

**BAD BOYS
OF BOSTON**
The Irish

BAD
BLOOD

K.S. Ellis

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For everyone who knew at first sight.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Paddy

I know what they say about me: I'm dark, dangerous, and damaged. The opportunity to avenge my parents' murder was stolen from me, and now I hate the world. Can you blame me? What has the world ever done for me? Less than nothing. Fighting and fucking are the only two outlets I have for my anger, and I'm very, very good at them.

Lauren

When did life get so complicated? I'm all alone with nowhere to go. Before my older brother, Josh died, he told me that if I was ever in trouble, I should go to one of his fellow bare-knuckle fighters, Paddy Flynn – an enforcer for the Boston Irish Mafia. But now I actually need help, I'm a little nervous that the cure might be worse than the disease.

Paddy knows he should stay away from Lauren before his darkness completely envelopes her. But he's drawn to her again and again, and nothing he tells himself can make him stay away. Can Lauren save Paddy from the darkness he seems content to drown in? Or will he drag her down with him into the cold, dark depths?

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Bad
Blood

Bad Boys of Boston
The Irish
Book Two

k.s. Ellis

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Thank you to everyone who believed in this book! Paddy and Lauren (and me) needed your gentle pushes to finally get edited. It's finally here! Yay!

Those eyes of yours
Could swallow stars,
Galaxies and universes.

What hope did I ever have?

- David Jones, Love And Space Dust

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Prologue

Paddy

There's a good-sized crowd tonight, so the takings should be good. My opponent is a big, brutish Russian. Ivor Stravinsky. He's got a good record. Mine's better.

I turn my eyes to where my crew is sitting, lounging off to the side of the ring. Seamus Fitzpatrick, our fearless fucking leader and my best mate for the last twenty years is scanning the crowd. Connor Fitzpatrick, his cousin, is beside him, trying his luck with one of the gorgeous lasses dotted around the crowded warehouse.

Fitzzy's eyes find mine, and he nods, turning to grin at something his cousin says. Almost the whole crew is here tonight. Liam, the young lad, he's still on babysitting duties tonight. Ronan's a lucky fucker that he's not there too.

Ever since Fitzzy found out his missus was pregnant when she was involved in a shootout, he's been a little over the top in the protective side of things. Needy fuck.

As it is, Ronan is distracted, stalking over to the back corner of the room. No guesses where's he's going. One of the strippers from the club, the little blonde one who is friends with Fitzzy's wife, shows up at these fights every so often. Ronan fucking hates it.

The crowd parts for him like water breaking over a rock, and his little stripper looks pissed that he spotted her. To her

credit, she's not backing down. It seems like he's trying to convince her to leave, but she's ignoring him, her eyes scanning the crowd. She is probably looking for the fighter she is here to see.

Perry, the announcer, does his little hyped-up spiel about Ivor. The fighter dances his way to the ring, the strains of whatever clichéd anthem he's selected blasting obnoxiously loud as the Russian corner of the room erupts.

He does some shadow boxing once in the ring, and the crowd laps it up. The eejit looks like he's in some grand Hollywood production, not an illegal underground fight ring.

When I'm announced, I walk over and climb into the ring. No music, no dancing or playing it up to the crowd. The Irish cheer, the Russian's jeer, and Ivor juts his chin at me, a smug grin on his ugly mug.

He's probably got about forty pounds on me. He's solid like a black bear. But we're roughly the same height, six foot three, so it's a pretty evenly matched fight. Fitzzy's got a lot of money riding on this, but I'm just here to fuck cunts up. I don't give a shit about the rest of it.

Perry announces Herman Ford, the referee, who climbs into the ring, says his piece about no eye-gouging, biting, or nut shots, and the bell rings out.

Ivor leads with three sharp jabs and a huge uppercut, going for the immediate knockout. How pathetically predictable. The man starts every single one of his fights the same way. I don't think I've ever seen anyone not see it coming from a mile off.

Dancing out of his way, I clock him with a sharp cross to the jaw, following with a jab to the ribs. He stumbles back, growling, and glaring at me. I let a slow, feral grin steal across my face, jerking my chin in an invitation. It's all he needs. He roars, charging me, swinging wildly.

The fight continues in the same vein. Ivor relies on brute strength, charging, swinging wildly as I dance out of his way, jabbing and parrying, landing some decent shots. My knuckles have split, and they'd be aching if I concentrated on them. I'm not concentrating on them, though. I'm too focused on fucking Ivor up. Just because I can.

Ivor is flagging while I've led him on a merry dance around the now bloodstained ring. We've been going at it for almost fifteen minutes straight, and he's rapidly running out of steam.

His significant blood loss doesn't help his flagging energy. Considering the fight is only over through submission or knockout, I'm going for the knockout.

Darting forward, I slam my fist into his jaw. His head snaps back as he crashes into the mat. He doesn't get back up, and Ford calls the fight.

Irish cheers fill the air to one side, angry rumbling countering it from the Russians on the other. Now the adrenaline has finished spiking, I'm starting to feel the prolonged beating my body has just taken.

The Russians are rowdy now, and I don't bother to acknowledge the crowd, sliding through the ropes to exit the ring, walking past Fitzzy's grinning mug out to the back rooms.

It's quieter in here. There are some private rooms, but I don't bother requesting one of them. I never do. The large dressing-room-style space is fine for me.

The lads have followed me in, and Niall hands me a water bottle to rinse my bloodied knuckles and mouth. Before Fitzzy can speak, Delic, the promoter, throws me a stack of cash. Catching it, I nod to him.

"Good fight," the swarthy Bosnian grunts, nodding to Fitzzy as he strolls away.

Fitzzy grins at me. "We cleaned up tonight, Paddy. Good job."

Ronan shoulders his way into the room, alone. I guess he struck out with his little blonde stripper.

"Ready to go?" he grunts at Fitzzy. Connor smirks and opens his mouth. He doesn't get a chance to tease before Ronan flips him off. "Feck off, Lucky."

Surprisingly, his mouth closes again. I don't think I've ever seen Connor willing to forgo an opportunity to stir the shit. The lad is born to piss everyone the fuck off with his banter.

"See you tomorrow, Paddy." Fitzzy nods to me, clapping Connor on the shoulder and steering him out of the room. Ronan starts to leave, shaking his head at Niall as he raises his eyebrows in some question.

Niall shrugs, nodding to me as he slides out of the room after Ronan and the rest of them. I've no idea what Ronan sees in the little blonde stripper either, but after the way Niall sniffs around after the little brunette bartender at the club, I don't think he has a leg to stand on.

Left alone, I shove my takings into my bag at my feet, fixing my eyes on the pair of sky-high, blood-red stilettos that stop before me, turning in my direction.

Running my eyes up smooth, tanned legs, I smirk at the overly made-up, gorgeous blonde woman. She wouldn't look out of place on a catwalk. But she's not on a catwalk right now.

"Let's take care of you, Paddy." She flashes a sultry smile at me. "I'm Maggie."

Why do they always insist on an introduction? It's not like I'm going to remember it anyway or like I'm going to see them again. Delic makes sure I get a different girl every week.

"I don't give a fuck what your name is," I growl, my head tipping back as she kneels between my legs.

Chapter One

LAUREN

The scrap of paper lies in the middle of the scrubbed diner table, bright against the dark wood. I know it's just a piece of paper with torn edges, but it's totally looking at me with contempt. Telling me to stop being such a baby and pull up my big girl panties.

“More coffee?” The tired-looking waitress appears beside me, clutching the metal pot. I nod, keeping my eyes glued to the name scribbled on the paper, my heart clenching. It's Josh's writing. This piece of paper is the last thing I have with his writing. How pathetically sad is that?

The name leaps out at me, dark on the smudged, otherwise white paper. Paddy Flynn. I'm supposed to go and find him. That's what Josh told me to do, and I always do what Josh tells me to do. So why am I on my fourth coffee in a twenty-four-hour diner in the middle of the night?

Two reasons. First, I'm waiting for Perry to come through with an address. The second... I still don't know if I will go where Perry tells me.

Once my mug is topped up, the waitress shuffles away, and I flick my eyes after her guiltily. I don't have enough for a good tip. She probably doesn't make the best tips at this hour. I think she knows I'm not going to tip big. She refills my coffee and glares at me every hour. Otherwise, she ignores me.

My phone buzzes from inside the duffel bag on the booth seat next to me, and I fish it out. Perry. I pull up our conversation, my eyes skating over the earlier texts.

LAUREN: Is Paddy Flynn going to be at the riverfront fight tonight?

PERRY: Yes. He fights every Tuesday and Thursday night. Why?

LAUREN: Where's the fight?

PERRY: Why? Why are you asking after Flynn?

LAUREN: I just am. For Josh.

PERRY: Josh would be telling you to stay the fuck away from Flynn. Do you know who he is?

LAUREN: He's with the Irish.

PERRY: Yeah, he is. So you should fucking stay away, Low.

LAUREN: If you don't send through the address, I'll go to Oracle and sit there until Paddy Flynn comes along.

LAUREN: Are you going to give me the address or not?

The latest text from Perry is an address. The illegal underground fight ring is in a warehouse on the waterfront. Not the fancy riverfront either.

Leaving the phone on the table, Perry's latest text with the address staring at me, also with contempt, as I nurse my coffee, drawing it out.

My eyes flicker over the earlier messages. Perry's right. It's not particularly smart to get involved with the Irish. But I

don't know if I have a choice. Josh made it seem like I didn't have a choice, and Josh would never tell me to do something dangerous. Ever.

There's nothing for it. I have to find Paddy Flynn. For Josh. My decision made, I blow out a breath, drain my bitter-tasting coffee and drop my last ten dollars on the table, collecting my bag and hustling out of there.

It's a half-hour walk, the night air holding a tinge of cold. It's only the start of fall, but the waterfront's breeze is blustery this late at night. Drawing my coat around me, I hug my duffel bag to my chest, hurrying toward the warehouse address from Perry. This is not the safest area, and there are no streetlights.

Eventually, I make it to the warehouse with my teeth aching from clenching them in fear. There is a floodlight out the front, some not-so-great looking people milling around, and a large, scary bouncer lounging against the side of the warehouse, next to the door.

He straightens when I walk up to him, throwing back my shoulders and lifting my chin. I need to look like I belong here.

"You lost, girlie?" he rumbles.

"N-no."

His eyebrows shoot up at my shaking tone.

"No," I say again, more assertive this time. "I'm here for the fight."

His eyes trail over me again, lingering on my jeans, duffel bag, and coat, buttoned to my chin.

“This isn’t the kind of place someone like you should be caught dead at, girlie.”

Yeah. That’s what Josh always said. Unfortunately, this guy is standing between me and where I need to be.

“I’m here to see Perry.”

His eyes flicker to my face as he blinks with surprise. “That so? Does Perry know you’re here?”

Damn. That was supposed to work. He doesn’t seem very impressed. I bite back a snort. He probably thinks I’m Perry’s girlfriend or something, here to catch him out with another woman.

I try another tack, flashing him a smile and lifting my hands to unbutton the top of my coat. The bouncer clears his throat, shaking his head.

“Not happening, kid. Beat it.”

Crap. Shooting him a venomous look – which he simply smirks at, asshole – I huff and stomp off to the side, pulling out my phone.

LAUREN: Outside. The bouncer won’t let me in.

Perry answers almost immediately.

PERRY: At least someone has sense. I’m half inclined to agree with the man.

LAUREN: You’re going to leave me standing out here without so much as a bus fare?

PERRY: Fucking hell Low. Give me a sec.

A “sec” turns out to be almost ten minutes. The bouncer has his arms crossed, glaring at me. I would think it’s because he assumes I’ll take a run at him, but I’ve caught at least two head shakes over my shoulder, so I think he might be warning people off from approaching me. Despite my annoyance with him, I feel a rush of gratitude that he’s looking out for me.

Finally, the door behind him opens, and Perry’s head pokes out. The windy breeze ruffles his reddish-brown hair, and his eyes lock on me, resignation there.

“Come on then, Low. Get your fucking ass in here.”

The bouncer doesn’t look happy, but he steps aside, letting me pass. He and Perry lock eyes as I step through the doorway.

“She’s your responsibility in there, Perry,” the man grunts. “I said no.”

Perry nods stiffly, his jaw tight. “I know that, Petey. I got my reasons.”

Eyes rake over me again. “They better be fucking good reasons.”

The warehouse is packed and loud. Perry’s fingers close around my upper arm, his eyes warning everyone away, just like the bouncer was outside. His breath washes over my cheek when he leans down to speak with me.

“I’m doing this under protest, Low.”

I shrug, looking around with interest. I get that Perry wanted to keep me away from this crowd – just like Josh, once upon a time – but circumstances have changed.

“I need to speak with Paddy Flynn.”

When I look up at him, Perry’s lips are tight. “Why Flynn? You never said.”

Digging Josh’s piece of paper out of my pocket, I give it to him. Perry’s lips press together, and he shoves the paper into my hand.

“All right. Paddy Flynn.”

I relax, letting him tow me through the crowd. He’s going to take me to Paddy Flynn. Thank god.

Craning my head, trying to see what this Paddy Flynn will look like, I’m barely paying attention to where Perry is leading me.

My feet stumble to an inelegant halt when Perry stops moving. We are in front of the makeshift ring. In the front row. There are seats here, unlike at the back where everyone is standing, crowding around.

Perry seizes my upper arms, forcibly seating me in an empty chair between a wicked good-looking brunette guy and an equally hot ash-blonde guy.

They both turn to look at us, their eyes darting between Perry and me. Perry ignores the blonde guy, looking at the dark-haired one.

“Fitzy,” Perry nods stiffly to him. “No one touches her.”

As soon as Fitzy nods, Perry turns, disappearing. I suppose he is at work. He must have things to do. This Fitzy looks me over frankly, his eyes showing zero interest. I’m not surprised.

There aren't many women here, but those dotted around the space are certified stunners.

His uninterested perusal of me finished, Fitzzy turns his attention back to the fight in the ring. Flushing, I quickly lock my eyes on the fight, too, wincing immediately. It's brutal. The ring is blood-splattered, and I don't think all of it was from this battle currently waging.

Wincing again as bone crunches against bone, I fight the urge to look away. Josh told the rules once. He didn't want to, but I pestered him until he caved. They're wicked horrifying. Bare-knuckle. No biting, no eye-gouging, no nut shots – everything else goes.

There aren't any rounds either. It's survival of the fittest. Continuous fighting until it's over by knockout or submission. Josh always came home bruised and bloody, even when he won. When he lost, sometimes he didn't come home until the next day, when he had regained consciousness.

The guy who loses this fight doesn't submit. He really should have, but he obviously has his pride. Well, he did. I'm not sure how much of it is left when he's dragged unconscious from the ring with his face a pummeled mess... but what do I know? The crowd seems to appreciate it, so I suppose that's all that matters.

As we watch the brutal fights, the reason Perry seated me with these guys becomes clear. Though initially annoyed he hadn't introduced me to Paddy Flynn like I asked, at least he's seated me with the Irish.

The sandy blonde and strawberry blonde men in the row behind us have thick Irish accents. Fitzzy has a brogue when

he's really worked up and yelling, and the ash blonde on my other side seems to be able to turn his brogue on and off, depending on how good-looking the woman he's flirting with is.

"Who the fuck are you?" he asks me, his accent straight Boston.

I shrug, my tongue suddenly thick in my mouth. Ash-blond squints at me, waiting with slowly raising eyebrows for me to speak. Perry clearly sat me here because these guys know Paddy Flynn, and Josh said Paddy Flynn was an enforcer for the Boston Irish Mafia. So that means these guys must be mafia.

That knowledge doesn't exactly inspire feelings of conversation. My tongue is still swollen in my mouth. Shit. Ash-blond will melt my face with the glare slowly emerging if I don't speak soon.

"Lucky, you place your bets yet?"

I'm saved by the swarthy, middle-aged guy who stops to talk to Ash-blond. He shifts in his seat, twisting to speak to the guy standing beside him. I catch a glimpse of the butt of his gun sticking out of the waistband of his jeans at the back.

It's not exactly a relaxing realization, but I think I might be in the right place. A bunch of armed Irishmen sitting ringside at an illegal fight? I've definitely found the Irish Mafia.

Ash-blond, or *Lucky* as I now know him to be called, hands the guy an eye-watering stack of cash.

"Do I even need to ask?" the guy chuckles.

"Not if ye value yer life."

They laugh, but I feel Lucky might only have been half-joking. He has his Irish brogue back, but his eyes aren't laughing when his mouth does.

The guy pockets the cash. "All on Flynn, then."

Nodding, the guy leaves, and Lucky turns back to me, his narrowed eyes fixing on my face again. I swallow, gamely meeting his eyes, hoping my shaking knees aren't obvious to anyone but me.

"Seriously, who are you?" Lucky asks me again, nudging me with his arm. Fitzzy tears his eyes from the ring, looking over my head at his compatriot.

"Strictly hands off this one, Lucky," he drawls, turning his attention back to the ring, where a truly massive *monster* of a man climbs in.

"Jaysus feck, that's a big lad," Strawberry blonde behind me mutters.

"Paddy can take him," Fitzzy mutters back.

Paddy. I think I'm about to lay eyes on the elusive Paddy Flynn for the first time. I straighten, my eyes locked on the ring where Paddy Flynn is about to appear. This is it.

"Paddy better be able to take him," Lucky mutters. "I've got a fucking mint riding on this fight."

Perry's booming voice rings out over the speaker system, echoing in the cavernous space. "Ladies and gentlemen, Paddy Flynn."

That's it. No flourish, no nickname, no music. Not what I was expecting after the other fights tonight.

“Let’s go, Paddy, lad!” Fitzzy cheers. Either Sandy or Strawberry blonde behind us lets out a piercing whistle, the other yelling something in Irish, the strange syllables ringing in my ears.

“Yes, Paddy!” Lucky cheers, clapping loudly. “Do us proud, lad!”

The Irish men around me aren’t the only ones catcalling, and cheers ring out around the room. Paddy Flynn doesn’t acknowledge any of them. He walks out of a door over the side of the room, through the crowd as they part for him like Moses and the Red Sea.

The ring is on the ground, right in front of us, and Paddy slides through the ropes, standing in one corner. He doesn’t acknowledge the cheers. He doesn’t acknowledge the catcalls. He doesn’t even acknowledge the bear of a man standing in the other corner, pointing at his face and yelling insults. Something about hitting him so hard his mother feels it in her ovaries. Charming.

My cheeks heat up, and my mouth is dry as my eyes drink in the sight before me. Paddy is dressed in a pair of low-slung, loose-fitting trousers and nothing else. That’s a sight I won’t forget any time soon.

Paddy Flynn is just plain gorgeous. He has thick, tousled dark brown hair, dark brows, and dark stubble. If he were in a suit, he wouldn’t look out of place in a five-star hotel. But he’s not in a suit.

Thank goodness, because it would be a crime of the most serious nature to cover up all this deliciousness. Broad shoulders taper down to a slim waist, a defined V cutting

down into his trousers, which are low-slung enough for a hint of dark hair to almost be showing.

You could cut yourself on his abs and pecs. I can't tear my eyes away. Beside me, Lucky laughs.

"Do you need a tissue, lass?"

My eyes snap away from Paddy Flynn's mouthwateringly bare torso, meeting his. My cheeks are now hot enough to fry eggs on. A tissue? Is my nose running? I lift my hand to brush my face, but it drops back into my lap when he speaks again. Screw eggs. A nuclear explosion would be cooler than my cheeks.

"To catch your drooling," he smirks, dropping his arm around my shoulders, and tugging me close. Uh, this is new. Girls who look like me don't get *snuggled* against guys who look like him.

"D'ye think our lad can win?" He winks as his Irish brogue colors his voice. I blink, staring at him. What's happening here?

"Lucky." There's an edge of warning in Fitzzy's tone. "Leave her alone."

He doesn't have to. I don't particularly mind. Not that I'm about to *say* that. I am going to savor this for as long as it lasts.

"Jesus fuck, Fitzzy," Lucky snorts, his arm still hanging loosely around my neck. "I'm not about to seduce her. I'm making conversation."

Fitzzy's eyes move over my face carefully. I quickly school my face into a neutral expression, blinking at him. I really don't mind. His arm is just around my neck, and I don't have

any illusions that he's doing anything other than having a spot of fun.

"You tell me if he's bothering you," Fitzzy tells me, turning back to the fight, ignoring me again.

I'm still staring at him when he nods toward the ring. Right. Paddy Flynn.

Turning my face back to the front, I realize Paddy is looking at him. They must have shared a nod. Paddy's eyes slide over to me as I watch the ring, dipping to take in Lucky's arm over my shoulders, coming back up to my face.

I'm blushing like all get out now, his eyes burning into mine. They are a rich, chocolate brown, and almost hypnotic. I certainly can't seem to look away. I fight the urge to squirm as heat pools between my thighs.

Lucky's breath brushes my ear. "Stop distracting him. I don't like to lose."

I blink, the spell broken. Lose what? The spell isn't only broken for me. Paddy looks away, his attention returning to his opponent.

Perry's voice booms out again. "Our referee for this fight, Joaquim Rodriguez."

A tall, tanned man with long dark hair tied into a ponytail climbs into the ring, moving to stand between the two men there. He speaks with the two men, low enough for us not to be able to hear. They nod, both shaking their heads.

The last fight we saw, despite its brutal end, the two fighters fist-bumped before they started. Not these two. They glare at each other.

“Your *mammy* will weep for you tonight,” the big guy sneers, his Boston accent jarring for some reason. On either side of me, Fitzy and Lucky suck in a breath.

“Jaysus feck,” one of the men behind me breathes. “The lad has a death wish.”

Paddy Flynn raises one eyebrow – I really wish I knew how to do that – and there is a lull in the crowd, everyone eager to hear Paddy’s response.

“Ye take that up with God.”

There is a roar as the referee steps back. I wonder what Paddy meant. Like, is his mother...dead? Or is this guy about to die? It was an ambiguous comment... and a little ominous.

The crowd is baying now as the bear of a man charges at Paddy, and I suck in a breath, my hand coming up to my mouth. I hope Paddy Flynn doesn’t get beaten to a pulp. It might be hard to put my request to an unconscious man.

I don’t think I have anything to fear. Josh never let me come and watch him fight, but I did get to see him train sometimes. Josh had a grace about him when he fought, but Paddy Flynn is poetry in motion.

His movements are fluid as he dances around the ring, his strikes swift and devastating. It takes eleven minutes. I count every blood-filled one of them.

The knockout blow comes from a sharp cross as the beast of man crumples at Paddy’s feet. The air is filled with Irish phrases, the men around me surging to their feet, roaring their approval.

Paddy doesn't celebrate. He simply turns and climbs back out of the ring, heading through the crowd into the back room.

"That's us done," Fitzy tells me, turning to crane his neck, peering through the crowd, clearly looking for someone. "Where the fuck is Perry?"

I don't respond because I have no idea where Perry is, probably in his announcing booth. Fitzy doesn't need a response, climbing to his feet and walking in the direction Paddy left. Like Paddy, the crowd parts easily for him. That must be nice. I always get squished in crowds.

My heart thuds, my mouth dry again. Are they just going to leave me? How am I supposed to talk to Paddy Flynn if I lose the Irish? Maybe Perry will come back. Hopefully, Perry will come back.

Fitzy must be someone important. The sandy blonde man behind us is flanking him, eyes darting around the crowd like he is a bodyguard.

"Let's go, Lucky," the strawberry blonde guy says, pausing beside us. Lucky stands and my heart sinks. Crap. Maybe I should ask him to pass on my name to Paddy? Before I can start to panic, he saves me.

"Come on." Lucky tugs me to my feet, draping his arm around my shoulders again, picking up my duffel bag, and steering me behind the other two.

"Yer funeral, Lucky," strawberry blonde mutters, falling in step behind us to the left. Like he's Lucky's bodyguard. I fight the urge to shiver. Just who has their arm around my neck?

As they reach the door, Fitzzy turns back, his eyes searching until they land on us. His eyebrows raise as he takes in Lucky's arm around my shoulders.

“What the fuck, Lucky?”

“She's my lucky charm,” Lucky bleats. “I didn't lose a single wager while she was sitting with us.”

Fitzzy rolls his eyes and keeps walking. Hey, Lucky can call me whatever he likes if it gets me to where Paddy Flynn is.

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Chapter Two

PADDY

The lads pile into the dressing room as Delic drops my takings in my lap.

“Good knockout tonight.” Fitzzy slaps me on the back. Unusually, he seems distracted. “You seen Perry?”

Why the fuck would he care where Perry is?

“No,” I grunt, wincing as I probe a tender spot on my side where I took a decent right hook tonight.

“Lucky,” Fitzzy snaps. “Take your fucking arm off her before Perry comes in and loses his shit!”

My eyes leave my bloody knuckles, raising to where Connor is standing beside the door. Sure enough, he has his arm around the little brunette I noticed before the fight. The one who hypnotized me with her eyes until Connor spoke to her and broke the spell.

She can't be more than five-two or three, a good foot shorter than me. A generic face, freckles dusted across her nose, dark hair pulled into a ponytail, uniform in color, and somewhere between sleek and frizzy.

She's pretty, in a girl next door kind of way. There is nothing special or remarkable about her looks at all. Except for her eyes. Her huge, amber eyes lock on mine, and I find I can't look away or even fucking blink.

There is something so fucking familiar about her, even though, apart from her eyes, she has a face you couldn't pick out of a crowd.

Despite the familiar feeling, I can't place her. I am about to turn away, dismissing the sight of her, when Connor grins, leaning in to say something to her, his lips bumping her ear.

I have no idea why, but I'm suddenly consumed with the desire to stride across the room, rip Connor off her and slam him into a wall. Fitzzy does it for me. Well. He doesn't slam his cousin into a wall, but he does pry him off the girl and shove him away.

"Perry says no one touches her, and that includes you. You want to get banned from here for cozying up to Perry's woman?"

Again, it's irrational, but I don't like the idea of a sweet little thing like her with a man like Perry. I've seen him on more than one occasion at the end of the night, his cock down some random woman's throat. This girl is too innocent for him.

Connor screws his face up to argue, but the girl pipes up, cutting off whatever he is going to say. She has a low, melodic voice. It matches her eyes in that it's just as captivating.

"I'm not Perry's woman," she tells Fitzzy, who blinks at her in surprise.

"You're not?" He scratches his head, looking confused. Why the fuck does he think she's Perry's woman? That's a weird fucking assumption to make. The girl looks like she would faint if someone said boo to her.

“No.” She shrugs. “Can I have my bag back?”

Connor grins, handing the duffel bag he is holding to her. She takes it, hugging it to her chest, but doesn't try to leave. Not that she would be able to... Fitzzy's like a dog with a bone. He hates puzzles he can't solve, and this girl is a fucking puzzle.

“If you're not his woman, why did Perry stick you with us and tell me to look out for you?” Fitzzy frowns. My eyebrows shoot up. Connor smirks at me, whatever that means, but I'm distracted.

Perry told Seamus to look out for her. What's that all about? What's a girl like her doing in this warehouse anyway? Someone who looks as sweet and innocent as her shouldn't be caught dead within a mile of this place.

She blushes a deep red, poking her finger at me. “Because I'm here to talk to him.”

Four sets of curious eyes turn to me. Don't look at me. I have no idea who the fuck she is. There is a scratching at the back of my mind – about her looking so familiar – but still, she's nothing to me.

Connor cackles. “My new good luck charm is a fight groupie? Brilliant news. You'll be around a lot then?”

The lass flushes an even darker red. “I'm not a fight groupie.”

The grin drops off Connor's face at her snappy tone. Lucky likes to joke around, but you can only push a Fitzpatrick so far in this city.

The girl isn't finished. She is still poking her finger in my direction. "I just need to talk to Paddy Flynn. *He's* Paddy Flynn, right?"

"And so he is," Fitzzy agrees easily. Anyone in the know is aware that when Fitzzy starts speaking easily, you're either family or about to be in a world of pain. I shift, frowning. I don't like the idea of the lass being in a world of hurt. She's just a little lass. "And what's your business with him?"

"That's between him and me," she mumbles. Fitzzy's eyebrows aren't the only ones to shoot up. I'm fucking intrigued too. Maybe she's going to tell me why she looks so familiar.

"If you want to speak to one of my lads, you can do it in front of me," the stubborn asshole tells her.

"Is that an Irish thing?" she asks. "Or a mafia thing?"

Connor chuckles, Fitzzy glares, and Niall and Ronan tense. The Reaper's fingers flex.

"What do you need to talk to Paddy about?" Fitzzy's tone is no longer easy, having moved to smooth danger, and the lass flinches. At least she has some self-preservation. Though not enough to keep her the fuck away from this place and us.

"It's personal," she mumbles, casting her eyes down, shrinking into herself, hugging the duffel bag tightly to her chest.

"Jaysus feck, Fitzzy," Ronan smirks from behind her, the first to relax. "Just let the lass be to ask if she can suck his dick in private."

“What?” she splutters, looking mortified. “That’s not... no!”

Her tone is jerky, and I take pity on her. She’s clearly not here to try to fuck me. I do want to know *why* she’s here and who she is. I’m tired, I hurt, and I hate my brain itching.

“Just fuck off out of here, the lot of you. You too, Fitzzy.”

He looks like he’s about to argue, his eyes locking with mine. I can see the disagreement but glare back at him, the warning clear in my eyes. This clearly has nothing to do with the Irish, and contrary to Fitzzy’s belief, my life outside of the Irish is none of his fucking business.

It’s grudging, but his shoulders relax in surrender. He nods to the lads, smacking Lucky upside the head as they all walk out of the room, leaving it empty except for the lass and me.

Wincing as I lift my arm, still feeling tender under it, I beckon her closer. She shuffles over, clutching her duffel bag like a shield, stopping about two feet from me. Sighing, I pat the bench next to me.

“Come over here, lass. I don’t bite.”

She stays where she is, studying me for a moment. I keep still like I’m dealing with a nervy dog. It works because she crosses quickly, dropping down on the bench beside me, swinging her legs. She’s so fucking short, her toes only just brush the ground.

“Why did you need to talk to me?”

She lifts her eyes and pins me in position with them at my words. Jesus fuck, those things are a damn weapon.

“What are you doing?” she squeaks.

I pause, my hand cupping her cheek as my thumb rests on her lower lip. Clearing my throat, I let my hand drop away.

“You look familiar, lass.” I shrug, hiding my confusion about why the fuck I just touched her face. “But I can’t place you.”

Tipping her head to the side, she studies me carefully, nodding to herself. Like she’s deciding to trust me. Probably not the best decision she’s ever made in her life, but all right. It will speed things along here.

“I’m Lauren.”

“Paddy.” I nod to her, reaching down and snagging a water bottle to rinse my knuckles.

“I need your help.”

Huh? I freeze, water pooling at my feet as I look over at her in surprise.

“Come again, lass?”

She sighs, rubbing her hand over her eyes, looking fucking exhausted.

“My brother said if I ever needed help, I should go to Paddy Flynn, and he will look after me,” she parrots. “You’re Paddy Flynn, right?”

I nod. Who the fuck is her brother? Why is he sending random women to me to ask for help? I’m not the kind of person anyone asks for help... unless it’s Lucky asking for my help to shakedown a poker player who owes him money.

“So, I need your help.”

Can't say that random women come to me for help often. Not that kind of help. Help getting themselves off? Yeah. Help looking after them? Not so much.

"Who's your brother, lass?"

And more importantly, where the fuck is he? Letting his sister run around an illegal fighting ring and asking me for help. It's not right.

"His name was Josh Carmichael," she says quietly.

"Jaysus feck," I curse under my breath.

Josh fucking Carmichael. The fighter from Dorchester. My eyes rove over her face again, and now I know where I fucking know her from. Josh's funeral.

She stood alone beside the casket, staring at the ground while people murmured meaningless words at her. She never looked up. Otherwise, I would have fucking remembered those eyes.

"All right. What can I help you with, lass?"

She flushes, moving her mouth, but no sound comes out. I lean in closer to her. Through the scents of blood and sweat, I can smell vanilla.

"Come again, lass?"

She clears her throat, and the barest whisper comes out this time. "I don't have anywhere to go."

Jesus fuck. I should never have told the lads to fuck off. Fitzzy could have taken her back to his house. He has three spare bedrooms. Hell, Connor has two. He could have taken

her home. His mammy would have coddled the fuck out of her.

Too bad the idea of her going home with either of my two best mates has me seeing red. I have no idea what it is about this lass, but she is bringing out weird reactions in me. I blame her fucking eyes.

“Paddy.”

Lauren and I turn to the scantily clad woman who has come to a stop in front of us, jutting her hip and thrusting her tits out.

“I’m here to take care of you.”

The words hang in the air as she preens, and we stare up at her. Right. Because it’s after a fucking fight. Delic would have seen the lads leave and sent her in to me, like always.

Lauren is flushing bright red again as she cops on to the tenor of the woman’s words.

“O-oh. I can wait outside?”

She is starting to slide off the bench, her feet flat on the ground. Outside? Outside the rooms, where the crowd was getting drunker and rowdier with each fight? Or outside the warehouse? Both are fucking unacceptable. Besides, I have no desire for Tits Magee here right now.

“Stay,” I growl at her. They both blink at me in shock.

“If that’s what you want, Paddy,” the stunning redhead simpers, throwing a glare in Lauren’s direction.

“You can fuck right off now,” I tell her, tugging a shirt from my bag, pulling it on, and shoving my feet into my shoes.

“I’ve no need for what you’re offering.”

An uncertain look crosses her face, her eyes flickering over Lauren. They pause there for the barest moment, but she quickly dismisses her as no threat. Clearly, she didn’t get a good look at the lass’s eyes.

Groaning as I stand, wishing my fucking ribs would stop aching, I snag our duffels, brushing past the redhead on my way to the door.

I get halfway across the room when I realize Lauren is still sitting on the bench, gaping after me, eyes swiveling between the redhead and me. What the fuck is she still doing over there?

“Come on, lass.”

After another moment of confused blinking, she shoves off the bench and scampers after me. That’s more like it.

Chapter Three

LAUREN

Trailing Paddy out of the warehouse, we pass the bouncer, who shares a nod with Paddy and watches me carefully. I offer him a small smile, but he turns away, looking amused.

Paddy strides purposefully to a small parking lot, hitting a button to unlock a large, comfortable-looking SUV, nodding to another large, black-clad guy – who I think might be the security in the parking lot.

Opening the door to the backseat, Paddy places both duffel bags there, rounding the vehicle to hold open the passenger front door.

“In you get, lass.” He nods, and I scramble into the car, my cheeks flaming as he closes the door like I’m a child.

He doesn’t speak or look across at me when he slides behind the wheel, wincing a little as he pulls the car out onto the road.

Paddy doesn’t speak to me at all in the comfortable SUV. I have no idea where we are going, but we don’t leave the city, pulling into an underground parking garage in Back Bay.

The silence continues as he opens my door, holding it and waiting for me to exit the car. Shutting the door as I stand to the side, Paddy grabs the two duffel bags and strides off, not bothering to look over his shoulder to see if I’m following him.

He has my bag and hasn't told me to fuck off, so I trail him into the elevator, where he jabs at the button for the fifth floor.

I don't think he's much of a talker – he didn't really speak to the other Irish guys back at the warehouse – so I'm not offended when we ride the elevator in silence or when he leads me into a small apartment.

Looking around, I blink in surprise. This kind of wasn't what I was expecting. Paddy drops my duffel bag on the leather sofa, nodding to the small kitchen.

“Help yourself to anything in the fridge. I need a shower.”

I nod, watching as he takes his duffel bag and walks through the only doorway leading off this postage-stamp-sized, open-plan living area, the door snapping tightly shut behind him.

I'm not used to poking around in someone else's space – that would be rude – but he *told* me too... and there really isn't anything else to do. This place is smaller than where *I* grew up in Dot. If you had shown me a picture and said someone who owned an SUV with all the fancy trimmings like Paddy lived in a place like *this*? I would have laughed until I cried.

I wander around the living area and into the kitchen with nothing else to do, opening the cabinets and the fridge. I find a well-used first aid kit underneath the sink and pull it out, leaving it on the counter. His knuckles were raw and bloody, and there was all that wincing, so he might want it. There isn't much else to look at, so I sit at the breakfast bar, waiting for him to emerge and tell me what will happen.

My eyes dart around the space again. It's kind of fascinating. It's a very functionally furnished apartment. No homey extras, almost like a hotel suite.

Sofa, TV, coffee table, two bar stools, and a bookshelf with about twelve books. That's it. That's all the furnishings. There aren't even any pictures.

The shower shuts off from the other room, snapping me out of my reverie. I stare at my hands folded on the breakfast bar before me. I don't have to wait long before the bedroom door creaks open. Turning my head, I watch Paddy saunter out, my mouth dry again.

He might be more covered up than when he fought, but he's still as yummy. His hair is damp from his shower, and he's wearing a pair of low-slung sweats and a white tee shirt. Now he is no longer covered in blood, I can see a faint bruise starting to show on his left cheekbone.

His eyes roam over me, falling on the first aid kit sitting near me. He crosses the room, easing himself onto the barstool beside me, wincing again, reaching for it. Oh, at least this is somewhere I can make myself useful.

Flipping the kit open, he rummages until he finds some antibiotic ointment. After many fights, I've cleaned Josh up, so I reach over automatically. He glances up in surprise when I take it off him but doesn't speak when I stand, moving between his legs as I tend to his knuckles. Instead, he watches my face intently, which isn't helping my whole dry-mouth situation.

"You fight well," I say when the silence has stretched enough to make me want to squirm. Well, the silence and the

heat and weight of his eyes on my face.

Paddy shrugs, continuing to stare at me. A hint of a blush spreads across my cheeks under his intense scrutiny.

“You’re all done.”

I put the cap back on the ointment, placing it back in the first aid kit, flipping it shut. My fingers linger on it, my eyes glued to them.

I’m still standing between his legs. So awkward. God, I can be such a liability. I blame never having been this close to someone so good-looking.

Willing my feet to move, I step back, but I don’t get far. Paddy’s hands shoot out, landing on my hips and anchoring me in place. Oh, God. This is...intimate.

Lifting my eyes, I meet his heated gaze, all the words I was going to say drying up on my tongue. Paddy’s eyes dip to my mouth, his fingers tightening imperceptibly on my hips.

Because I’m such a liability, my tongue darts out to wet my lips at the force of his gaze. His pupils dilate, and his eyes darken. Paddy’s nostrils flare, his gaze moving back to meet mine, searching for something. I fight the urge to squirm, pressing my thighs together. God, he’s *so* gorgeous.

“Ye look tired,” he murmurs, a slight Irish brogue tingeing his voice. “Ye should get some sleep.”

Uh, where? His hands fall from my hips, and I feel strangely bereft but force myself to step away from him, walking across the small room to the sofa.

I jump when his voice sounds low in my ear, the heat of his body against my back like flames of awareness licking upward.

“Ye take the bed. I’ll sleep on the sofa.”

I can’t take his *bed!* I swallow at the feel of Paddy’s breath against my ear, fighting another urge to shiver. If I stay with him so close, I’ll probably do something wicked stupid, like try to kiss him and get my ass kicked out of here. I step forward to avoid such a ridiculous notion, dropping onto the sofa and beaming up at him.

“I’m fine here.”

To illustrate my point, I kick off my shoes, curling my feet up underneath me. My response has him frowning.

“It’s not the most comfortable,” he starts, sounding a little uncertain. I have no idea why, but I get the feeling Paddy Flynn isn’t a man who is uncertain very often. I don’t manage to swallow my snort in time, his eyebrows shooting up at the sound.

“I spent last night trying not to fall asleep in a twenty-four-hour diner. This is plenty comfortable.”

His face darkens at my words, like the idea bothers him, but I lay down, closing my eyes and blocking him out. Although I’m in a strange place, with a strange, dangerous man who makes me feel things I really shouldn’t be, I’m asleep in less than five minutes.

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Chapter Four

LAUREN

Waking up is disorientating. When I force my gritty eyes open, the first things I see are exposed brick and an empty nightstand. What the hell? This isn't where I fell asleep. There was a sofa and a generically furnishing living room like a hotel.

I jerk upright. I'm still fully dressed, so there's that. I'm also curled up in a large bed in the middle of a moderate-sized bedroom. Like last night's generic living room, the exposed brick walls are the only defining feature. The rest of the room is empty apart from the bed, a bureau, and two bare nightstands.

I definitely fell asleep on the sofa. Blinking in surprise, I glance around the sparse room. Paddy must have moved me into the bedroom after I fell asleep.

My cheeks heat at the idea of a man as gorgeous and dangerous as *Paddy Flynn* carrying me into bed. It's enough to make my heart thump and *everything* tingle. It's a good thing he didn't tuck me in as well... my ovaries might explode at the thought.

Still moving around the room, my eyes land on my duffel bag, lying on the floor at the foot of the bed. Thank goodness he had the foresight to move that too.

I scramble over to it, snatching it up and carrying it into the bathroom with me. Like the rest of the condo, Paddy's lack of personal touch is evident.

The only color is the dark towels hanging over the rail near the spacious shower. Shedding my clothes, I slide into the subway-tiled space, sighing with pleasure at the strong water pressure. We had terrible water pressure at our Dot apartment. This is like heaven.

Opening my body wash, I inhale, smiling to myself. I might have packed in a hurry, but I'm glad I brought this. I remember the first time I smelled it. Some girlfriend of Josh's left it in our shower, and I swiped it. It smelled like luxury then. Now it just smells like home.

Closing my eyes, I sniff, shaking my head and tipping my head back to allow the water flow over my face to wash away any possibility of tears. There's no point crying. I've done so much crying recently. I simply want to enjoy how lovely this shower is.

Stepping out of the shower, I snag a soft, dark towel, quickly dry myself, and brush my teeth, feeling like a new woman. Knotting my hair on top of my head, I tug on a pair of jeans and an oversized sweater, staring at myself in the large mirror above the stone-finished basin.

The dark circles under my eyes from yesterday have disappeared. I must have slept well. That's a first for me recently. I might have remembered to bring my body wash, but makeup wasn't high on my list.

Oh well. The sexy woman from last night offering herself to Paddy floats through my mind. I could never compete.

Maybe it's a good thing I can't even try.

Leaving the bathroom, I crack open the bedroom door, peeking into the main room. The sofa is empty, but I can smell coffee, tempting me into the kitchen like the pied piper.

My feet falter at the sight of Paddy sitting at the breakfast bar, seemingly engrossed in an iPad. He glances up as I tiptoe out of the bedroom, his eyes moving across my jeans and baggy sweater. Tugging at the hem, I swallow, willing the blush to leave my cheeks.

"Morning," I squeak. Something about his sexiness and the feeling of danger emanating from him caused that noise. At the sound, he raises a brow.

"Afternoon," he rumbles back.

Afternoon? I glance at the clock on the microwave in surprise. Holy crap. It's after two in the afternoon. I slept for *hours!* I should thank him for letting me sleep. He could have woken me hours ago and kicked me out of his apartment.

Fixing him with a small smile, I open my mouth. But no thanks come out.

"You put me to bed." I narrow my eyes accusingly at him, but the cocky bastard smirks at me. So much for saying thank you.

"And so I did," he agrees easily. "And a good thing too. Otherwise, I'd have been creeping around my own home all day while you slept."

I open my mouth to argue, but I can't fault his logic. He could have woken me up, but I'm not about to suggest it if it

didn't occur to him. I close it without speaking, moving into the kitchen to pour myself some coffee.

Once I'm furnished with a mug, Paddy pats the barstool beside him, and just like last night, my feet obey his silent command without question.

When I'm seated, my feet dangling like a child, Paddy watches me for a beat, sliding a half-eaten cream cheese-smearred bagel in front of me. I think maybe he was eating it before I came out of the bedroom.

“Eat.”

Before I can even think, I've picked it up and devoured it. Paddy watches me eat in silence. I lick the cream cheese from my fingers, turning to him once I'm done.

Without speaking, he blinks at me, reaching up, cupping my jaw with his hand, and stroking his thumb over the corner of my mouth, his eyes darkening.

He blinks again, drawing his hand back, putting his thumb in his mouth, and sucking the cream cheese he wiped from my face into his mouth. Okay. That was...wicked hot.

My breathing hitches at the intimate gesture, and his pupils dilate at the sound. What is happening? He clears his throat, his hand dropping to the breakfast bar.

“So, Lauren Carmichael,” he speaks after a moment, drumming his thumb on the counter. “Why do ye need my help?”

I wish he'd keep the Irish out of his voice. It's wreaking havoc with my mind. Like he's strumming on my clit with just his voice.

I stare at him, blinking until he raises his eyebrows and tries again. “Why did ye spend the other night in a diner trying not to sleep?”

Like last night, Paddy looks like the thought pisses him off. Again, I blink at him without answering. My mind is completely blank. He smells nice, and if possible, he’s even better looking up close. Like, every feature is perfect.

He’s starting to look annoyed. Oops. When he speaks for the third time, the dark undercurrent in his tone lets me know it’s the last time he’ll ask.

“Why did ye come to an underground fight to find me?”

I finally shake myself out of my stupor.

“It was either there or at Oracle,” I blurt out, and he frowns. “But I didn’t know anyone at Oracle if the doorman didn’t let me in. And Perry said you were fighting last night.”



PADDY

Finally, she speaks. Thank fuck, because I was about to do something monumentally stupid, like bend her over the counter and fuck the truth out of her. I blame her fucking eyes.

At the same time, I'm not sure I like her answer. I'm not sure which would have been worse; Lauren coming to a fight to find me or her showing up at Oracle on the off chance I was there.

Christ, the lass is a walking bundle of scenarios where she's between a rock and a hard place.

"What d'ye need from me, lass?"

For some reason, the question makes her squirm. Her words from last night come back to me, and I squint at her.

"Why d'ye have nowhere to go?"

"Because they'll find me," she whispers.

Because that's not ominous at all. I freeze. Jesus fuck. *Who'll* find her? I can't protect the fucking lass if she doesn't tell me anything.

I'm about to demand she starts fucking talking when the words die on my tongue as those big amber eyes swim. She blinks, and tears spill over, sliding down her cheeks.

I stare at her, horrified, as she silently cries. I don't know what to do with a crying lass. I don't do female emotions. When I fuck my women, I'm out of there the minute I'm done.

The only woman I spend any kind of time around is Tiggy, Fitzzy's wife, and the closest she's ever gotten to emotional was when she told me her father ordered the killing of my parents and his right hand carried out the murders. Then she told me I couldn't have my revenge because she'd already killed both men in question.

While I was grateful to Tiggy for shooting her father in the head while he held a gun to mine, I'm dirty she accidentally killed my parents' murderer in a struggle with a knife when he kidnapped her from Fitzzy's kitchen. He was fucking *mine*, and she robbed me of it.

A small sniffle brings me back to the present and the lovely lass crying in the middle of my kitchen. Shit. I need to keep my head in the game. How am I supposed to look out for her if I'm too busy fixating on revenge I can never take?

I have no idea what to do with a crying lass. For lack of a better idea, I reach over and brush the tears off her cheeks with my fingertips.

Lauren freezes under my hand when I do. Her large, liquid-filled eyes meeting mine. I find myself swallowing, and I'm fucking rock hard.

Because I'm a bastard, and apparently my good sense is taking a vacation, I tug her into my lap, one arm wrapping around her waist, the other gripping her jaw as I crush my mouth down on hers.

Lauren makes a sound of surprise, which causes her lips to part. I seize the opportunity to plunge my tongue into her mouth, curling it behind her teeth, fencing with hers.

She kisses me back, clinging to my shoulders. A small moan escapes from her. Shit. I remember myself and pull away. I'm supposed to be finding out how I can help her, not kissing her senseless.

Her lips are parted, her gorgeous eyes hooded, and she's breathing quickly. But at least she's not fucking crying

anymore. I'd call that a success.

"That's enough crying from ye, lass," I rumble, depositing her back onto her stool, climbing to my feet, and rounding the breakfast bar into the kitchen, grateful to have the solid countertop between us.

I'm saved by the ringing of my phone, thank fuck.

"Paddy," Fitzzy's voice sounds down the line. "Where the fuck are you? Get your ass here now."

"I'm on my way," I growl, hanging up and turning to Lauren.

While I was distracted with Fitzzy, she took the opportunity to compose herself, sitting quietly with her hands folded in her lap, her legs dangling in the air.

"I have to go to Oracle," I tell her. She looks up at me and nods. "Make yourself at home. Don't leave the apartment."

Surprisingly, she doesn't bristle at the order in my tone. If anything, she looks relieved. Nodding to her, I turn and stride out of the apartment, closing the door firmly behind me and taking a deep, steadying breath.

Groaning, shaking my head, I walk toward the elevator bank. Did I just tell a woman to make herself at home in my apartment? That's a first. It's a first I don't understand, and I'm not sure I like it.

Slinging myself into my SUV, I roar out of the parking garage, turning to Oracle. The Vice cops are there, sitting in their unmarked Crown Vic, sticking out like a sore thumb.

Ignoring them, I jog up the stairs, stepping into the club, the familiar sounds of the place waking up and getting ready for a night of booze-soaked debauchery swirling around.

Strippers are arriving as I walk through the door from the private lounge to the club's back end. They call out to each other, laughing and chatting. I pass their dressing room without a glance, beelining for Fitzzy's office.

The generic-looking door has a *Manager* label on the door but nothing else. Fitzzy is surprisingly unconcerned about flashy shit. It's one thing I love about the prick.

Stepping into the office, it's clear I'm the last one here. Connor starts catcalling the second the door closes behind me.

"So. Is my little good luck charm dynamite in bed?" he smirks, blinking in shock when my fist snaps out and smashes into his face. I blink too. That was unexpected, but it felt fucking good.

"Her name is Lauren," I growl at him. "You can call her that or nothing."

Seamus is watching me carefully, and Ronan and Niall trade looks in the corner. Liam simply looks confused.

"I take it she's the reason you're late?" Seamus notes, a dangerous edge in his tone.

"And so she is, Fitzzy," I agree easily, sinking into the last empty chair dotted around the room. "The lass only just woke up, couldn't leave before I found out what she needed."

"And what was that?" Seamus throws a dark look over at Connor when he opens his mouth, no doubt to offer a smart-

arsed comment. I scratch my head, shrugging, lounging back in my seat.

“I don’t right know. She didn’t exactly get to the point.”

Seamus’s eyes fly up his forehead, and he starts smirking. Prick.

“It’s not like that,” I snap. His lips drop back into a straight line. “She’s hiding from someone. Didn’t say who.”

“Where is she now?” Seamus asks after a beat, nodding his head.

“My place.”

He blinks in surprise. “Still?” he sounds incredulous now.

I shake my head. “Where else is the lass supposed to go?”

He glares at me. “We don’t know who this lass is. She could be anyone -.”

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. “She’s Josh Carmichael’s sister.”

That statement has the attention of the room.

“The Dot fighter who had a run-in with the Italians?” Connor asks. I blink at him in surprise. I think he has the man mixed up with someone else. He couldn’t possibly be talking about the Josh Carmichael I’m thinking of.

“The Italians?” Seamus ponders, but I’m already shaking my head.

“Carmichael wasn’t associated with any organizations. He was just there to fight. He and Perry go way back. Probably how Perry knew Lauren.”

As I think about it, I need to speak with Perry. What the fuck was he thinking? Letting Lauren run around that warehouse with a vague instruction to Fitzzy to look out for her.

“Nah.” Connor is frowning and shaking his head. “He might not have worked for the Italians, but I distinctly remember them talking about taking out a Dot fighter named Carmichael because he refused to take a fall. Cost them a fucking bomb when he won the fight he was supposed to take a dive in.”

What? That’s the first I heard of it. I thought Carmichael simply got jumped one night. It happens all the time in Dot.

Seamus stares at his cousin with his lips pursed. After a long moment, he turns to me.

“Get rid of her, Paddy,” he grunts. Not a fucking option.

“She’s too much of a fucking liability if Connor’s right. We used a lot of currency with the Italians to clean house with the Romanians. We can’t afford a beef with them right now.”

“Not happening, Fitzzy,” I growl back at him. He blinks in surprise at my opposition to his careless order. “I’m not about to turf a crying lass out onto the street. That’d be throwing her to the wolves.”

Where the fuck would she go? The Italians would eat her alive. The Bianchi Crime Family doesn’t exactly have a reputation for compassion.

“Why would she be crying?” Seamus is frowning now, looking confused. Why is that what he’s focused on?

“Fucked if I know.” I shrug. “How d’you make Tiggy stop being emotional?”

“Tig’s not a crier,” Seamus replies, sounding pissy.

“Tiggy cries all the time,” Liam pipes up. Seamus glares at him like he’s fucking betrayed him.

“Tig’s pregnant. It’s different. Hormones,” he offers. Liam snorts, rolling his eyes. That’s a bold fucking move by the kid.

Seamus rounds on him. “You’re the one who coddles her like you’re her mammy.”

“She’s pregnant!” Liam blusters.

It’s my turn to roll my eyes. Jesus fuck. I came all the way down here for this? I could be at home finding out who the fuck is after Lauren. Seamus catches the look on my face, frowning and changing the subject.

“Paddy, Niall. There are some lads who’ve taken to avoiding their debts from the poker tables,” he sighs. “I’ll need you to talk some sense into them.”

Niall grunts from where he’s standing in the corner, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. Talking isn’t his strong suit.

“Fists only.” Seamus throws the Reaper a warning look. Niall grunts again, disapprovingly this time. For him, that’s articulate. “Paddy, you take the lead.”

Expected. It will also keep me away from Lauren, which isn’t ideal. How the fuck can I figure out what trouble she’s in if I’m not in the same building as her?

I can’t disobey a direct order. Seamus might be my best mate, but he’s also second in command. Without another

option, I nod, shoving out of my seat as Connor smirks and texts me the addresses.

As we're leaving, Seamus's voice rings out. "Cuddling."

He sounds like saying the very word pains him. I stumble to a halt and turn to him, my eyebrows raised. Did he really just say that?

"Fucking, what?" I ask, my jaw hanging slackly.

Seamus shifts uncomfortably in his seat, clenching his jaw, and repeats himself.

"Cuddling," he grits out. "When Tig's upset, she likes to be held."

Liam snickers, and when Seamus shoots him a murderous glare, Ronan reaches out and smacks the lad upside the head. He's lucky he didn't get worse. Seamus is handy with a flick knife when he needs to be.

"What? Like hugging her?" I ask, nonplussed. Cuddling. Isn't that what mummies do to weans? Seamus shakes his head, scrunching up his face.

"Nah, like, lying in bed and holding her to your chest." He gestures awkwardly. "Stroke her hair and shit."

"You're telling Paddy he should cuddle her after fucking her?" Connor asks, fighting a losing battle to keep a straight face. Seamus shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

"There's no fucking involved," he sighs. What? All five of us stare at him, baffled.

"At all?" Connor's eyes are bugging out of his head. Seamus looks like he wishes someone would burst in and blow

his brains out for him right now. I don't blame him. This is awkward as fuck.

"It's supposed to be comforting her, not you getting your rocks off," Seamus snaps at him.

Connor nods. "Right, so you just get her off and hold her?"

That doesn't sound too hard. I could do that. I'm not sure I completely understand the whole *she gets off, I don't* part, but I could try. Seamus's eyes flutter closed.

"Jesus, give me strength," he mutters. Opening his eyes, he glares fiercely at his cousin. "No one gets off. You just lie down next to her and hold her. Fucked if I know why, but it seems to fucking help them calm down."

Connor looks dubious now. "Wouldn't getting off be a quicker -."

He cuts off midsentence, ducking when Seamus throws a flick knife at his face.

"Everyone fuck off out of here," he snaps. "I'm done with this fucking conversation."

Probably for the best. I need to see to these gamblers and get to the bottom of this mess with Lauren.

Chapter Five

PADDY

A grunt of pain rings in my ears as I drive my fist into the man's stomach. Air expels from his lips as he doubles over, clutching his middle.

“One week,” I growl at him. “You don't front the cash by then, we'll be paying you another visit, and next time, *he* gets a shot at you.”

I jerk my head at Niall, standing in the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest, scowling at the piece of shit who has sunk to all fours, moaning on the floor at my feet.

The weak prick's eyes flicker over at Niall, and he pales with fear. I imagine being threatened with a visit by the Reaper of the Boston Irish Mafia would be enough to make you shit yourself.

I aim a hard kick at his solar plexus, and he collapses, curling himself into a fetal position, trying to protect himself from my swinging feet.

“One week,” I threaten again before we take our leave.

It's almost midnight when Niall and I wrap up Connor's list. Really, the man needs to be clearer with his gamblers. I wouldn't be letting them leave the room upstairs at Oracle without paying. Then again, that might be why Seamus gets his cousin to run the tables, not me.

Dropping Niall to his West Boston condo building, I drive to Back Bay, parking and sliding out of my SUV. The plushly carpeted hallways of the building are silent. It's one of the reasons I picked this place twelve years ago when I moved out of Sean Fitzpatrick's West Roxbury home.

Seamus bounced around for a while before buying his house in West Roxbury, where he still lives, but I moved here. There are too many memories in West Roxbury, and I'm not ready to revisit any of them.

Wondering if Lauren will still be here, I let myself into my apartment. The lights are off, but when my eyes adjust, Lauren is visible, curled up on the sofa, fast asleep.

Something weird curdles low in my stomach at the sight of her. Sitting uncomfortably, it's a strange feeling, so I shrug it off, gently closing the front door behind me.

Sighing, I quietly stalk across the room, gathering her in my arms as I move her into the bedroom. It doesn't seem right for her to sleep on the sofa when there is a perfectly good bed in the other room.

As I try not to jostle her, Lauren murmurs something but doesn't wake, rubbing her cheek against my shirt, and I smell vanilla again. I deposit her in the bed, tucking the comforter around her shoulders, and stare down at her.

Fuck it. Fucking Fitzy. Kicking off my shoes, I strip down to my fitted cotton trunks and lift the comforter to climb into the bed with her.

I hesitate, holding up the comforter, taking stock of the situation. What the fuck am I even doing? Letting Fitzy get all

up in my head is what. Climbing into the bed, I slide an arm underneath her neck, shuffling closer until our sides are pressed together.

It's uncomfortable as fuck. I don't see how this is supposed to make someone feel better? I think I'm doing it wrong. I should abort mission and go and sleep on my fucking too-small sofa like I did last night.

I shift, starting to slide my arm back out, when Lauren mumbles again, rolling toward me. A hand lands on my bare chest, and she presses herself against me, half lying on my chest. Her cheek is rubbing against my collarbone, and she snuggles closer, butting her head underneath my chin. I freeze for a moment, sighing and wrapping my arms around her.

I feel awkward as fuck, but at least it's not an uncomfortable position anymore. Closing my eyes, the smell of vanilla envelops me. I fall asleep quicker than I ever have in my life.



LAUREN

As I wake up, I realize slowly that Paddy has moved me to the bed again. I'm no longer curled up on his sofa. I'm stretched out on the firm and comfortable mattress.

Except I'm not. I blink in shock as my eyes flutter open. I'm lying on top of Paddy's chest. Paddy's very *naked* chest, his strong arms are wrapped around me, holding me tightly to him. Oh *my*. This is a wicked nice way to wake up.

My face is pressed against his collarbone, and his face is buried in my hair as he sleeps deeply. Sunlight is spilling through the window, dappling on the bare hardwood floor.

I have no idea what time it is because he doesn't have a clock here, and my phone is on the coffee table.

My small movements must wake him because Paddy stirs, nuzzling his face into my hair as he does so. The gesture does funny things to my lady parts, heat pooling there.

"What are you doing?" I whisper, wincing as his face stops moving, though it's still buried in my hair.

"Holding ye," he murmurs back, which definitely has the butterflies fluttering in my vagina. Okay. Panty-meltingly sexy. But... unusual.

"Why?"

He pauses for a moment, still not moving his face out of my hair. When he answers, his voice is a little muffled.

"Because ye were upset yesterday," he replies, though he sounds unsure of himself now. "Do ye not want me to?"

Uh. Yeah, I want him too. I'm not some ice-cold stone bitch. Before replying, I stroke my fingertips across the bare skin spreading out from underneath my cheek, my eyes watching the movements I'm making with wonder.

His breath hitches and I pause my strokes when I feel something else hitching. Something *huge* pressed against my hip.

“No, it’s nice,” I murmur. Nice? It’s *heavenly*. Despite everything, I think I’m living out some kind of fantasy right now. Reality will surely come knocking, but I’m okay if it doesn’t any time soon.

One of Paddy’s hands leaves my back. He hesitates for a moment before trailing his fingers through my hair.

Closing my eyes, I let out a small sigh at the feeling. Yeah, this is definitely nice. Paddy’s hand halts in my hair at my sigh.

Keeping my eyes closed, I murmur to him. “No, don’t stop. I like that.”

His breathing hitches again, but he starts stroking softly again before I can second guess my words. I focus on the feeling of his fingers sliding through my hair and the steady beating of his heart underneath my cheek and eventually drift off to sleep.

When I wake again, I’m still lying on Paddy’s chest. He has stopped stroking my hair, but his fingers are still tangled there, while his other hand rests on the small of my back. His dick is a hard ridge underneath my stomach, digging into me.

When I lift my head, I see he’s lying there, staring straight up at the ceiling, seemingly lost in thought. At my movement, his head tips forward, his eyes finding mine. Paddy studies me in silence for a beat, a frown marring his perfect face.

“Ye sleep a lot, lass.”

“Making up for lost time,” I mutter.

His frown deepens, but he doesn't say anything. He moves his hand from my hair, stroking his fingertips along my cheekbone.

“I have to get to the club.”

Oh. Oracle. Shit. Of course. *Ye sleep a lot, lass.* That probably meant *I'm late for work, waiting for you to wake up.* I have no idea why he didn't just leave... but I'm sure he had his reasons.

I nod jerkily, scrambling backward off him, taking the comforter with me. As I uncover him, it becomes obvious he got into bed in just his fitted trunks. Hell.

My eyes land on his gloriously bare body, and my cheeks heat up, but I can't drag my eyes away. They slide over the hard planes of his torso and fix on the enormous bulge contained in his black fitted trunks.

Cheeks tomato red, my tongue darts out to wet my lips, and a growl rumbling from Paddy's chest has my eyes darting up to meet his coal-black ones.

He's staring at me with blazing heat in his eyes, his jaw tight. It's a wicked good look on him and has heat curling low in my stomach.

“Did it make ye feel better?” he growls. “The cuddling?”

He was trying to make me feel better? That's...sweet. I blink in surprise and nod.

“Yes. It did. Thank you.”

“Good,” he growls again, his eyes dipping to my mouth and holding there. “Cuddling’s done now, though, yeah?”

“Uh,” I stutter, not sure what he means. “I mean, you said you had to go to work, so yes, I was going to get up.”

“Thank feck for that,” he mutters. My cheeks get hotter, but this time in embarrassment.

Oh. Of course, a man like Paddy Flynn isn’t a cuddler. It must have been annoying for him to lie here all that time. I wonder why he did it at all. From what Josh said about him, I wouldn’t have taken Paddy for someone who cared if I felt comforted. The whole thing is....

My head bounces against the mattress as I’m suddenly flat on my back, Paddy’s fingers circling my ankle as he drags me toward him, tugging off my shorts and panties and yanking my legs apart until my pussy is exposed to him.

I gasp in surprise at the air on my suddenly bare lower regions. I’m not sure what is happening, but whatever it is, I’m on board with it. I thought he had to go to work? Not that I’m complaining or anything. Tipping my head forward, pressing my chin to my chest, I drink in the sight before me.

Paddy’s eyes dart up to my face, burning into mine for a moment. Breaking the spell, he buries his face between my thighs, his mouth closes around my clit, and his tongue lashes it.

Oh shit. His tongue is wicked talented. Instantly, I’m moaning, arching my back off the bed as he slams his forearm down across my hips, anchoring them so I can’t buck against his mouth.

Boo. I settle for tangling my fingers through his thick, dark hair, clenching tightly, my other hand gripping the comforter beside my head.

My head is thrashing about because, holy shit, I'm going to come wicked hard, wicked soon. The man is a *god*, and his tongue is the most blessed part of him.

The second my orgasm crashes over me, Paddy's mouth leaves my clit, his lips sliding over my neck as he slams his monster dick inside me. Shit. God. *Paddy. Yes.*

Since I was in the middle of coming hard, at the feeling of being stretched and *full*, another orgasm washes over me. I writhe beneath Paddy as he groans against my neck, pinning my hips with one of his hands, while he lifts himself onto his other forearm and withdraws almost fully, slamming in again.

The sensations are overwhelming. My brain is mush, my mouth is dry, and my vagina is throbbing with pleasure. My fingernails scrabble at Paddy's back as he fucks me hard, pistoning in and out in a way that is only just shy of painful. So, so good.

"*Paddy!*" I scream as my third orgasm hits like a fucking freight train, my legs thrashing about his. After a few pumps, he thrusts in hard, holding deep as he comes with a groan against my neck.

Our harsh breaths mingle, loud in the silence of the room. That was...I can't even articulate. I may never think coherent thoughts again. I would be okay with that future.

Shifting on top of me, Paddy doesn't immediately withdraw, which surprises me, considering what I've heard

about him. Instead, he sighs against my neck, his weight bearing down, pressing me into the mattress.

It's not uncomfortable. It's rather reassuring to feel his weight there. I feel... I don't know, *protected*?

"Who's looking for ye, lass?" Paddy asks against my neck, still buried deep inside me. Okay. Good feelings gone. Not entirely, but he definitely popped my post-orgasmic bliss bubble. I can't really lie to the man. One, he's *still inside me*, and two, I did come to him for help.

"Italian men," I whisper.

"Jesus fuck," he mutters into my neck. Whatever that is about.

"Because of Josh," he guesses. It's not a question, but I respond anyway.

"Yes."

I swallow painfully, willing myself not to cry. Not again. I shouldn't have any tears left. Surely. A sniff breaks through my composure, though tears don't threaten, thank God.

Paddy pushes himself up on his forearms, lifting his comforting weight off me, and I feel vulnerable. He studies my face for a beat, brushing a few strands of hair out of my eyes.

"I want ye to stay here, don't leave the apartment. Understand?"

He speaks softly but with a thread of warning running through his words. I swallow again and nod.

“I’ll send someone over with some groceries. There’s not much in my fridge.”

I nod again, and he’s gone. Out of my vagina, out of bed, out of the room. That was...intense.

I hear the front door slam, and I curl up on my side for a moment, letting out a shaky breath. If I’m not careful, I will be consumed by Paddy Flynn. And, honestly, I’m not sure I’d mind.

Chapter Six

LAUREN

There isn't a lot to do in Paddy's apartment. I've cleaned the entire place and gathered the laundry things. But Paddy told me not to leave the apartment, so I couldn't *do* the laundry.

The TV has no cable – I think that's super weird – and he doesn't have many cooking or baking things. Not that they would help – I can cook, but anything I attempt to bake ends up burnt.

I bite back a smile. Mrs. Dawkins, who lived next door to us back in Dot, is an incredible baker. She was also a substitute grandmother for all the kids in the building. We were always coming and going out of her apartment.

After ascertaining that she didn't mind, Josh used her as a babysitter. I spent more afternoons sitting at her kitchen table doing my homework than in our own apartment doing the same thing.

The only other kid who spent almost as much time there was Andie. She lived across the hall from us with her mother. When her mother was around, I think she might have been a prostitute. Mrs. Dawkins spent hours teaching Andie and me to bake. Andie had the *touch*. By the time we were in high school, Andie was a master baker.

I could never master it, but I happily sat at the kitchen table, chatting with them and eating all the mouthwatering pastries

they churned out. Those afternoons in Mrs. Dawkins' apartment cemented Andie and my friendship. If I had to pick a best friend, it would be Andie.

Standing in front of the bookshelf – since there is *nothing* else to do, I run my fingers over the spines of the books. All twelve of them.

I wonder how Andie is doing. And Mrs. Dawkins. I can't call Mrs. Dawkins. She would demand to know where I was, and knowing that might put her in danger. I couldn't do that to her. I could call Andie... my eyes linger on the microwave clock. Or not. It's mid-afternoon. She works as an administrative assistant at a small shipping company. She would be at work.

My fingers pause on the spine of the final book. It's thick and heavy. I used to work as a bookkeeper in a copier sales company. I never gave them notice, but I don't think my job is still there. They probably had a replacement starting two days after I didn't show up to work.

I pull the book off the shelf, frowning down at it with a sigh. It's a history of the Irish struggles for freedom against English oppression. You know, light bedtime reading. But it's a book, and I'm bored.

Settling down on the sofa, I tuck my feet beneath me, opening the book and staring at the first sentence. This is definitely not going to be light bedtime reading. But he only has twelve, so he's probably read them all. It would give us something to talk about... if he was ever here. With that in mind, I focus and start reading.

After maybe an hour, I jump and drop the book when a knock sounds on the door. Who would be knocking? Paddy wouldn't knock. My heart is in my mouth, and I stare at the door, irrational thoughts running through my head. Or maybe not so irrational.

There were probably Italians at the fight where I met Paddy. They could have seen us leave together and put two and two together that I'm staying here. They could have tracked me down, known Paddy wouldn't be here during the day, and they could be outside the door *right now*, ready to snatch me.

I'm not sure why people here to kidnap me would *knock*, but I don't know mafia etiquette. They're probably not that big on manners if they are here to snatch me out of Paddy Flynn's living room.

The lock turns. My breath sucks in, bile creeping up my throat. I'm on my feet in an instant. There isn't enough time to go for a knife in the kitchen, so I clutch the heavy book in my hand, hoping like hell I don't miss when I launch it at whoever is coming in.

The young, dark-haired man who enters is about my age. His eyes widen, and he ducks to the side as I launch the book at him. Not that he needs to, because it barely clears the sofa before hitting the floor with a loud thump.

That was my last line of defense. There's no way I can make it to the bedroom door. We stare at each other for a moment until I realize he's holding bags full of groceries. Oops. Paddy did say he was sending someone with groceries. I have no idea why that didn't occur when I panicked and spiraled.

“Lauren?” he speaks softly like I’m a rabid dog he’s trying to calm.

“Uh, yeah?” I blink at him, and he smiles gently.

“I’m Liam. I’m going to put these down and lock the door, okay?”

“Uh, okay?”

He does exactly that, turning back to me, his hands raised slightly.

“I’m going to unpack the groceries now, okay?”

I nod, watching while he unpacks and puts away the groceries. Feeling more relaxed and a little foolish, I wander over, sitting on one of the stools at the breakfast bar, waiting for him to finish.

When he turns and sees me sitting there, he relaxes too. Fishing out the last item from his shopping bag, he throws it toward me. It lands on the breakfast bar and slides to a stop right in front of me.

Glancing down, blood rushes to my heated cheeks. Picking up the box of Plan B, I raise my eyebrows at him. But Liam doesn’t seem the least bit embarrassed. He simply fetches a glass of water, sliding it across to me.

“You need to take that. One pregnant woman at a time. That’s all I can handle.”

I have zero idea what he’s talking about. But at least I can allay his fears.

“I have an IUD,” I tell him, dropping the Plan B packet onto the countertop and snatching up the water to take a sip as

he visibly sags in relief.

“Thank fuck for that,” he mutters, turning to set the coffee maker going.

As soon as his back is turned, I drop my head, biting back a groan of mortification. Paddy must have told him we had sex. Unprotected sex. And sent him to buy a packet of Plan B for me. How humiliating. God, this guy must think I’m some kind of slut or something.

“You’re doing laundry?” His voice cuts through my mortification. I lift my head, following his gaze toward the basket I left on the coffee table.

“Um, I’m not supposed to leave the apartment,” I hedge, and he nods.

“Yeah,” he smirks. “I know.”

We stare at each other for another long moment, and he sighs like the most put-upon person in the world.

“I’ll fucking do it.”

I blink as he strides over, snatching up the basket and the detergent I found under the sink in Paddy’s bathroom, slamming the apartment door behind him.

Sliding off the stool, I cross to fetch my book. Picking it up, I lay it on the coffee table, grab my phone, and curl up on the sofa. The urge to call Mrs. Dawkins is hammering hard at me, so I settle for texting Andie instead.

LAUREN: Working?

ANDIE: Gotta hustle baby. How’s hiding out? You find your mafioso?

I'm surprised she texted back immediately. Maybe her boss is out. I snort and roll my eyes at her text.

LAUREN: I don't think you're supposed to call them that. Isn't that Italian?

ANDIE: No idea. He's mafia, so mafioso works well enough. Did you find him?

LAUREN: Yeah. I found him.

ANDIE: Is he going to help you?

LAUREN: I don't know. He's helping hide me ATM, so I guess that counts.

ANDIE: What's he like?

My fingers pause on the phone. What is Paddy like? My cheeks flame at the memory of his tongue... and his dick.

LAUREN: He's not what I was expecting.

Like, I wasn't expecting him to fuck me. I have no idea if that was a one-off thing, but I'm okay with it being just that once. I will carry the memory of that fuck to the grave.

ANDIE: As long as he keeps you safe, he's all right in my book. Shit. Boss is back. Got to go. Love ya Low!

LAUREN: Bye. Love you too.

Dropping my phone, I stare unseeing at the book on the coffee table. Somehow, having a kind of normal chat with Andie only made me sadder. I miss Dot. I miss Mrs. Dawkins, and I miss Andie.

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Chapter Seven

PADDY

Seamus drops into the chair beside me, handing me a tumbler of whiskey, his eyes flickering over the stripper working it on the pole on stage before returning to rest on me.

“I’ll have to talk to Pa about the Carmichael lass,” he tells me.

I grit my teeth and nod sharply at him. Yeah, I figured as much. “And so you will, Fitzzy.”

He studies me for a beat, smirking. “Heard you sent Liam for Plan B. Decided to try to fuck her happy, did you?”

I flip him off, growling. “No. I fucking cuddled her, you fucking prick.”

His laughter makes me want to slam my fist into his jaw.

“You did it wrong if you needed Plan B,” he snorts. “Were you not listening when I said there was no fucking involved?”

“I listened,” I tell the asshole through gritted teeth. “Fucking nightmare. I was fucking hard as a rock the entire fucking time.”

“So you decided you fuck her. Defeats the purpose.” Seamus is cocky *and* smug now.

“No.” I glare at him. I listened. I followed his fucking rules. It was *torture* lying under her and not getting myself off, but I fucking did it.

“I asked her if it made her feel better, and when she said yes, I asked her if we were done cuddling. She said yes, and then I fucked her.”

Seamus throws his head back, roaring with laughter. Once he’s calmed the fuck down, he nods.

“Don’t go getting attached, Paddy,” he warns me. “If Connor’s right, Pa will have the final say.”

“And so he will.” I sigh, smoothing my thumb over the rim of my glass. “Connor’s probably right.”

Seamus glances sharply over at me.

“The lass told me today that she’s scared of the Italian men. And that they were gunning for her because of her brother.”

“Fuck, Paddy.” Seamus blows out his breath and scratches the back of his head. “Just don’t go getting fucking attached, yeah?”

I don’t say anything, tossing back the last of my whiskey. Standing, I rap on the table, and Seamus’s eyes fly up to mine.

“Let me know what Sean says.”

He nods and watches as I stalk from the room. Striding out of the club, I fight the urge to flip off the Vice cops.

I’d love nothing more than to walk over there and offer them a drink to let them know we *know* they are there, but Sean laid down the law when they first started scoping the place out. No one talks to them. No one acknowledges them. I get his reasoning, but they annoy the fuck out of me.

I don’t have time to get into it with our resident Vice cops. I have another errand to run. A personal one. Sliding into my

SUV, I pull out of the parking lot, my eyes finding the unmarked Crown Vic in the rearview mirror. They don't follow me. They never follow anyone.

It's a relatively easy run to Dot. Unsurprising, since it's the middle of the afternoon. I got the address from Delic. He was wary about giving it to me, but I assured him it didn't concern Delic's business. And it doesn't.

The building is a little shabby but clean. Checking the address on my phone, I skip the lift, jogging up the stairs to the third floor and hammering on the door of apartment nine.

"Jesus! I'm coming. Keep your hair on!"

The door snaps open, and Perry frowns at me, his T-shirt on inside out, his reddish-brown hair falling into his face. I've never seen him anything less than smoothly put together, but I think I just got him out of bed.

"Flynn?" his tone is colored with confusion. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to you about Lauren Carmichael."

Perry's eyes widen, darting over my shoulder like he's afraid the big bad bogeyman will appear there.

"Shit. You better come inside," he mutters, stepping back and letting me in.

Once I step inside, he locks the door, sliding the chain across for good measure. My eyebrows shoot up, and Perry flushes when he catches sight of my face.

"This is Dot, and you want to talk about a Carmichael. I'm not taking any chances."

Okay. I don't particularly like the sound of that. Crossing my arms over my chest, I watch Perry as he subconsciously mirrors my stance.

“What did you want to talk to me about? Is Low okay? She said she needed to find you. I sent her in your direction.”

Another uncomfortable sensation curdles my stomach when he calls Lauren ‘Low’. Shrugging it off, I narrow my eyes at him.

“What do you know about Josh and Lauren Carmichael?”

Perry sighs, running a hand through his shaggy hair. “I went to school with Josh. Low was the skinny little sister he always had to look out for. Sometimes she was annoying because he couldn't do stuff. ‘I can't. Low needs me,’ was his go-to phrase. But she was a good kid.”

So, she was close with her brother. That doesn't answer the questions hammering at my brain.

“What happened with Josh and the Italians.”

Perry shifts uncomfortably, sadness flashing across his face. “I don't know. He never wanted to be affiliated with any... one.”

His eyes dart to my face, but I keep it impassive. I don't give a shit if Carmichael didn't agree with the mafias running this city – he was always polite to me, and a good opponent in the ring. Until three days ago, that's all I needed to know about the man to respect him.

“I heard the Italians paid him to take a dive. But Josh would never take a dive. I don't know if he agreed for some reason

and backed out or if they just misunderstood, but he wound up dead.”

“And Lauren?”

Perry’s breath blows out sharply. “Low buried him. She tried to move on. I thought that was the end of things. Then she texted me asking about you.”

His eyes trail over me, and he snorts.

“What about me?”

“She wanted to know when you were fighting. I told her Josh never wanted her near the fights, so she wasn’t fucking getting close to one.”

And he should have fucking held the line. Lauren should never have been in that warehouse. There were Italians *right there*. Does she know what kind of danger she might have been in?

“And yet, you let her in. You sat her with Seamus.”

“Yeah. She said if I didn’t tell her, she would sit on the doorstep of Oracle until you showed up.”

Jesus fuck. I need to have a word with the lass about self-preservation.

“I figured I had some clout at least at the fight and could keep her safe.” He pauses, eyeing me carefully. “Is she okay? Is she safe?”

“She’s safe.”

He hesitates again. “You’re not going to tell me where she is, are you?”

“No. I’m not.”

“Okay. That’s okay. As long as she’s safe. That’s what Josh would have wanted.”

“Do you know why Josh Carmichael told Lauren to come to me if she ever needed help?”

I mean, I knew the guy. He was a good guy. But we barely spoke two words to each other outside of the ring. Perry smirks.

“Josh thought you were a decent bloke. I guess he trusted you with his sister.”

I wish I could ask him why. But he’s cold in the ground, and I don’t think I will get any more information from Perry.

“I’ll see you at the next fight, Perry.”

He nods stiffly, unlocking the door and holding it open for me.

“Thank you for looking out for Low.”

Grunting, I nod and stalk out of the apartment, heading back for the stairs. Of course I’m going to look out for Lauren. What the fuck else would I do? If anything happened to her, I think those huge eyes would haunt me for the rest of my life.

Sliding back into my SUV, I hesitate. Usually, I would go back to Oracle, but I can’t be arsed to do that. Something is tugging at my brain, so I turn for Back Bay.

The shower is running when I let myself into the apartment. The place is spotless. The lass has even polished my door handles, and a basket of folded laundry is on the coffee table. I could get used to having her live here if this is what I get to

come home to. The only thing missing is a mouthwatering meal sitting on the breakfast bar.

There is no mouthwatering, home-cooked meal, just the Plan B packet I had Liam deliver with the groceries. Crossing to it, I pick up the box and frown when I see it's unopened. Turning it over, I start to read the instructions. We fucked this morning. Surely she has to have taken some by now for it to take effect?

The bedroom door opens, and I look up to see Lauren standing there in cotton shorts and a T-shirt. She is staring at me where I'm standing in the kitchen, frowning and holding the box.

"You've not taken any." I jerk my head toward the box, holding it up for her to see. She nods, chewing her lower lip.

"Like I reassured Liam, I have an IUD. I think he may have almost fainted with relief." She smirks at me, crossing to the laundry basket, pulling out some sheets, and moving to make up the sofa.

My brain is racing to catch up. Thank fuck she has an IUD. Why the fuck would Liam have fainted? What the fuck is she doing with my sofa?

"What are you doing?" I ask her, dropping the packet back onto the breakfast bar.

"Making up the sofa to go to sleep," she replies, not bothering to look up from her task. Fuck that. I haven't let her spend the night on the sofa since she arrived. Why the fuck would she think I'm going to start now?

"What's wrong with the bed?"

I stalk over to her, sliding my fingers into her hair and tugging her head up to look into her eyes. Still just as fucking mesmerizing. I cup her jaw with my other hand, sliding my thumb over her lower lip.

“N-nothing,” she stammers, her eyes widening. “I don’t want to impose.”

My eyebrows shoot up, and I step closer, pressing my hard dick against her stomach.

“Do I seem put out to ye?” I murmur huskily, and her breath catches as her pupils dilate.

“Not particularly, no,” she whispers, her breath brushing over my thumb. Jesus fuck, I need her.

My eyes dip to her mouth, and my nostrils flare, but I don’t kiss. Ever. The other day was a one-time thing. Now I know that cuddling works just as well in calming her the fuck down, it will only ever be a one-time thing.

Instead, I hold my thumb against the seam of her lips, and when she parts them, I press it inside. My breathing catches as she sucks on the tip of the digit, her eyes locked on mine. I groan. This woman will be my fucking undoing.

“Feck, lass. I need to be inside ye,” I growl.

She nods, still sucking on the tip of my thumb. Fuck, I need to be buried balls deep in her. Keeping my thumb in her mouth, I spin her around, pressing her ass against my dick, sliding my lips along the nape of her neck, smirking as she shivers.

I walk her into the bedroom, bending her over the wooden bureau.

“Keep sucking, lass,” I growl, feeling the pull on the tip of my thumb as she obeys.

Pressing my chest against her back, I use my other hand to reach around, sliding my hand into her shorts and panties, parting her folds, and pinching her clit.

Lauren moans around my thumb, sucking harder as I grind my dick against her ass, flicking her clit with my fingers.

“Are ye nice and wet for me, lass?” I breathe against her ear. She mewls her agreement, nodding silently. My fingers leave her clit, sliding down and one spears into her. Fuck, she’s *so* wet for me.

“Hands on the top of the bureau,” I order. Without hesitating, she immediately obeys, which is fucking sexy.

I remove my finger, and she whimpers.

“Suck,” I remind her, and she does. Shoving down her shorts and panties, I leave them around her knees, unbuttoning my jeans.

I use my hand at her mouth to twist her head to the side. Leaning forward, I pin her against the bureau with my weight, feeling the heat of her body against my chest.

I suck her earlobe into my mouth at the same time I slam into her, causing her hips to slap against the bureau drawers.

As she gasps, my thumb slips from her mouth. Probably a good thing. If she sucked on the tip of my thumb while I was balls deep in her, I would probably be finishing embarrassingly quickly.

I snake one arm around her torso, pressing my forearm over her collarbone to anchor her against me. Gripping the bureau with my other hand, I pound into her, biting lightly on her earlobe.

I can see her face in profile and feel a surge of smugness at the look there. Lauren's eyes are closed, her head tipped back, her mouth open as she loses herself to feelings of pleasure.

Even though I have her pinned into place, she's trying to throw her hips back to meet my thrusts, so I give it to her harder. She starts making the sexiest little moans and whimpers.

She shatters, her pussy clamping down on my dick, and I let her earlobe slip out of my mouth as I bury my face into her neck, inhaling the vanilla scent of her skin, biting down on the curve of her neck as I come.

Yeah. There's no way she's sleeping on the sofa.

Chapter Eight

PADDY

“You bit me.” Lauren sounds accusing as she leans over the vanity, twisting her head to examine the side of her neck in the mirror. The morning sun filters through the high window, dust motes swirling above her head. I didn’t hear her voice any complaint last night when she was busy coming on my dick as I was biting her.

“And so I did,” I agree, smirking at her as I lounge against the doorjamb.

“It left a mark!” She points to it, her eyes meeting mine in the mirror as she glares at me.

“And so it has,” I concur, my eyes skating over the slight teeth marks there. It was redder last night when I ran my fingers over it as she slept on my chest. It’s almost faded now. I didn’t even bruise or break the skin.

“Why?”

Why? Because it was sexy as fuck. Because she enjoyed the hell out of it, moaning with pleasure. I smirk at her, pushing away from the doorjamb as I stride across the bathroom, hooking my fingers through the belt loops of her jeans and tugging her hips back so her ass is grinding against my dick. Of course, none of those were my true reasons.

“Because I wanted to.”

She stares at me, wide-eyed. “And I suppose you always do exactly what you want?”

She rolls her eyes at me, and I bite back a grin.

“Always, lass,” I agree with a cocky grin. My dick is hard now, and her pupils have dilated. When she speaks, her voice is breathy, which has *my* pupils dilating.

“And what is it that you want to do right now?”

A low growl rumbles out of me as I close the space between us in two strides, my fingers sliding through her hair. I tug her head back against my chest to murmur into her ear.

“I want to fuck ye over this basin,” I breathe into her ear, and she shivers. “Take off all your clothes. And don’t look away from my eyes in the mirror.”

Her breath catches as I step away, my eyes burning into her reflection. Lauren slowly unbuttons her top, slipping it off and letting it drop onto the ground. My eyes dip to her lacy black bra, moving back up to meet her gaze.

“And leave yer bra on.”

Still staring into my eyes, she pops the button on her jeans, shimmying out of them. Her thumbs hook under the waistband of her matching black lacy panties, and I grit my teeth, holding my breath as she slowly slides them off, her eyes still holding mine.

Once she’s naked except for her bra, I step against her again, rubbing my jean-clad dick against her bare ass, my lips finding the shell of her ear.

“Bend over the vanity, lass.”

She immediately does so, gripping onto the sides of the basin, her eyes still locked on mine in our reflections. Fuck. This has to be the most beautiful sight I've ever fucking seen.

I pop the button on my jeans, pulling out my dick and stroking it from base to tip as I reach forward and slick my finger through her wet folds. She's so fucking ready for me.

When I flick her clit, her pupils dilate as I watch them, my dick leaping in my hand. I position it at her entrance, her juices coating the tip.

“Does being told what to do excite ye, lass?” I murmur, the evidence it does covering the tip of my dick.

“Only by you,” she breathes.

Fuck. That was the right thing for her to say. My hips jerk forward as I slam home. Gripping her hips, I slowly withdraw, pounding in hard again. Lauren's body convulses forward with each brutal thrust, and a long, low moan sounds as I slowly withdraw each time.

Her eyes never fucking leave mine, and I keep up my pace, hard in, slow out, until her mouth falls open, her eyelids fluttering as she tries to keep them open and on mine as she comes.

I hold deep in her until she's ridden the crest of her orgasm, reaching forward, tangling my fingers in her hair, tugging her head back as I tighten my grip on her hip and pump hard.

Lauren's eyes widen as she comes again unexpectedly. The sight and feel have me coming hard. So fucking good. I almost wish I had bitten her again.



LAUREN

Paddy withdraws, breathing hard, his eyes finally releasing mine from his captive gaze as he buttons his jeans back up, turning away.

“Get dressed, lass,” he calls over his shoulder as he strolls out of the room. “I want to talk to you in the kitchen.”

My legs are still trembling from the force of my two orgasms as I quickly clean myself up and dress, hurrying into the kitchen.

Paddy is leaning against the counter next to the fridge, his long legs crossed at the ankles, sipping a mug of coffee. Another cup sits steaming on the breakfast bar. He gestures to it as my eyes land on it.

“Have a seat, Lauren.”

I hurry to comply, feeling cold inside. Paddy rarely uses my name. Normally he calls me *lass*, so this must be serious.

He watches me for a beat over the top of his coffee. I pick up my mug, taking a sip of the lovely coffee. Paddy shoves away from the counter, striding across the room and placing his mug on the breakfast bar. He leans forward, his hands

resting on the countertop as his eyes hold my gaze and search my face.

“Why are the Italians after you?”

My heart starts thumping in my chest, bile rising in my throat.

“I’m not entirely sure,” I tell him truthfully, scratching the countertop with my thumbnail. “I know it has something to do with Josh. I think about a fight. I think....” I pause, taking a deep breath as I voice my darkest suspicion. The one I’ve never told anyone else. “I think they might have killed him.”

Paddy watches my face for a long moment. Lifting my eyes, I meet his gaze, feeling miserable.

“I have to head out,” he says, nodding and draining his coffee. “Don’t -.”

“Leave the apartment,” I finish for him, nodding earnestly. Paddy blinks in surprise, smirking at me.

“Not even for laundry.” He nods to the basket over on the coffee table, censure coloring his tone.

“Liam did that,” I blurt out. “I just folded it when he brought it back up.”

Paddy’s lips press together – I don’t know if it’s because he doesn’t want to smile or if he doesn’t like Liam doing our laundry. Without speaking, he nods, reaching out, cupping my cheek, and stroking his thumb over my lower lip while he holds my gaze.

I’ve noticed that it is one of his favorite things to do with my mouth. He never kisses me. It’s frustrating as all get out

because I want him to kiss me again. I have dreams about our single kiss. It was wicked good.

Paddy's hand disappears from my face, and he turns without another word, striding out of the apartment, the door slamming shut behind him.

The silence is deafening after he leaves. There isn't even a stereo here. Maybe I'll blast some tunes on my phone. Like I've summoned something to distract me from the silence, my phone buzzes from the coffee table. I retrieve it, answering as I slide back onto my stool, sipping my cooling coffee.

"What's going on, girl?" I drawl down the phone, getting a snort in return.

"Not dead then?"

I roll my eyes at Andie's dramatics. "Why would I be dead?" I snicker, taking another sip of my coffee.

"Oh, I don't know," she replies airily. "Maybe the fact that the Italian mafia wants you to be?"

I pause, sighing. "You think they want me dead?"

Honestly, that hadn't occurred to me. I have no idea what I thought they wanted with me, but death makes sense. They killed Josh – at least, I think they did, and Paddy didn't disagree. He'd know about that stuff. So, maybe they want to kill me too. Rid themselves of all the Carmichaels. It makes as much sense as anything else.

All I know is Josh was murdered, and two weeks after his funeral, one of my neighbors cornered me and told me the Italian mafia had been sniffing around. They had broken into my apartment but were gone when I got home. I packed my

duffel bag, taking Josh's piece of paper with Paddy's name within an hour, leaving and not looking back.

Andie makes a noncommittal noise down the line. "They've been around again. They broke back into your place. They trashed it this time."

Shit. That's not good. Andie's apartment door faces mine, and she's got a mouth on her.

"I hope you stayed inside your place and locked the door."

A sniff down the line says she is rolling her eyes at me.

"No," she gasps, sarcasm dripping off the word. "I went out and confronted them, guns and all."

"Andie," I warn her, but I need to practice my 'dangerous' tone because it's got nothing on Paddy's.

"Relax," she snorts. "I hid inside my apartment. I didn't even go into your place after. I only peeked in the door. I think they may have pissed in here," she makes a disgusted noise in her throat, "because it *reeks*."

"Gross," I wrinkle my nose. My poor home.

"Yeah," she agrees, changing the topic as she sighs and launches into a story about our weird-ass, creepy neighbor Dan who likes to flash the young women in the building.

Ah, god, I miss Dot. Paddy's place in Back Bay is so boring by comparison. I bet they don't have a resident flasher. I bet Paddy would stop that right quick if anyone ever started.

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Chapter Nine

PADDY

Lauren is awake when I get home for the night. Some of Connor's gamblers needed a second visit from Niall and me. That never ends well. I want a shower.

She is sitting at the breakfast bar, toying with a beer bottle, the remnants of her supper lying off to the side. When I let myself in, her eyes flicker toward the door, relaxing when she sees it's me. The relaxed shoulders only last a second before she stills, her eyes widening as they dance over my shirt, and she pales, her freckles standing out against her stark white face.

"Fuck," I curse low under my breath. I thought she would be asleep. Her eyes are fixed on the bloodstain soaking through the right arm of my button-down shirt.

"Oh my God!" she gasps, finding her voice, jumping off the barstool, and hurrying over. "Are you okay?"

Why the fuck wouldn't I be okay? I blink at her in surprise until I realize she thinks I'm injured.

"It's not my blood, lass," I reassure her.

Again, she looks relieved. For about two seconds before all the blood drains from her face again, and she stumbles back, away from me. Frowning, I take a step toward her, my hand coming up. Why is the lass running from me? Is she all right?

“Oh...who...um.... Oh...okay,” she mutters, backing up slowly until her back hits the breakfast bar, her eyes wide and glued on the blood.

Lauren snaps out of her stupor, turning away from me sharply, snagging her dishes and moving them to the sink, washing them with jerky movements as I close the door behind me, moving further into the apartment with slow, deliberate movements. I don't want to spook the lass. Not with how jumpy she is. And she's holding a knife. She might cut herself accidentally.

Fuck. I've never really had to deal with this. The only women I have ever slept under the same roof with were my mammy and Tiggy, and they both knew the score. I walk slowly up behind her, cursing myself for not realizing the light was still on and taking my shirt off outside.

Once her dishes are resting on the drying rack, Lauren turns and takes a deep breath when her eyes land on the bloodstain again.

“We should soak that.” She gestures half-heartedly at the red mark. “Otherwise, it'll set in, and the shirt will be ruined. I'll do it.”

Okay? She holds out her hand for the shirt. She wants my shirt? My blood-stained shirt? She's no longer jerky in her movements, more calm and controlled. I don't know which is worse.

Thinking it is best to go along with whatever is going on, I deftly unbutton and slip it off, holding it out to her. Lauren takes it gingerly, careful not to touch the blood with her fingers, walking stiffly into the bathroom.

Running water sounds from the bathroom. I move into the doorway, leaning my shoulder against the doorjamb, watching Lauren fill the basin, pour some laundry detergent, and drop the shirt in. Her eyes meet mine in the mirror, wide and nervous.

“It should be okay to wash in the morning,” she tells me. I watch her silently. Is she going to flip out at some point? I think I should definitely keep her close tonight. Just in case.

“Well,” she squirms, “goodnight.”

I step aside to let her out of the bathroom since I need a shower. She beelines for the door out to the living area, skirting the bed.

“In the bed, lass,” I remind her. How else will I make sure she’s okay? Lauren freezes mid-step, nodding without looking at me and walking out to the main apartment area.

Once I’ve toweled myself down, I head back to the bedroom. The place is bathed in darkness, and I can make out a shape huddled under the comforter. Good, she listened to my command.

Striding toward the bed, I’m about to climb in when I hear a small snuffle. The fuck? As I slide in beside her, there is a small squeak and another snuffle. Jesus fuck, the lass is crying.

“Are you crying, lass?” I whisper, the horror evident in my voice. She sniffs again.

“No,” she whispers back, her voice breaking on the word.

Jesus fuck. This is another one of those cuddling moments, isn’t it? Motherfucker. Sighing, I slip my arm underneath her

neck and haul her to me, closing my arms around her and burying my face in her hair as her cheek lies on my bare chest.

“What are you doing?” Lauren asks, her voice slightly muffled since her mouth is half-pressed against my chest. There is a slight tickle as her lips move against my skin. My dick gets the wrong idea and leaps around like an eager puppy, but I ignore it.

“Cuddling you until you feel better,” I reply into her hair. Her lips move against my chest again, but no noise comes out. I think she might be smiling, even though she snuffles again.

“Have you ever cuddled a woman before, Paddy?”

I roll my eyes into the darkness. Did the lass get the memories shocked out of her at the sight of the blood or something? She’s from Dot. A little blood wouldn’t be an unusual sight. She didn’t seem so squeamish cleaning my knuckles the first night she got here. She was fucking *there*.

“Yes. I cuddled you the other day.”

“And so you did,” she replies after a beat.

She’s imitating me. Normally, the sound of someone so obviously mocking me would have my blood boiling. But I’m lying here, my arms around her, swallowing a smile. It disappears as Lauren sighs.

“The Italians trashed our apartment.”

I stiffen at her words. Jesus. That’s a common tactic the Bianchi Crime Family uses to send a message. That you’re not safe. That they can get to you anywhere.

“Is that why you came to find me?” I ask her, stroking her hair. It’s a nice feeling because her hair is silky, and when I move the strands around, the smell of vanilla is more evident.

“No, I mean, today. Well, this morning, they trashed our apartment.”

What? How the fuck would she know that if she was obeying my order to stay here? My fingers close tightly around the hair they are tangled in, and I tug her head back to look into her face. She winces at the tugging in her hair and cringes at the fury in my voice.

“How do you know that?” I ask, furious that she disobeyed me and left the apartment. I can’t fucking keep her safe if she doesn’t do as she’s fucking told. Jesus fuck, what is with people thinking they can do as they fucking please?

“Ow,” she whimpers. Shit. I slacken my fist, but only a little. “My neighbor called me today after you left,” she bleats. I loosen my grip further.

“What did you tell this neighbor?” I hiss. Jesus fuck. They could be informing for the Italians. The lass has less than no sense of self-preservation. Just how much harder has she made looking after her?

“Nothing! I didn’t tell Andie anything.”

Andy? Who the fuck is Andy?

“Who the fuck is Andy?” I growl, my hand tugging at her hair again.

“She’s my neighbor,” she sniffles. I open my hand, letting her hair slip through my fingers as her head tips forward, and she presses her face against my chest, a small sob escaping.

Fucking hell. I'm not doing a very good job at this cuddling thing. I tentatively start stroking her hair again. Eventually, the tension leaves her body as she falls asleep.

The moon comes out from behind a cloud, and the room is bathed in silvery light. I study Lauren's face. Now her eyes are closed, she's back to being simply pretty again.

I run my fingertips over the smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. I watch her face until the clouds come over again, and the room is plunged into darkness. Unable to see her freckles anymore, I let my head drop back onto the pillow, closing my eyes as I tighten my arms around Lauren and fall asleep, vanilla swirling around my senses.



LAUREN

I wake to find myself held tightly against Paddy's chest again. This is becoming something of a habit. One I probably shouldn't let myself get used to. His morning erection is pressed hard into my hip, and he groans softly as I move, inadvertently grinding against it.

"Do you feel better this morning, lass?" Paddy's gravelly, just woken voice slides across my skin, raising goosebumps.

“Yes,” I whisper, remembering the other day when he asked if cuddling time was over and fucked me.

Shivering with anticipation, I grind against his erection again, deliberately this time. He flips us so I am flat on my back with a growl, his body pinning me into the mattress, his face inches from mine.

Paddy’s breath catches as his eyes dip to my lips. But, to my everlasting dismay, he doesn’t kiss me. Instead, he grinds against me, dropping his face and groaning into my neck.

“Feck,” he mutters, his hips stopping their motion, his body taut above mine. Why did he stop? What’s happening? I strain my hips upward, attempting to grind against his erection again.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, my voice breathy, which has him groaning again.

“Aye, lass.” He sounds like he’s gritting his teeth, and he’s still as stiff as a board on the top of me. “Feck,” he mutters again, sounding frustrated.

He bites down lightly on my neck with a muffled sigh, moving off me. What? No! Where is he going? What did I do wrong? I stare after him feeling a mixture of desire and rejection. Paddy looks at my face and groans, scrubbing his hands over his eyes.

“Feck,” he whispers again, reaching over, hooking his fingers under the waistband of my shorts, tugging them and my panties off, and burying his face between my thighs.

“Ah, Jaysus feck, but ye taste good, lass,” he sighs against my clit. I whimper, bucking my hips upward. I don’t know what that was all about, but I can get on board with this.

Paddy eats me out until I come on his mouth twice. Sated and still trembling from the force of my second orgasm, I stare after him as he shoves off the bed, his eyes lingering on my still spread legs.

Abruptly, he leaves the room, storming into the bathroom and slamming the door. The shower starts running, and a low oath rings through the door.

“Fuck, that’s cold!”

He’s only in there for about two minutes before the shower shuts off. When he emerges from the bathroom, I’m still lying on the bed, naked from the waist down, completely confused about what’s happening.

His eyes darken as they flutter over my form, and I press my thighs together as he tears his eyes away and storms out of the bedroom, slamming the door behind him again. I’m so confused. What the hell was that all about?

Chapter Ten

PADDY

“There’s a good-sized crowd here tonight,” Seamus notes. I cast a glare around the crowded warehouse. I don’t give a fuck who is here tonight. I don’t intend to be here for that long.

“And so it is, Fitzzy,” I agree through gritted teeth. He turns to me with an amused look in his eye.

“Fuck, you’ve been a moody fucker today, Paddy. Everything alright?” he squints at me.

“Fucking peachy, Fitzzy,” I spit at him. He blinks at me in surprise, his mouth opening to ream me out. Whatever, bring it on. Just another thing to amp me up for this fucking fight.

“Ready to go, Paddy?” Perry’s voice sounds behind me, a hand clapping on my shoulder. I don’t bother looking at him, stalking toward the ring.

With a shrug, Seamus sits beside Connor, who has been bitching me out all night about not bringing his good luck charm with me. Infuriating bastard. He’s lucky he wasn’t my first knockout of the night.

Perry’s voice rings out, announcing my opponent and myself. As I step into the ring, I eye my opponent, a feral grin tugging at my lips, which has him flinching back and a murmur running through the crowd. I don’t usually show emotion before these fucking things.

It's all over in five fucking minutes. It was never going to take long. I plow my fist into his nose, the skin at my knuckles splitting as his head snaps back, and he hits the floor with a thud.

Taking a deep breath, I turn, climb out of the ring, and stalk out to the back room. Seamus and the lads are right on my heels.

Dropping onto the bench, I unzip my bag, snagging a bottle of water and wincing as I rinse my knuckles.

"All right, Paddy," Seamus snaps once we're relatively alone. "What the fuck's going on?"

"Nothing," I snap back at him, sick of his fucking face right now. "Absolutely fucking nothing!"

Of course, he doesn't let it go. Seamus plants his feet, crosses his arms and glares at me. I simply stare belligerently back.

"You fucking slaughtered that lad back there. It felt fucking personal, Paddy." He cocks an eyebrow. "Do you know the lad or something?"

"I've never fucking met him before in my life," I spit, shrugging as I pull on a T-shirt, holding out my hand as Delic enters the locker room, bringing my takings for the night over and handing them to me.

"You okay, Flynn?" he asks. I blink at him. Not him too.

"What the fuck is with everyone tonight?" I snap. Delic eyes me carefully, a thoughtful look on his face.

“I watch you fight for years, Flynn,” he tells me solemnly. “You always the same. Your anger, it burns ice cold. Tonight, hot. Hot and angry. Frustrated.” He shrugs, moving away.

As soon as he’s gone, Seamus snorts. “You got blue balls or something, Paddy?”

He has hit the nail on the fucking head. I growl up at him. Fucking asshole. I bet *he* got laid today. A knowing smirk settles on his fucking ugly mug, and I flip him off.

“I’m sure we can fix that right up,” Seamus grins, gesturing to the door as one of the sex on legs, stunning fight groupies struts in.

Connor’s eyes eat her up while Ronan and Niall smirk. They’re fucking welcome to her. The groupie drops to her knees in front of me, reaching eagerly for the waistband of my trousers. Well, that’s not what my dick wants right now.

I knock her hand away, shoving my feet into my sneakers. The woman reaches for me again as I snag my duffel bag. Can’t take a fucking hint, can she?

“Fuck off,” I snap at her. She rocks back to sit on her heels as the curious looks of my crew burn into my face.

“Everyone get the fuck out,” Seamus growls, his eyes trained on me.

They all file out, including the pouting groupie. Niall hesitates, but Seamus jerks his head at the door. Niall’s eyes slide over me, and I nod stiffly to him. I assume I’m about to be reamed out, but I’m still not going to let anyone jump Seamus.

Niall snaps the door shut behind him. Once we're alone in the room, Seamus crosses his arms over his chest, eyes narrowing on me.

"You have exactly five fucking seconds to explain what the fuck is going on before I smack your ass down," he informs me, his face hard.

Fitzy is handy with a flick knife in a fight, but he's no match in a brawl with me. I contemplate telling him to fuck right off, but there's something in his eye that tells me this isn't between me and Fitzy, my best mate. It's between me and Seamus Fitzpatrick, the next head of the Irish Mafia. He needs an answer, and I have no choice but to give him one.

"Delic had it right." I shrug at him, slinging my bag over my head and letting the strap settle across my chest. "Blue balls."

I step toward the door, eager to be off home to rectify the fucking situation A.S.A.P, but Seamus shifts, planting himself in the way. Swallowing an annoyed growl, I stop in my tracks.

"And yet, you sent the groupie away," he points out.

"And so I did, Fitzy."

His eyes narrow. "Don't give me that shite."

I sigh, holding up my hands to appease him. "I didn't need her services."

His eyes narrow further. "The Carmichael lass," he surmises.

I shrug as he shakes his head, scratching the back of it while resting his other hand on his hip.

“From memory, the lass is nothing special,” he sighs, watching my reaction carefully. I *want* to smash my fist through his fucking nose, but I school my face into a neutral expression.

“No offense, Fitzzy,” I smirk, “but you don’t think anyone but Tiggy is anything special these days.”

“And so I don’t,” he agrees, still eyeing me carefully. “But I still know a good-looking woman when I see one.”

“Lauren *is* good-looking,” I’m nonplussed, but Seamus shrugs one-shouldered.

“The lass is pretty, I’ll admit, but she wouldn’t stand out in a crowd of pretty lasses.”

She would to me, but I don’t fucking tell him that.

“I’ve a hankering for her, that’s all.” I shrug. “I was going to fuck her this morning, but I wanted to be sharp for tonight’s fight,” I explain. Suddenly, Seamus is grinning again.

“But you denied yourself, and that’s why you’ve been pissy all day.” He’s nodding now, fucking amused. “Well, as Delic said, it was a different fight style than you’ve had in the past, but it clearly fucking works for you because you were a beast back in that ring.”

I don’t really care. The fight is over. I won it. The lads made bank. Now I can get the fuck out of here and home to Lauren. Nodding to Fitzzy, I step toward the door again.

When I stalk out of the room this time, he lets me go. I head straight home, and Lauren is curled up on the sofa when I walk in. She looks up in surprise, her eyes drifting over my busted knuckles as she stands.

“I’ll get the first aid kit,” she starts, but I cut her off, pointing my finger at her face.

“Don’t bother. I want ye naked, kneeling on the bedroom floor when I get out of the shower.”

She blinks but nods as I throw my duffel bag onto the sofa, stalking into the bedroom.

I have the world’s quickest shower, toweling myself off and striding back into the bedroom, almost stumbling at the sight before me.

Lauren has done *exactly* what I told her. She’s naked as the day she was born, kneeling on the floor, sitting back on her heels, her hands resting in her lap as she looks up at me expectantly. Jesus fuck. That’s a beautiful sight.

I fist my dick, stroking it as I walk over to her, stopping right in front of her. Reaching down with my free hand, I cup her chin, guiding her until she’s fully kneeling before releasing her face.

“Open,” I breathe. She obediently opens her mouth, her fucking stunning amber eyes locked on mine. Her hands come up to grip the sides of my thighs as I feed my dick into her pretty pink lips.

I fist my other hand in her hair, guiding her head forward until the tip of my dick hits the back of her throat, and she makes a small choking noise. Only then do I stop.

“Suck,” I command her. Lauren’s cheeks hollow as she obeys without hesitation, dragging a groan from my throat as I grit my teeth. “Feck, lass, just like that,” I groan again.

Her eyes still locked on mine, she stops sucking and swallows. And keeps fucking swallowing. My eyes widen as my dick slides down her throat until her nose is practically pressed against my pubic bone. I stare down at her, my jaw hanging loosely.

“Jaysus feck, *leannán*,” I breathe, blinking. Her eyes burn into mine as she sucks, her cheeks hollowing out before swallowing again. My hips jerk as her throat contracts around my shaft.

“I need to fuck yer mouth, lass,” I grit through clenched teeth. She nods as much as she can with my dick crammed in her mouth.

Sliding both hands through Lauren’s hair, I grasp it to hold her head in position. Staring into her mesmerizing eyes, I start thrusting gently until she gets accustomed to it, slacking her jaw before my thrusts become rougher, picking up the pace.

“Touch yerself, lass,” I grunt, and her hand creeps down between her thighs at my bidding.

This incredible moment has been worth the frustration I’ve felt all fucking day since I had to walk away from her delicious body this morning.

Lauren’s eyes widen, and her nostrils flare. She’s about to fucking come. That knowledge has me shattering. I explode down her throat as she moans, her eyelids fluttering shut.



LAUREN

Paddy scoops me up and deposits me on the bed, climbing in beside me and tugging me into his arms as he buries his face in my hair. His words from last night echo in my head, “cuddling you until you feel better.” That seems to be what he’s doing now. I wonder what I did to make him think I need to be comforted.

“I’m not upset, Paddy,” I whisper against his chest. “You don’t need to cuddle me.”

“Shut up, lass, and let me hold ye,” he growls into my hair. I lapse into silence. I’m not about to argue with his cuddling me. I like it.

We lie here until he speaks again, his face still buried in my hair.

“Was it just the two of you?” he asks softly, his fingers stroking my hair. “Just you and Josh?”

I swallow, realizing that Paddy isn’t cuddling me because he thought I was upset. He is cuddling me because he wants to ask me upsetting things.

“Yes,” I whisper, bringing my hand up to stroke over the skin on his chest beside my face. Beneath my fingertips, the

beating of his heart is strong and steady. I can hear it underneath my cheek too. “Ever since I was little, it was just us.”

“You’re a lot younger than Josh,” he guesses, and he’s not wrong. There were almost ten years between us. Ten years and a lot of different men in our mom’s bed.

“Yes,” I whisper again. “I’m twenty-five.”

Paddy’s hand on my back moves, sliding over my skin, his fingertips trailing up my arm until they come to rest on my hand that is tracing patterns on his chest.

His fingers close around mine, capturing my hand and holding it against his heart.

“What happened to your parents?” he asks at last, a strain in his voice I have never heard before. It’s hard to explain, like pain and sorrow and anger and darkness. I hesitate, sighing against his chest.

“Josh’s father left our mom when Josh was little. I don’t think that Josh ever heard from him again.”

“And your father?” he prompts when I don’t continue. I rub my cheek against his chest.

“I never knew who he was. I don’t think my mom ever knew either.”

There’s a pause, and I sense he will ask, so I breathe and keep talking. “My mom disappeared when I was about six. I don’t know if she’s dead or just gone. Josh dropped out of school to look after me. He started fighting to make money.”

My voice is tinged with sadness, and Paddy's hand tightens on mine, anchoring it to his chest, his lips moving in my hair, though I can't hear his words. He doesn't speak aloud again, and I fall asleep to the steady beating of his heart and the feeling of his lips moving in my hair. Feeling warm and safe for the first time in a long time.

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Chapter Eleven

LAUREN

I think Paddy made himself sexually frustrated on purpose last Thursday. And I have a feeling it had something to do with the fight he had that night. Perry once told me that Paddy fights on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The reason I think the whole “sexually frustrated for the fight thing” is because we have fallen into something of a pattern since then.

I wake up in his arms, and he fucks me every morning. Every. Single. Morning. Then he leaves to do whatever it is he goes and does, and I clean his apartment and work my way through his weird-ass collection of books.

When he gets home late at night, he eats me out, and we fuck again before he cuddles me until I fall asleep. Rinse and repeat. It’s a routine I am quickly getting addicted to. And who wouldn’t? Paddy is the most gorgeous man I have ever laid eyes on. I’m living a wicked nice dream and never want to wake up.

It’s Tuesday morning, so he must have another fight tonight. Our day is already out of kilter. Blinking awake, wrinkling my nose at the light shining through the windows onto my face. My hands close around cold, empty sheets, and I sit up quickly, my head swiveling as I look around with wide eyes.

My mouth tastes full of ash as my eyes sweep the room. No sign of Paddy. His absence, so different from most mornings, has me feeling slightly empty, a feeling I *definitely* need to sit down and examine at some stage.

I can hear him out in the kitchen. Sliding out of bed, I tiptoe to the bathroom, running the shower, standing under the warm, steady flow, and taking deep, steadying breaths. I'm reading too much into this. I know I am.

It's just a single morning where he hasn't woken me up to fuck me. It probably means nothing. Certainly not that he's done with me. Maybe he got called by Fitzzy, his boss or whatever, and is having breakfast before he leaves.

I take my time to dry my hair. There's no hairdryer here, but I towel it dry, brushing and tying it back. Wrapping the towel around me, I step into the bedroom. There are still sounds of Paddy moving around the kitchen and my heart thuds.

I was in the bathroom for a while. Paddy mustn't have been called to Irish business. Maybe it is that he's sick of me.... Crossing to the closet, I open the door, stepping inside the smallish walk-in space. My duffel bag is on the ground underneath some hanging clothes. It's empty. All my clothes are folded neatly in two drawers, except for one thing.

My fingers brush against the soft fabric of the only dress I packed. I have been living in jeans and sweaters, but I feel more than a little insecure without our usual morning sex.

Snatching the dress off the hanger, I step into it, zipping it up the side under my armpit. Turning to the mirror built into

the back of one of the closet doors, I smooth my hands over the skirt of the dress, staring at my reflection.

It's a cute little sundress with a sweetheart neckline and spaghetti straps, which hugs my curves tightly to my hips before falling loosely to mid-thigh. The dress has an in-built push-up bra, so my tits are nicely displayed, and I've carefully brushed my hair until it's shining, tied back off my face.

Taking a deep breath, I stare at my reflection. It's the same one I have looked at every day of my life, but not for the first time do I feel a pang of disappointment. I'm pretty. I know that. But I'll never be stunning. No wonder Paddy is sick of me.

Turning away from the mirror, I close the closet door and walk into the main living area, bracing myself for Paddy's inevitable rejection, telling me that I need to get out of his home.

When I walk into the kitchen and his eyes land on me, Paddy freezes where he's spreading cream cheese on a bagel and makes a strangled sound in his throat.

My eyes lift to meet his. He drops the knife and the bagel onto the countertop, stalking out of the kitchen, heading over to where I'm standing next to the breakfast bar, his eyes dark with need. But he doesn't move to fuck me. Maybe my plan with the pretty dress didn't work after all.

Instead, he growls as he stares at my tits for a moment, spinning me around, pressing against my back as he pushes me into the breakfast bar. Okay, something is happening. Maybe a tentative success?

I rest on my forearms there as one of his arms snakes around my collarbones, the muscles on his forearm cording, visible where the sleeve of his button-down shirt is rolled up to his elbows.

His hard dick grinds against my ass as his other hand snakes up under the skirt of my dress, and he snaps off my panties. Pity, I liked that pair. Now they're just a torn lace pile on Paddy's kitchen floor.

Grinding his dick harder against my ass as he anchors my back against his chest, Paddy's breath tickles my ear. His right hand slides up my thigh and underneath my skirt, his middle and ring fingers plunging into me as I gasp.

"Feck, so wet for me, lass," he groans into my ear, vigorously finger fucking me, the edge of the breakfast bar digging into my stomach.

Paddy's breath is coming out in rough pants, harsh against my ear, and every time his fingers slam into me, the heel of his palm slaps against my clit. It's sensation overload. Oh god. I'm not going to last.

"Come for me, *leannán*," he growls into my ear. I have no idea what the Irish word means, but his words are such a heady mix of command and tenderness that I shatter around his fingers, gasping out his name as I do.

He presses his forehead against the back of my head, breathing heavily into my hair for a moment. My ass wiggles against his rock-hard dick, drawing a groan from his lips.

Paddy collects himself, moving back around the breakfast bar, stooping to collect my torn panties from the floor. He

weighs them in his hands, shoving them into the pocket of his jeans.

My eyes follow him as he moves back to his bagel and picks it up, eating it like he doesn't have a painfully hard erection bulging against the zipper of his jeans.

My breathing is slowly coming back under control as I move into the kitchen, feeling Paddy's eyes on me as I pour myself a cup of coffee. There is a clatter as he drops his plate in the sink, and I place my mug down on the countertop, turning to face him as he gives me his usual spiel about not leaving the apartment.

"I promise not to go anywhere," I quickly assure him. Paddy studies my face for a moment, nodding sharply. Between us, his dick is still bulging against his zipper, my tongue darting out to lick my lips at the sight.

This is normally when Paddy would stride out of the room without a backward glance, but he still hasn't moved.

"See that ye don't, lass," he murmurs, raising his hand and running his fingertips over the bridge of my nose for some reason.

He cups my cheek with his hand, his thumb running over my lower lip as his eyes follow its movement hungrily. I don't know what's up with him and not kissing, but his eyes lift to mine, his gaze burning hard into them before he's gone, the door closing firmly behind him, the lock clicking into place.

Sighing, I move into the bedroom to don new panties. The kitchen is calling, so I grab a bagel, spread it with cream cheese, and eat it over the sink. I'm feeling sated after my

orgasm but a little off-balance over the lack of sex. My eyes land on my phone – specifically on the date – Tuesday. When Paddy fights. My theory from last week about sexual frustration comes back to me. Does that make you a better fighter?

Pushing my insecurities out of my mind, I mechanically wash the breakfast dishes. I want to clean the bathroom today. Then I'll get back to my reading. I'm almost halfway through the book on the Irish struggles against the English oppression. Maybe I'll finish it today. It's slow going because I have to keep stopping to look place names up.

It is late when Paddy returns, but I have waited for him. My legs swing as I toy with my phone at the breakfast bar. The key rattles in the lock, and I look up expectantly as Paddy slides into the apartment, locking the door behind him, his eyes meeting mine.

Like after the other two fights, his knuckles are busted up again, and he has a faint bruise starting to darken on his jaw, but other than that, he seems fine. I slide off the barstool, waiting for him to order me onto my knees. That was extremely hot last week.

Paddy's eyes hungrily drink me in. I'm still in my sundress.

“Naked, lass, in the shower. Now.”

Shivering with need, I turn, hurrying ahead as he stalks behind me, throwing his fight bag into the closet on the floor.

I drop the sundress on the bathroom floor as I step out of it, discarding my panties as Paddy tugs off his T-shirt and kicks

off his sneakers, shoving his sweatpants down.

Paddy's eyes are hungry as he steps into the water flow, quickly washing the blood and sweat of the fight away as I stand naked in front of him.

The second he is clean, he drops to his knees in the shower, grabbing my hips and moving me until I'm pressed against the cool, subway-tiled wall. Paddy's eyes meet mine as he hooks one of my legs over his shoulder.

He finally breaks our hypnotic eye contact as his thumbs part my folds, his nose teasing my seam and his lips and tongue finding my clit. Shit. He's wicked talented with that tongue.

Moaning, my eyes flutter closed, and my head tips back, resting against the cool tiles as my fingers slide through his thick, dark hair, gripping tightly.

"Feck, lass. I've wanted to do this all fecking day," he groans, his teeth raking over my clit. I whimper at the feeling, bucking my core against his face.

A long finger spears into me, stabbing at my sweet spot, and his teeth rake over my clit again.

"Shit, Paddy," I whimper, riding his face as I come.

"That's it, *leannán*."

He rises, his hands sliding under my thighs as he picks me up, pinning me there with his body as my legs wrap around his waist, and he thrusts deep.

Paddy's lips taste my neck, sliding up, and his tongue swirls over a sensitive spot beneath my ear. A moan rips out of my

throat as he sucks on that spot, pounding into me, my back slapping against the wall until I come again.

“*Leannán,*” he groans, biting down on my neck. He holds deep inside me, coming hard. His tongue licks over the spot he just bit, his head lifting and his forehead pressing against mine. As always, I hope for a kiss, and as always, I’m left disappointed as he sets me down, patting my ass when I move under the warm flow.

Shutting off the water, Paddy towels us dry, picking me up and carrying me to bed. This is new. Sliding under the coverlet beside me, Paddy buries his face in my hair as he wraps himself around me like a blanket, quickly falling asleep.

I think this is one of the first times he has fallen asleep before me. I lie here, staring up at the ceiling, raking my fingers through his hair as I enjoy the feeling of his breath tickling at my neck, where his face is pressed against me.

For someone who I’m pretty sure has never snuggled before, he’s getting wicked comfortable with it. It’s enough to make me feel quite smug. I take the rare opportunity while awake and he’s not to trace my fingers over his face and press a kiss to his temple as I fall asleep.

It’s still dark when I wake up to fingertips tracing gently over my face. When my eyes flutter open, my breath catches because Paddy’s face lies inches from mine, his eyes open and following the path of his fingers as they brush across my skin.

Paddy’s fingers cease their movement when he sees I am awake. Moving them from my face down to my neck, he cups

its base loosely with his hand.

I wait, but he doesn't speak, simply lying here, his hand resting on my neck, his eyes burning into mine.

"Is everything all right, Paddy?" I whisper. He watches me for a moment longer, sighing.

"Sometimes, lass, you look like you're in pain when you sleep." His eyes search my face as I blink in surprise at his observation. "Why is that?"

"I...uh," I stutter, casting my mind around, trying to think about what I was dreaming of right before I woke up. Oh. "I was dreaming about Josh," I whisper sadly, and Paddy's fingers stroke at my throat.

"How did he die, lass?" Paddy's whisper sounds loud in the silent room. I swear I can *hear* my heart beating so hard as I swallow painfully, the tears pooling in my eyes.

"He was sh-shot," I manage before the tears start to fall.

Paddy stares at my face, more specifically, at my cheeks, watching my tears with a look of horrified fascination on his face. He quickly lifts me onto his chest, cuddling me close, his lips moving against my hairline.

"I was at work." I speak into his chest as he runs his fingers through my hair. "When the police came to speak to me, I was at work. They took me out into the back, sat me down, and told me that Josh's b-body had been found in an alleyway in Dot."

Paddy's lips are moving on my forehead again. I close my eyes, seeing the image of Josh's face as he lay cold on the

metal table at the morgue, the hole in his forehead, right where Paddy's lips are now pressing against mine....

My eyes bug out as I shove away from Paddy. I've caught him off-guard, so by the time he moves to grab at me, I'm already out of bed, running for the bathroom.

I get there just in time, dropping to my knees, the cold, hard tiles underneath them as I vomit into the toilet.

"Lass?" Paddy has followed me into the bathroom. "Fuck, Lauren," he swears softly.

His hands gently lift my hair, holding it out of my face as I vomit until there's nothing left in my stomach. I'm trembling all over, my eyes closed, a light sheen of sweat coating my face once I'm done. Except I can still see Josh's face, so I keep heaving, even though there's nothing left to expel.

It hurts, but I can't seem to stop. Paddy kneels quietly behind me, his fingers stroking my hair and the nape of my neck.

Once I have finally stopped heaving, Paddy gathers me in his arms and moves us to the shower. Sitting on the floor with me tucked between his legs, he turns on the flow. The warm water washes over us, landing on the side of my face as I rest it against Paddy's chest.

"Feeling better, lass?" he asks, stroking this thumb over my cheek. Wearily, I nod against his chest.

"They made me look at him. At Josh's face." My voice is small and broken when I speak, my throat sore from all the dry heaving.

“The police?” Paddy clarifies, his thumb still stroking my cheek.

“Yes.” I nod again. “To identify him, they said. There was no one else.”

Paddy doesn't say anything else, and neither to do. I lie here, under the shower spray, while he strokes my face until I fall asleep.

Chapter Twelve

PADDY

“Pa wants to see us.”

Seamus looks up from his inventory lists as I lean against the doorjamb of his office at Oracle, the strip club he’s in charge of running.

He has an inscrutable look in his eye that can only mean one thing. Sean Fitzpatrick wants to see us about Lauren. Fuck.

Over the last three weeks, I’ve slowly gotten her to open up about various things about her childhood and her relationship with Josh, building up to his death, but all she knows is what the police told her.

He was shot in an alleyway, and his body was left there. Straight through the forehead, execution-style. It’s typical of both the Italians and the Russians, but it’s unlikely to be the Russians as it happened in Dot. They don’t have an alliance with the Italians like we do. If anything, there’s bad blood there.

I’m ready to straight-up murder the cunts who did it because not only did Lauren cry when she talked about it, but she also shoved her way out of my arms, fled into the bathroom, and vomited until her stomach was empty while I knelt behind her and stroked her hair.

Afterward, she spent about ten minutes painfully dry heaving over the toilet bowl. The police asked her to identify the body. It's fucking bullshit that there was no one else who could have identified him. Fucking Perry could have done it. Lauren didn't need to see that shite.

I hate that her last memory of her brother is seeing him like that. I will forever be grateful to Sean Fitzpatrick for not allowing me to see my parents' bodies – even when I raged at him to allow it.

Seamus stands, checking his phone.

“Checking up on Liam?” I smirk, waiting for him to lead me out of the room as I fall into step, flanking him. Without Niall here, I'll be Seamus's bodyguard for the day.

Seamus glances up, tucking his phone into his pocket with a shrug.

“Liam's running some errand for Ronan. I didn't ask. He was wreaking havoc in the dressing room last night – so it probably isn't a pleasant task.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Wreaking havoc how?”

Seamus snorts, rolling his eyes. “Apparently, two of the girls were getting upset about him sticking his dick in the new girl.”

“Liam sticks his dick in every new stripper. And he doesn't double-dip.”

“Yeah. I thought it was unfair for Ronan to blame him, but I think he was getting on his nerves anyway. This was the last straw.”

“Remind me never to get a protegee. Seems more trouble than it’s fucking worth.”

With a chuckle, Seamus slides into the SUV. I lock eyes with the Vice cops but turn and climb into the driver’s seat, pulling out of the parking lot and turning for West Roxbury.

“Just don’t get a protegee who earns the nickname *Sinner*,” Seamus snorts. Sighing, he rests an elbow on the window and strokes his chin thoughtfully. “I originally thought the nickname was to complement Ronan’s. You know, the Saint and the Sinner.”

I snort. The idea had occurred to us all at some point. “Liam doesn’t need to piggyback Ronan’s nickname. He earned that one all on his own.”

At Seamus’s direction, I pull into the driveway of Connor’s three-story West Roxbury home. Seamus stays in the SUV while I climb out, walking to the door of the small, matching cottage out the back of the house and hammering on it.

Connor’s head sticks out, and I jerk my own head at the SUV where Seamus is waiting.

“We’re going to see Sean. Seamus wants you there.”

Connor nods, turning to say something to the two lads inside the cottage who run his online gambling business, and steps outside, tugging the door shut behind him.

As he climbs into the backseat of my SUV, I lock eyes with Siobhan Fitzpatrick – Connor’s mother – who is standing in the laundry, looking out at the cottage. She nods stiffly and turns away.

As I pull out of the driveway, Connor smirks at Seamus.

“I heard Liam’s in the doghouse. Who have you got shadowing Tiggy.”

“Niall and Ronan,” Seamus replies. Both Connor and my eyebrows shoot up.

“Both?” Connor asks. Seamus shrugs, keeping his eyes locked on the road in front of us.

“I have my reasons.”

That’s fucking ominous. Connor drops the topic, launching into a description of the current takings for the gambling business as Seamus nods. I turn over why Seamus needs both the Reaper and the Saint watching over his wife.

I had thought this meeting with Sean would be about Lauren, but maybe it’s something else entirely. If Seamus wants Connor there, and he has two men looking after Tiggy, perhaps something a lot more serious is happening. Despite the worry we may be walking into a bad situation today, I relax. At least Lauren is safe at my place.

Sean Fitzpatrick only lives fifteen minutes from Connor and his mother. It’s a sprawling family home with a wide expanse of lawn, and it’s the place I called home from when I was fifteen until I was eighteen and moved into the apartment Lauren is holed up in now.

My parents’ house here in West Roxbury lies empty, waiting for me. But I don’t want to walk those empty rooms alone. I’m not ready to live there, but I don’t want anyone else there either, so it’s lain empty for the last fifteen years. Sean organizes a cleaner to go in once a month to dust and shit, but other than that, it stays locked up tight.

Connor and Seamus slide out of the SUV, and I hurry around to shadow Seamus inside, my eyes darting around. This is a nice neighborhood, but it's also the house of the head of the Irish Mafia, so you can never be too careful.

Mickey O'Shea from Doyle's crew is guarding the door. There's a rumor he has taken up with Doyle's daughter, so he must be on the up and up. He returns my nod, radioing inside that we're here.

Darragh Connelly, Sean's right hand, opens the door and ushers the three of us through to the den, where Sean is waiting, seated at his ornate wooden desk. As soon as we step into the room, I tense. Sean only meets Seamus in this room if things are fucking serious. Normally they catch up in the den with glasses of whiskey.

Sean gestures for us to sit, and so we do, Seamus and Connor lounging comfortably in their chairs while I'm taut as a fucking bowstring, my hands stuffed into the pockets of my jeans so no one can see my clenched fists.

Sean beams at me. "Paddy, I've heard ye're killing it in the ring, son. Really upped yer game."

I nod sharply, and Seamus snickers. "He's got a new prepping technique. It really helps channel his rage."

I flip him off, and Sean smiles indulgently, cutting the small talk and becoming serious.

"Gianni Manchetti has contacted me," he tells us, his eyes burning into mine. Jesus fuck. This is definitely about Lauren.

Gianni Manchetti is head of the Bianchi Crime Family, the Italian mafia in Boston. He and Sean have had a solid alliance

for the last seven years.

“They want the lass, Paddy.”

They can want her all they like. They’re never fucking touching her. I stare impassively back at Sean until Seamus and Connor start shifting uncomfortably.

“And this is my problem?” I ask at last. Sean’s eyes narrow at me.

“Gianni seems to think the word on the street is that the Carmichael lass is under Paddy Flynn’s protection.” Sean’s voice is even, controlled, and furious.

“And so she is,” I agree easily. No one is fucking touching her. They’ll answer to me if they try. I swallow a bloodthirsty grin at the thought.

Sean glares at me. “Well, that’s a problem for Gianni, which means it’s a problem for me. And if it’s a problem for me, Paddy, it’s a problem for ye.”

“Why do they want the lass?” Seamus interjects

Sean glances over at his son. “They had a deal with Josh Carmichael. They had an agreement that he would throw a fight. The Italians bet high on the match. Carmichael refused to take the fall and knocked the Italian’s lad clean out. Cost them a fecking mint. They want the lass to recoup some of their losses.”

“Lauren has no money. She can’t repay them anything. She spent her last dollar the night she came to me for help.”

Sean fidgets uneasily, and behind him, Darragh focuses his eyes on the ground. Seamus and Connor straighten in their

seats as an uncomfortable silence settles over the room.

Sean clears his throat, drawing all eyes to him. “The Italians intend to have the lass work off the debt.”

There’s absolute stillness in the room, like no one is even breathing. That’s never fucking happening. I can’t believe Sean would even consider it. We don’t force women into prostitution, and if he’s going to side with people who will, maybe it’s time the Irish re-thought their leadership structure.

It’s taking everything I have not to surge out of my seat, stride around the desk, and choke the life out of the man who has been my father figure for fifteen years.

“You’d order Paddy to hand over a woman to be forced into prostitution against her will?” Seamus’s voice is deathly quiet and ice cold. It would appear he agrees with my assessment of his father’s plan.

Connor is staring at his uncle with a look of horrified fascination on his face, while Seamus looks disgusted. My own face is a blank mask. I don’t even trust myself to blink right now.

“We can’t risk this alliance,” Sean says quietly. “We used all our capital with the Italians when we went up against the Romanians, and we can’t afford to protect this lass.”

It’s a sneaky, lowball move to remind Seamus that Sean doesn’t want to upset Gianni because we had to call on Gianni more than we would have liked to clean house after Seamus’s wife was kidnapped and shot by her own father. And Sean knows just how low it is.

“I’m not asking Paddy to hand anyone over. I’m asking him to release the lass from his protection and let the cards fall where they will.”

Seamus looks furious with his father, but I force an easy smile.

“I’m afraid that’s not going to happen, Sean.” I keep my tone light and conversational. Seamus and Connor’s eyes flicker over me, but they hold their tongues.

“Paddy,” Sean reasons with me. “I realize ye feel protective of this lass, but she’s no one to ye. We need to be picking our battles carefully, son. This is not the hill ye want to die on.”

“Actually, I think this is exactly the hill I want to die on, Sean.”

His eyes narrow as he studies my face, watching me carefully.

“For some lass, ye hardly know?”

A muscle ticks in my jaw, and a look of disbelief flashes across his face.

“Ye’re fucking her.” It’s not a question, and his tone is flat. “I’m sure she’s a good lay, lad. But there are plenty of good-looking lasses who know their way around a bedroom out there, son. Let this one go.”

“Pick your next words very carefully, Sean,” I speak slowly and evenly. “I’ll not sit here and have you disrespect my woman.”

“Fuck,” Seamus mutters beside me, eyes fluttering closed briefly. “I should have fucking known.”

“What d’ye mean?” Sean breaks his glare at me to glance over at his son. But Seamus ignores him, focusing on me.

“Are you in love with her?” he asks me, his lips twisting into a smirk. I turn to stare at him, raising my eyebrows in annoyance.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Fitzzy?” I snap at him. This is not the time, nor the place, for some whimsical fucking gossip session.

“How’s the cuddling going?” he smirks. I narrow my eyes into a glare.

“Fuck off, Fitzzy,” I grit out through clenched teeth. Can the bastard not appreciate the situation we have going on here?

“Do you snuggle with her every night when you go to sleep?” he mocks me, and I grind my jaw. I will slam my fist into his fucking face if he doesn’t shut his ugly mug soon.

Now it’s me, who Connor is staring at with horrified fascination. I flip him off while I signal to Seamus with my eyes that I’m going to rip his fucking face off if he doesn’t stop talking.

“Do you like the way her hair smells?”

“What the fuck?” Connor mutters under his breath from the other side of Seamus. I ignore Lucky’s confusion.

I know exactly what Seamus is doing. Fucking vanilla. I can smell it in my fucking nostrils. Whatever flashes in my eyes, the amused look drops right off Seamus’s face, and he turns to his father, his voice hard.

“The Carmichael lass is off the table. You find out from Gianni what he needs to make this right, and we will see to it.”

Sean doesn't look pleased, but I relax my fists. For the first time since Sean started talking, I'm feeling more confident that Lauren isn't going to be ripped away from me and thrown to the wolves. If Seamus is on my side, Lauren will be safe.

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Chapter Thirteen

LAUREN

A knock at the door distracts me from polishing Paddy's doorknobs. There are only five of them, so I'm making them shine. Boredom really doesn't suit me.

Dropping the cloth on the dish rack next to the sink, I walk to the door and take a deep breath. Should I have grabbed a knife? It might only be Liam – the errand boy from last time Paddy needed groceries. We're running short again. Maybe he's brought some food.

Opening the door slowly, I blink in surprise. It isn't Liam. The strawberry blonde Irishman from the underground fight stands at my doorway, looking uncomfortable.

"Lauren Carmichael, aren't ye?" he asks at last. I nod, wondering what he's doing here. He doesn't have any groceries, and I thought he was Lucky's bodyguard.

"Course ye are," he mutters under his breath. "What other lass would Paddy have in his home?"

I have to bite back a smile at the observation, a feeling of smugness surging through me.

"I need ye to come with me, lass." He looks like he doesn't like the idea one little bit. Why wouldn't he like it? My heart thumps in my chest, nausea swirling around. I finally find my voice.

“Paddy says I’m not to leave the apartment. I’m not even allowed down to the laundry room.”

“Aye, Paddy’s an overprotective stubborn bastard,” he agrees, and well, he’s not wrong. But I kind of like being protected by Paddy. It’s very... *pleasurable*.

“So....” I purse my lips. “I’m sure you understand why I won’t be going anywhere with you then?”

“I’m afraid Paddy’s been overruled on this one, lass.” He seems almost apologetic, glancing down at my sundress and sneakers. “Yer shoes don’t match yer dress. D’ye need to change them then?”

I look down as well, frowning at my white tennis shoes. “I don’t have any others.”

“Aye, well, grab yer purse.”

The look in his eye warns me not to disobey him. He remains in the doorway, looking forbidding as I slowly drag my feet into the bedroom, fetching my pocketbook out of the closet. I haven’t gone anywhere since I arrived here, so I haven’t had much need for it.

Weighing it in my hands, I swallow. Paddy’s been overruled? By who? Where are they taking me? Why do I need my pocketbook? I feel immensely uneasy as I step back out of the bedroom.

Strawberry blonde’s eyes follow me, looking amused. I’m not imagining things, they slide over me, checking me out – whatever that’s about.

“Let’s go, lass.” He gestures for me to lead him to the elevator bank, closing Paddy’s door behind us. My stomach

twists as the lock clicks. I don't have keys. I haven't needed them. I'm not supposed to leave the apartment.

He doesn't offer an introduction or an explanation as he leads me down to his SUV, holding the door open for me. At least he opens the front door. You don't normally let prisoners sit up front.

I wouldn't be doing this if he hadn't been with Seamus Fitzpatrick at the fight. I'm trusting that he won't sell me out because he seems to work for Seamus, with Paddy. I hope I'm not misplacing my trust.

There still isn't any talking happening. I look out the window, watching buildings whip past. We're not going to Dot. That has to be a good sign.

I blink in surprise when we pull into the parking lot at Oracle, the strip club run by the Irish mafia in West Boston.

"Am I being put to work?" I try to keep my tone dry, but nerves creep into it. I can't dance. I don't want to be a stripper.

He is in the process of holding my door open and glances at me in shock.

"Absolutely fecking not," he snaps. "Paddy's woman doesn't strip for other men."

His large hand closes around my upper arm, and he jerks me toward the large, looming front doors, leading me up the stone steps. I follow him, barely taking in my surroundings. I'm a little dazed at being called 'Paddy's woman' by one of his crew. Hello, warm and fuzzy feelings.

I get some curious looks from patrons as he guides me through the main bar, along a corridor into a smaller, more

intimate bar, and through a door into an industrial-looking hallway. It's empty, and I let Strawberry blonde lead me to a nondescript wooden door with a handwritten sign and a disgruntled, good-looking blonde lounging against the wall beside it.

“Hey!” I perk up and point at him excitedly. “It's Sandy from the fight.”

His emerald green eyes turn on me as he emits a low growl. Holy crap, he's a wicked scary dude.

“What did ye call me?” he asks, and I shiver in fear. I don't want to die tonight.

“Um, Sandy?” I squeak. “Because of your hair. He's Strawberry.” I jab a finger at my tall shadow, and Sandy blinks in surprise, the corners of his lips tugging up into the barest hint of a smirk.

“I'd rather ye call me Niall,” he drawls. “But ye can keep calling him ‘Strawberry’.”

Strawberry splutters from somewhere above me. “No, she fecking can't! It's Ronan.”

“In ye go, lass.” Niall jerks his head in the direction of the door. I get a good look at the sign as I turn the handle. What's written has me giggling, distracting me as I step through.

The door behind me snaps tightly shut, and I'm faced with three women, who are all looking at me like I am a circus curiosity and they are paying customers.

The glowing dark-haired beauty seated in the desk chair speaks first.

“You must be Lauren,” she beams at me. “I’m Tiggy Fitzpatrick. Seamus’s wife.”

Fitzpatrick. Seamus must be “Fitzy,” the drool-worthy brunette from the fight. She has a giant fuck off diamond on the fourth finger of her left hand, along with a plain gold wedding band. No wonder Fitzy had his very own bodyguard. He’s clearly someone important within the Irish mafia. I wonder if he’s related to... no. That’s *too high* in the Irish mafia to be interested in little old me.

“This is Fiona.” She gestures to a petite blonde with bright blue eyes who salutes me with a bottle of vodka that she appears to be drinking straight from. “And Mellie.”

The third woman is a brunette with gorgeously smooth tanned skin and eyes the most piercing blue I have ever seen. She’s drinking whiskey from a tumbler.

I shuffle uncomfortably as they all check me out, looking interested and amused. I’ve never had an issue with feeling pretty before, but in the presence of these three *stunning* women, I feel very plain.

“Come in.” Tiggy waves me over. “Sit.” She jabs her finger at an empty chair next to Mellie’s. “Drink.” She gestures to a very well-stocked bar to her right.

She’s drinking water, but given her glow and the way she rests her hand on her stomach, I’d say it’s because she’s pregnant.

I snag a tumbler and sit next to Mellie as she pours a generous amount of whiskey into my glass. I slug back the

drink while they all look expectantly at me, Mellie topping my drink up.

“Sorry,” I ask after a beat, “but why am I here?”

Tiggy smirks at me. “Because I wanted to meet Paddy’s secret girlfriend.”

His *what?* I choke on my drink, spitting a small amount onto the large hardwood desk. Mellie pats my back, and Fiona smirks as she moves to wipe the droplets off the desk, but Tiggy is sitting here beaming at me.

“I’m not...we’re not...” I stutter. Tiggy rolls her eyes at me.

“I don’t think any other woman except for you has seen the inside of his home. So you can’t tell me you’re not his secret girlfriend. Or are you saying you’ve never seen the inside of his bedroom?”

I flush bright red, snorting. “Just because we sleep together, doesn’t make me his *girlfriend*.”

“I know. Trust me, *I* know.” Tiggy perks up. “But we needed a fourth who is actually drinking, and that’s you.”

Tiggy is wagging her eyebrows at me now while the other two are grinning mischievously.

“So now, drinking games. I’ll go first.” Tiggy claps her hands like a little kid, fixing her eyes on me and beaming. “Never have I ever come on Paddy Flynn’s mouth.”

Motherfucker. That’s a dirty way to play the game. I take a slug of whiskey while the others smirk at me. I’m a little

relieved – given how gorgeous the other two are and that they have bare left hands – that they didn't drink.

“Never have I ever slept in Paddy Flynn's bed.” Fiona tosses her hair and raises her eyebrows at me. Glaring at her, I take another drink.

“Never have I ever fallen asleep in Paddy Flynn's arms,” Mellie giggles, topping my tumbler up when I drain my drink. Jesus. What the hell is this? Why don't they ask a question that isn't about Paddy? Again, I'm relieved I am the only one drinking. I don't know if Paddy wants people to know this stuff. Are you allowed to lie in this game?

“Never....” I sigh, but Tiggy cuts me off.

“Oh, you don't get a go,” she smiles. Wait, what? “Never have I ever *woken up* in Paddy Flynn's arms.”

“Wait, no! That's too similar,” I insist, gesturing to Mellie, but they shake their heads.

“No.” Tiggy shrugs, correcting me. “This is implying that he held you all night. *Very* different.”

Damn it. She's not wrong. I grit my teeth and take a drink. Tiggy laughs and claps her hands again.

“Never have I ever been kissed by Paddy Flynn.” Fiona waggles her eyebrows at me. Fucking drink.

“Never have I ever been kissed by Paddy Flynn with nothing sexual happening before, during, or after,” Mellie suggests. They fucking erupt in excitement when I drink, my cheeks on fire.

I mean, it was just the once. Right after we met, so I don't think it signifies what they seem to think it does.

"I told you you were his secret girlfriend!" Tiggy crows. Ugh. I'm definitely not that. I shrug and roll my eyes at her. What if it gets back to Paddy that I let them think that?

"He only kissed me once to stop me from crying," I sigh, and she looks a little disappointed.

It's not a drinking game. It's a fucking interrogation. Never have I ever, over and over again. Paddy's spoken to me in Irish, we've had sex in the shower, Paddy's cuddled me without anything sexual happening, I've seen him fight, I've washed bloodstains out of his clothes, we don't use condoms.

I drink, and I drink, and I drink. Oh god, I'm going to get so drunk. No one else has even taken a sip. I'm clearly not the only one who has noticed.

"I say we start drinking when Lauren does," Fiona suggests. Tiggy wrinkles her nose.

"How will we know if you're drinking because you have done it or not?" she challenges. Yeah, I'd like to know that too. Mellie laughs.

"We'll shout 'never!' and then drink," she suggests. Okay. I can handle that.

"Never have I ever eaten a meal with Paddy Flynn," Fiona laughs. They all look over expectantly, Fiona and Mellie starting to raise their glasses. Unfortunately, they're not going to get their first drinks of the game from this question.

Of course we haven't eaten a meal together. That's very "date-y". I mean, there was when Paddy gave me his half-

eaten bagel, but he had already finished eating.

They all look disappointed, but I shrug at them, offering a small smile. What did they expect? I'm not his girlfriend.

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Chapter Fourteen

PADDY

It's silent in the SUV as Connor drives us back to the city. Seamus insisted I sit in the backseat with him. He's staring out the window until I finally speak up.

"Whatever the Italians want done, I'll be doing it, Fitzzy," I assure him. He turns to face me, studying my face intently.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Paddy," he replies at last. "And it'll be a group decision."

"Like fuck it will," I snap. "Lauren's going *nowhere*. Least of all to the Italians."

"That's not what I meant, Paddy," Seamus says easily. "I meant, the best man for the job will be the one doing it. Whatever the job may be."

Connor is nodding in agreement from the front seat. "She's your woman, Paddy. We'll do whatever it takes."

I blink in surprise, and Seamus looks at my face and laughs.

"I should have picked it the second you turned down pussy after the fight," he snorts. "It looks like she's got you monogamous."

I bristle at his implication. "I'll fuck whoever I want to fuck. No woman is going to stop that."

I shrug, and Connor chuckles, but Seamus grins like a fucking Cheshire cat.

“And so you will, Paddy,” he agrees with me easily. “And I suppose it just so happens the only woman you’ve wanted to fuck recently has been the Carmichael lass.”

I ignore his smug as shite face, staring out the window. Asshole.

“You can drop me home on the way to the club, Connor.”

Seamus’s face is reflected in the window, wearing a shit-eating grin. I flip him off over my shoulder.

As we pull into the parking lot beside Oracle, it becomes obvious Connor has ignored my request. I shoot him a glare, but he shrugs, smirking at me.

“You wanted to go home to stick your dick in the Carmichael lass. Since she’s *here*, I figured I’d take you direct to the source.”

What the fuck is he talking about? My eyes narrow dangerously at him.

“What d’you mean, she’s *here*?” I snap at him. Looking intrigued, Seamus pulls out his phone, snorting with laughter at whatever he sees there.

“Oh, this I *have* to see,” he mutters, getting out of the vehicle. “Come on, Paddy,” he jerks his head at me, “I imagine you’ll be wanting to see this too.”

I’ll be wanting to see *what*? Why the fuck would Lauren be here and not at home where I fucking left her and told her to stay? How the fuck did she even get here?

I’m out of the SUV and striding into the strip club in the blink of an eye, my fingers itching for my gun. The only

reason it's not already in my hand is those fucking Vice cops watching us carefully from across the road. Pussy arse motherfuckers.

If Lauren is inside stripping, I'll fucking shoot the eyes out of every man who has even glanced her way. I'll fucking spank the shite out of her arse, and *then* I'll bend her over a table and fuck her hard, right in front of everyone, to prove my fucking point.

"Relax, Paddy," Seamus calls out as they trail me in. How the fuck am I supposed to relax? My woman is right where she isn't supposed to be.

I flip him off and stalk into the club, my eyes darting around the place. Lauren isn't in the main bar, and when I get into the private bar, I almost sag with relief that she's not here either.

"This way." Seamus claps me on the shoulder, smirking, and opens the door to the back area and his office.

Niall and Ronan are lounging against the wall outside, though they jerk upright when they spot us.

"They're in there." Ronan jabs his thumb over his shoulder at the door of Seamus's office. Seamus growls back at him.

"But you're not."

Talk about stating the fucking obvious. Ronan tips his head at the piece of paper stuck to the door with a handwritten note scrawled on it in large letters.

"I lack the requisite equipment." he shrugs.

Seamus's eyebrows shoot up, and he snorts as he reads the sign.

“And so you do, Ronan.”

I move so I can see what it says. *No vagina, no entry.* Because while the sign might mean something to Niall and Ronan, it means absolutely nothing to him, Seamus reaches over, shoving open the door. We all peek in, blinking, frozen like five statues at the sight in front of us.

They're drunk. Well, not Tiggy – she's pregnant – but the others? Three sheets to the wind.

Lauren is seated on a chair in the middle of the room, her fingers pressed to her mouth as she giggles. Ronan's little blonde stripper stands behind her, talking the little brunette bartender through a lap dancing lesson, while Tiggy watches from Seamus's chair behind the desk.

The bartender is wearing a short skirt, and she's topless. They're all giggling like children, four sets of eyes turning to us and widening as they freeze like someone pressed pause on the telly.

There's silence for a long beat until a bone-chilling growl rumbles out of Niall as his eyes darken and he drinks in the sight of the bartender's tits.

The growl tells me the rest of us should immediately avert our eyes. Niall stalks into the room, snatching off his T-shirt, tugging it over her to cover her up. He grabs her, shoving her against the office wall, pinning her with his hips, his eyes locked on hers.

“Time to go.” Tiggy is out of her chair, herding the other two women before her as she walks toward us. As Tiggy snaps the door shut behind them, a moan and a growl sound out as Niall thrusts into the bartender.

“Jaysus feck, let’s get ye home, *leannán*.” Ronan is trying to wrangle his little blonde stripper, but she’s having none of it.

“I’m not your sweetheart,” she snaps back at him, trying to shrug him off while not stumbling since she’s blind drunk.

“Oh,” Lauren gasps, her wide eyes darting between the stripper and me. “Is *that* what that means? I was wondering.”

She’s been wondering what *leannán* means? Now she knows, what is she thinking? I watch her with inscrutable eyes as emotions war for dominance on her face. Finally, Lauren shrugs, her face a blank mask.

“I prefer ‘lass’.”

My stomach twists. She doesn’t like me calling her *leannán*? What the fuck not? Connor snorts behind me, Seamus’s hand snapping out and smacking his cousin upside the head.

“Well then, *lass*.” Lauren’s eyes snap to mine, and she flinches at the quiet fury in my tone. “Maybe ye’d care to explain why ye’re here and not at *home* where ye’re supposed to be?”

Tiggy grins, whispering something to the stripper, who waggles her eyebrows at us, but I ignore them both. They’re Seamus and Ronan’s problems.

Lauren backs away slowly from me, her eyes flashing as I stalk after her. Where the fuck is she going now? I'm going to catch her, and I'm going to make her come until she can't remember her own fucking name. *Then* I will find out why she doesn't like me calling her *leannán*.

She makes it to the dressing room when I catch her, strippers in various states of undress looking over at us in interest.

"Everyone, get the fuck out!" I snap at them. There's a rustling as robes are grabbed, and girls hustle out of the room. Lauren's eyes widen as she watches me, darting down to my clenched fists. Stepping right up into her space, I fist a hand in her hair, tugging her head back until her huge, amber eyes meet mine. My thumb drags across her lower lip roughly as I groan.

"I need to be buried between yer legs, lass," I growl at her, dropping to my knees in front of her.

She stares down at me in surprise, but I need to taste her before I do something stupid like kiss the fuck out of her. She's wearing her sexy little sundress, thank fuck.

I shove my head up the skirt, pushing her panties aside, my tongue darting out to taste her, sucking her clit into my mouth, one of her thighs thrown over my shoulder.

Lauren moans and writhes. If I'm not careful, her leg will buckle, and she'll fall over, considering she's standing on one leg in the middle of a dressing room.

She is so close to coming when she gasps at the sound of the dressing room door opening. Why the fuck is the door

opening? Didn't I make myself clear before?

"I said fuck off out of here!" I growl, but Lauren is whimpering and trying to scramble away from me, ruining the moment. Jesus fuck. She was so close to coming on my mouth. I'm going to kill whoever interrupted us.

"I'll go wherever the feck I like in me own club, son."

Jesus fuck. I freeze at Sean's statement. That's the only voice that could kill my buzz. Removing my head from under Lauren's skirt, I slowly rise to my feet, shoving Lauren behind my body as Sean tries to get a good look at her.

"Can we help ye, Sean?" I growl. His eyes spark at the Irish brogue in my tone, and I inwardly curse. That's giving the game away, Paddy.

"I just wanted to see what the fuss was about for meself." He shrugs, his lips tugging into a smirk as he turns his eyes back to Lauren. The door swings open again, and Tiggy appears in the doorway, sympathy in her eyes.

"Lauren, I need your help with something." She reaches out with one hand, beckoning to Lauren, whose eyes flicker to me. Wanting permission. Jesus fuck. That's gratifying and such a fucking turn-on. I lift my hand, dragging my thumb along her lip, nodding sharply to her.

"Ye go with Tiggy, lass," I murmur.

Lauren's eyes burn into mine for a moment, and she hurries from the room, her head tipped forward, hiding her face from Sean as she passes by him.

Once they're gone, Connor and Seamus step into the dressing room, Connor snapping the door shut behind him.

“She’s not yer usual type, Paddy,” Sean smirks at me, my hand clenching into fists at my sides.

I have to fight to keep my tone even. “And what type is that, Sean?”

“Gorgeous.” He shrugs as a growl rumbles out of me. Lauren *is* gorgeous. It’s not my fucking fault Sean’s clearly blind.

“I feel Paddy slightly disagrees with your assessment,” Seamus drawls, sounding fucking *amused*. I don’t think I’ve ever been in a less amusing situation.

“If everyone’s fucking *done* deciding whether they’re attracted to my woman yet, I’d like to take her home.”

Sean’s eyes shoot up while Connor sniggers over by the door. But Seamus nods. That’s all the permission I fucking need. I shoulder past Sean, striding out the door in search of Lauren.

I want to take her home to finish what we fucking started in here. And I *really* want to find out what sex with a drunk Lauren is like. I wonder if the alcohol will dull her inhibitions.

Alcohol very much dulls her inhibitions, as I find out halfway home when she decides to suck me off while I’m driving. I’m starting to be a bit less pissed off at the lads for taking her to Oracle.

Chapter Fifteen

LAUREN

The sun is too bright, and the silence is too fucking loud. A chuckle sounds out from somewhere beside me.

“How can silence be *loud*, lass?” Paddy asks, still chuckling. I groan in pain as I roll over and see him lounging on the bed, propped up against the headboard, watching me with amused eyes. I must have spoken aloud.

“*You’re* loud,” I whimper, curling up and wishing for death. “Never let them make me drink again.”

“I didn’t *let* them make you drink this time,” he corrects me, annoyance dripping from his tone. “I told you not to leave this apartment, so you can imagine my fucking surprise when I found out you’d not only left but gone across the city to a fucking *strip club*.”

I’m too hungover to unpack the fact that he sounds more pissed about my being at a strip club than my actually leaving the apartment.

“You did let them,” I bleat, pressing my face against the comforter. “You weren’t here, and they came and took me.”

Paddy’s face darkens at my choice of words. “Who took you?” he growls.

I shiver, feeling the icy coldness of the darkness emanating from him.

“Which one?”

I contemplate not telling him because he looks like he might actually try to kill them for it, but a shaft of sunlight hits my eyes, causing me to wince. You know what? I don't actually care. If they hadn't taken me there, I wouldn't have had to drink, and I wouldn't be wishing for death right now.

“Ronan,” I whimper, remembering Strawberry's name. “He said you had been overruled, and I had to go with him. Then they ambushed me.”

Paddy's hands are clenched into fists, and when he speaks, he's forcing his words out through gritted teeth.

“Who ambushed you?”

“Tiggy.”

He blinks in surprise, the tension leaving him a bit.

“Fiona. Mellie. They did this to me. You should go and make them pay.”

He lets out a small, amused chuckle. “I don't hurt women, lass.”

I frown at him, wrinkling my nose. “You're a terrible mobster.”

His mouth stretches into a wide grin, showing his even white teeth. I stare at him, distracted. I've never seen him openly grin. I thought Paddy Flynn was gorgeous before, but I was wrong. He's just about the best-looking man ever to exist.

“Just because you're hungover and feeling like shite doesn't mean you should take it out on me,” he teases me.

Ugh. Why does Paddy have to be all cute and playful the one time I can't appreciate it? Life is so unfair.

I attempt to flip him off, but I don't have the energy to lift my hand off the bed.

"No one forced you to drink so much."

He's enjoying this. The sadistic bastard.

"Yes, they did," I moan. "They're mean, and they made me."

He laughs again, squinting at me. "How on earth did they manage that then?"

"Never have I ever," I whimper. "Again and again and again. I *hate* that game."

His eyebrows shoot up at my statement, and he grins again.

"Drinking games, huh? And clearly, if you got that drunk, you had to spill your secrets pretty hard. Maybe I should have been there. Then I would know so much more about you."

"They were all about you," I groan, and he blinks in surprise, the teasing grin dropping off his face, replaced by a look of confusion.

"What was all about me?" Paddy asks, looking adorably nonplussed.

"The questions, in the game. They kept making statements about you."

His eyebrows are trying to reach his hairline now. "What kind of questions?"

My face flames bright red as I bury my face in the comforter so I don't have to see his eyes.

“Whether I've come on your mouth. Whether you've kissed me. Whether you cuddle me.”

The silence stretches out above me, and I risk a peek. Paddy is staring at me, his mouth hanging slightly open.

“Those fucking sneaky bitches,” he breathes, looking stunned. Right?!

“That's what *I* thought.” I take a deep breath, forcing myself to sit up in bed. When I waver, Paddy's hand shoots out to steady me. He frowns as a thought occurs to him.

“If all the questions were about me, how did the other two get so off their tits?”

I blink at him in surprise. Despite feeling like death warmed up, I almost smile. He must not have ever been with either of them. Otherwise, he'd be a little less surprised. Or maybe not. Maybe he's only fucked them, which wasn't one of the questions I told him. Paddy's eyes linger on my face, and he snorts.

“Not even once. Ronan and Niall would have my balls for breakfast.”

Niall. That reminds me.

“Did Niall fuck Mellie last night?” I ask, my eyes wide. Paddy's smirk widens.

“Ah, you remember that, do you?”

“Unfortunately, I remember everything.”

Paddy growls at my wording. Oops. That sounded bad, didn't it? I fix my eyes on him.

“Who was that guy? The one who came into the room while you were... you know...” I flush bright red, gesturing as Paddy laughs, trailing his fingers over my bare thighs, sliding them up to my pussy, his pupils dilating.

“While I was busying eating ye out?”

Yeah. That. My breathing hitches as the tips of his fingers brush against my folds. Sighing, he snatches his hand away. Boo.

“That was Sean Fitzpatrick.”

Shit. I know what that is. Everyone in Boston knows who Sean Fitzpatrick is. He's the head of the Irish Mafia. Oh god. He saw me like that! My cheeks flame at the thought. Paddy is watching me carefully, sighing as he slides off the bed. Where is he going?

“Shower, coffee, breakfast, and a movie,” he prescribes for my hangover. I mean, it sounds good except for one thing. I flop back down onto the mattress.

“Can't. No energy to get up.”

I shriek as Paddy's fingers circle my ankle, and he drags me to the edge of the bed, slinging me over his shoulder and carrying me to the shower. Well. If he's going to do all the work, I suppose I can manage.



PADDY

I have no idea why women enjoy rom coms so much. The storyline makes no sense. No fucker in his right mind is going to pussy foot around and risk losing his woman over and over again like these wet pricks.

Lauren seems engrossed, laying on my chest, her eyes glued to the movie. I turn my attention from the idiot on the screen to her. Stroking my fingers through her silky hair, I use my fingernails to scratch her scalp lightly until her eyes flutter closed. She lets out a contented little moan, stretching like a little cat as she snuggles into my chest.

I've never watched a movie with a lass before. I've certainly never cuddled with a lass on the sofa, either. It's nice.

"Paddy?" Lauren asks, the movie forgotten, her eyes resting on my face.

"Yes, lass?" I murmur, my eyes still watching where my fingers are trailing through her hair.

"What happened to your parents?"

What? My fingers hold still in her hair, and I feel like I've been doused in icy water.

“What did you say, lass?” I ask her, my voice dangerously quiet. Lifting her head, her eyes meet mine. She swallows. Whatever she can see in my eyes unnerves her.

“Tiggy mentioned....” She pauses as my eyes flash with anger. Tiggy mentioned *what*? “She only said she felt bad about your parents. And I wondered....” Her voice trails off as she buries her face in my chest, mumbling, “it doesn’t matter. Forget about it.”

Sighing, I stroke her hair again. “They were murdered.”

I keep my voice even, and Lauren sucks in a breath, peeking at me and relaxing when I don’t look mad that she got the truth from me.

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

I shrug with one shoulder, focusing on the feeling of her hair beneath my fingers. “It was fifteen years ago. The men responsible are dead now.” I grit my teeth at the thought. “Tiggy killed them.”

Lauren freezes under my hands, her breath hissing.

“*Tiggy*?” she chokes, sounding beyond shocked. I nod absentmindedly.

“Before I got the chance to get to them. She knifed Ivan and shot her father in the head.”

“Why’d she shoot her father in the head?” Lauren breathes, her eyes wide.

“To stop him from shooting me in mine. He had a gun to my head.” I can’t believe the fucker got the jump on me. I will forever be pissed about letting my guard down.

“How’d he manage that?”

I’m a little appeased that she thinks it should be an impossibility.

“I was cocky and distracted,” I confess with a small shrug. “There was a shootout. I thought I had him, and the bastard surprised me.”

“Oh.”

Lauren’s small voice seems loud in the room, the movie playing on the iPad propped up on the coffee table. I really should get the TV in here hooked up to something. I wonder what she does all day?

Just when I think I’ve scared her off, Lauren shocks the hell out of me, snuggling down into my chest and hugging me tightly.

“I’m glad she killed him then.”

I blink down at her in surprise. Bloodthirsty is rather out of character for my little lass.

“Because otherwise, I would never have met you,” she murmurs, pressing her cheek against my pounding heart. We lay in silence for a long while until Lauren falls asleep. The wet prick will probably get the girl, but he doesn’t fucking deserve her. I flick the iPad off.

Gently, so I don’t wake her, I pick Lauren up, carrying her back into the bedroom. Setting her down on the bed, I strip us both and crawl into bed with her, tucking the comforter around her shoulders and wrapping myself around her body, holding her close.

As she sleeps, I trace my fingertips across her features. I don't know why I thought of her as 'just pretty.' If I closed my eyes right now, I would be able to picture every part of her, right down to the last adorable freckle.

When the echo of Lauren's words floats through my brain, *otherwise, I would never have met you.* I swallow roughly.

I have no idea when the lass managed it, but she's burrowed into my skin, right into my heart, and made herself a home there. My thumb brushes over her lips, and I bury my face into her hair, closing my eyes, inhaling deeply. Fucking vanilla.

Jesus fuck. I fucking love her. How the fuck did that happen?

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Chapter Sixteen

LAUREN

ANDIE: The Italian guys came back. They killed Mrs. Dawkins. I'm so sorry. Cops are here. Can't talk. Stay hidden xx

I stare at the text message, bile rising in my throat. I'm not going to cry. I'm not. Mrs. Dawkins babysat me after school when Josh worked or trained for a fight.

She used to make sure I always did my homework. She used to feed me cookies and milk. And she used to smell like peppermint.

Tears threaten, and I blink rapidly to clear them. Taking a deep breath, I press my palms against the breakfast bar. I'm not going to fall apart. I'm going to breathe.

It feels like my chest is crushing in on itself. Oh god. I have no one. Every person in the entire world who loved me is gone. I'm all alone. There's not enough air in the world. I'm all alone.

Literally, all alone. Paddy's still not home. It's almost eleven o'clock at night. I think I'll go and curl up in bed and cry. Poor Mrs. Dawkins. Why did the Italians have to kill her? She wouldn't have hurt a soul. She wouldn't have said boo to them. Was it because they knew how much she meant to me? Is this a message?

My heart is in my mouth as I stare at the breakfast bar, not really seeing it. Is Andie safe? If they know I cared about Mrs. Dawkins, will they know I'm friends with Andie? That we used to hang out, drink wine, and watch rom coms?

A banging at the door has me freezing, my heart in my mouth. Is that them? Have they come from killing Mrs. Dawkins to kill me? Carefully, I round the breakfast bar, grabbing a knife from the kitchen countertop.

“Lauren! Open up! It's an emergency!”

Shit. Dropping the knife on the countertop, I hurry over and peek through the peephole, wrenching the door open when I recognize Liam, who brought me the unused Plan B that one time. *Paddy*.

“Is Paddy okay?” I grab his arm, and he looks at me, confused, as I claw at him, panicking.

Paddy doesn't love me, but he's all I have left. He can't be gone too. He *has* to be okay. He has to be.

“I'm sure he is.” Liam shrugs, stalking into the apartment. “Why are you asking?”

He reeks of alcohol. He's drunk. Anger surges through me. Does he have any idea how much he freaked me out? Asshole. I smack his arm as hard as I can.

“Maybe because you're hammering on the door in the middle of the night yelling that it's an emergency!”

He has the grace to smirk shamefacedly at me. “Yeah, a sexual emergency. I need condoms.”

He grins at me, waggling his eyebrows as my mouth drops open, and I smack at his arm again. I almost miss it because he's already wandering into the bedroom. Uh, hello? You can't just walk into people's bedrooms, especially if they're not here. Paddy probably doesn't want random men in there, even if they are members of his crew.

"Hey! You can't go in there!" I hurry after him, tugging at his arm.

"Where else would I go to find a condom stash?" Liam laughs, easily shrugging me off him.

Growling in frustration, I leap onto his back, locking my legs around his waist like a koala, tugging at the back of his shirt. Undeterred, he continues like I'm an annoying fly, occasionally swatting at me but otherwise ignoring me.

"Where does he keep them?" he asks over the top of my protests. "Nightstand?"

He tugs one of the drawers open, but it's empty.

"I have an IUD, remember?"

He wanders into the bathroom with me still clinging to his back, tugging ineffectually on his shoulders. He starts opening drawers.

"So Paddy doesn't have any condoms," I remind him, hoping it's enough for him to give up and leave so I can grieve in peace. Hell, this is the last thing I need right now.

"Paddy *always* wraps it before he taps it," Liam snorts at me. "He might not with *you*, but he does with everyone else."

Everyone else. My chest feels like it's caving in, and I fight the urge to vomit. Suddenly, there's not enough air in the room. Again.

Of course Paddy would have other women. Why on earth would I think we're in some kind of relationship? Because we fuck every day? Big fucking deal. I'm probably nothing but a warm body to him. I'm in his space. I'm convenient. My heart is lying in pieces right now.

But he cuddles you, he holds you every night, a small, hopeful voice in the back of my mind whispers, and I cling to that shred of hope. I have to, or I'll fall apart right here in front of Liam. I need to get this asshole out of here. Right now. Before I go to pieces. I don't have the energy to grieve two things, but what choice do I have?

"Where's his fight bag? He'll have some in there. They always send in groupies to take care of the fighters."

He strides back into the bedroom while I cling to him like a living backpack, no longer fighting him. I'm mainly just trying to breathe, but my lungs can't fill up properly.

I remember the night I met Paddy at the underground warehouse. I remember the stunning woman who came in to 'take care of him.'

Oh god. Just breathe. I've given my heart to Paddy Flynn, but he never asked for it. I got exactly what I deserve. Men like Paddy don't fall in love. They don't do monogamous relationships. They don't do relationships at all.

I projected my own feelings onto him, and now I feel like I've been disemboweled. I can't stay here with him. I can't. I

can't bear the idea of him touching me after he's touched someone else. My stomach roils at the thought.

Unaware of my existential crisis on his back, Liam continues his search undeterred and finds the duffel in the closet, picking it up and starting to open it. Oh god.

I don't want to know. I can't know. It would utterly destroy me to know for certain. I come alive, thrashing and fighting Liam like a wildcat.

"Stop it! Don't touch!" I scream, tugging at his hair. I want him gone. I want to be gone too. Maybe he can take me with him.

"Ah, Jesus fuck, woman!" he yells back, still holding the duffel in one hand while grabbing at me with the other, trying to twist around to get at me.



PADDY

Fuck. It's been a long fucking day. Seamus felt Liam needed a night off from babysitting duties, so I have spent the entire night staring at my iPad while rom coms blasted out of the TV and playing fetch to an annoying, pregnant Tiggy.

Honestly, the only reason that I didn't tell her to go and shove it is that I don't trust her to tattle on me to Fitzy. That

and, as Seamus pointed out, it's my godson she's carrying.

Fitzzy finally got home, and I fucking bolted. I want to be at home, buried balls deep in Lauren. I've been fucking harder than steel for the last two hours. Tiggy was baking something, and she fucking spilled an entire bottle of vanilla in the kitchen, so the scent had wafted through the whole house. I couldn't escape it. So, yeah, need to fuck Lauren immediately.

Striding out of the elevator, my dick twitching at all the ways I want to hammer into her, my feet falter when I reach the apartment door. It's slightly ajar. What the fuck?

My heart stutters, my blood like ice in my veins. My gun is in my hand in two seconds as I stalk through the door. Shouting rings out from the bedroom. Jesus fuck.

"Stop it! Don't touch!"

Lauren. My feet are moving as rage pours through me.

"Fuck, woman!" a male voice yells.

"Let go!" she howls back.

I reach the bedroom door, wrenching it open, my gun pointed at... I don't exactly know what. I stare, my jaw hanging open at a drunk Liam...who is giving Lauren a piggyback ride? While she pulls his hair, they play tug rope with my fight bag. What the fuck is Liam doing with Lauren *in my bedroom*? I trust the kid, but this is crossing a line.

"What the *fuck*?" I growl. They both turn, their eyes widening at the sight of me. Or, more specifically, at the sight of my gun pointed at them.

I lower it right as Lauren gives one huge tug and the fight bag slides out of Liam's nerveless fingers. Lauren overbalances, squealing as her arms windmill, and she topples right off Liam's back, landing flat on her back on the floor with a loud thud. I wince at the sound. Fucking hell, that had to hurt.

Now my gun is lowered, they go back to their argument. Liam snatches at the duffel bag while Lauren hugs it tightly to her chest, attempting to slide herself along the ground, away from Liam, using her feet.

"Give me the fucking bag, Lauren," he snaps. She shakes her head stubbornly.

"No!" she yells back at him. "They're our condoms! Paddy needs them! Get your own!"

She bursts into noisy sobs, clinging to the bag while Liam and I gape at her. Enough is fucking enough. I don't give a shite that it's Liam, and I fucking trust him. No one comes into *my* home and makes *my* woman cry.

"What the *fuck* is going on here?" My voice is low, controlled, and furious. Liam flinches at the sound, turning slowly toward me, his hands raised.

"I just need condoms. You always have some in that bag."

He's pointing to the fight bag again while Lauren wails louder, hugging the bag tightly to her chest.

"She just fucking lost it..." Liam shuts up pretty fucking quickly when he catches the look on my face.

Jesus. This is about condoms? Hasn't Liam ever heard of a fucking 7-11? Stalking over to them, I reach down, unzipping

the bag while Lauren cries like her heart is breaking.

I need Liam gone before I rip his fucking face off. Snatching out the entire pack of condoms, lying unused since Lauren walked into my life with Connor's fucking arm slung around her neck, I thrust it at him.

"Now, get the fuck out."

Liam's eyes widen as he flips open the box. "I only need a couple."

"Take the lot and fuck off out of here!"

He stumbles backward in his haste to be gone. The front door slams behind him, and I turn to Lauren, now curled up in a fetal position on the floor, the duffel bag abandoned as she hugs her knees to her chest and cries in great, heaving sobs.

Fuck. That's a horrible sound. It tears at my fucking heart, and I have no idea what's going on. I have no idea how to make things better for her, who I have to hurt. I need her to *talk* to me.

"Lass," I speak as softly and gently as possible, reaching out and resting my hand on her arm.

"Don't fucking touch me!" she screams back at me, her voice breaking. I quickly withdraw my hand as shrieking sobs rip from her chest.

"I won't touch ye, lass," I rush to assure her. "Just tell me what's wrong. I'll fix it."

But my words only make her cry harder. Fuck. This is terrifying. Everything I say or do seems to be wrong. What the fuck happened? I'm going to fucking kill whoever caused this.

Eventually, I give up trying to calm her down. I lay down next to her on the bedroom floor, watching her face as she cries her fucking heart out.

Every sob is like a knife to my fucking heart. My fingers are flexing because I just want to hold her. But it will only make things worse.

Clenching my fists and gritting my teeth, my eyes don't leave Lauren's face until she cries herself to sleep. Even then, when the tears and sobs stop and she's fast asleep, her breathing is still ragged, and she occasionally hiccups.

Once her breathing has evened out, I finally get up, snagging the comforter from the bed and carefully wrapping it around her. Lying back down on the floor beside Lauren, I tentatively hold her hand, tangling my fingers with hers. When she doesn't wake up, I reach out with my other hand, running my fingertips over the freckles on her nose.

"I'm going to fix whatever hurt ye, lass," I whisper to her sleeping form. "I'm going to take the pain away."

I let my thumb brush against her lower lip. "I love ye, lass."

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Chapter Seventeen

LAUREN

My eyes feel like they are glued shut, and my throat aches like I swallowed a handful of rusty nails. But worse than all that, my lungs feel like they can't fill, and my heart feels like it's been ripped out of my chest.

I moan at the dull pain, forcing my eyes open. The first thing I see is my hand, sticking out of the comforter I am wrapped in, lying on the floor.

My fingers are tangled with Paddy's, and the dull throb in my heart intensifies. Beyond our hands is Paddy's face. He's lying on the floor, watching me, his face a mask of pain.

"Lauren," he whispers when he sees I am awake, his voice tortured. He lifts the hand not holding mine, moving to touch my face. I flinch away from his hand as he freezes.

"I want to go home," I rasp out. Paddy winces at the rough sound of my voice. But there's no one for you there, the small voice in my head whispers, and my heart clenches.

"Ye can't, *mo chroí*," he gently replies. "It's not safe for ye there. Tell me who hurt ye, and I will make them suffer."

The sincerity bleeds through his tone, and it tears at the empty space in my chest where my heart used to be. Everyone hurt me. The men who killed Mrs. Dawkins. Liam. *Paddy*. Everyone.

“If I can’t go home, can I stay somewhere else? I don’t want to stay here,” I stubbornly insist. Something dark flashes across his face, but he nods.

“Of course, lass. I have a house in West Roxbury. We’ll go there.”

I know I came to him for salvation, but he’s not my savior anymore. I can’t be in the same house as him – loving him – and knowing he feels nothing for me.

“Not you,” I choke out, shaking my head as the tears threaten again. “I don’t want you there with me.”

Paddy’s gorgeous face spasms with pain and rage. “I need ye to talk to me, *mo chroí*.” His fingers tighten almost painfully on my hand. “Tell me what happened.”

I struggle to sit up, and Paddy immediately jackknives upright, helping me sit up, his hands on my arms, clamping down hard.

“I just....” I swallow another sob trying to force its way painfully up my throat. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, my voice breaking.

“I didn’t mean to fall in love with you, Paddy.” I shake my head sadly at him while he blinks in surprise. “I’m so sorry. But I can’t be around you. I know I have no right to expect you to give up other women, but I can’t...I can’t be around you knowing that you....” I choke off the rest of the sentence, my heart clenching in agony as he reaches out, brushing his thumb along my lower lip.

“*Mo chroí*,” he breathes, his face a strange mixture of triumphant and confused, “hear me when I say this. I haven’t

even looked at another woman since I met ye.”

Now it's my turn to blink in surprise. He what? But... surely..?

“Why in God's name....” he trails off as I blow out a shaky breath.

“You haven't...with anyone?” I stutter, my lungs filling with air, hope fluttering around inside my chest, beating against my poor, abused heart.

“I don't see their faces, lass. Only yours,” he whispers back, his thumb still tracing my lower lip, my heart clenching as I melt into a puddle.

Paddy's hand curls around my cheek, and he leans in, his eyes burning into mine until his lips are less than an inch from mine.

“*Is breá liom tú,*” Paddy breathes, his lips brushing against mine, and his eyes flutter closed, just as mine do.

My lips are trembling against his as they press together gently. He groans, tugging me into his arms, his hand on my jaw sliding around into my hair as he anchors my head, tipping it back.

His tongue darts out, tracing my lower lip like he usually does with his thumb. I moan, sighing into his mouth, and as my lips part, Paddy's tongue licks into my mouth.

I breathe deeply despite my busy mouth, sucking Paddy's comforting scent deep into my lungs. My hands grip his chest as he eats at my mouth.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing heavily. Paddy presses his forehead against mine as he holds me tightly against his chest.

"I've wanted to do that again for so long," he breathes. "I have no idea why I was holding back."

His eyes flutter open, burning into mine. "Last night was the worst night of my life."

My heart stutters. He can't mean that. Not really. Surely when his parents were killed.... Paddy sees my thoughts on my face, moving his hands up to cup my jaw, holding my face still as he presses his forehead harder against mine.

"I mean it, lass. The worst night of my life. Ye were in so much *pain*." His voice breaks on the word. "I was so fucking *scared*. I had no idea what was wrong. I thought my heart was breaking right alongside yours." He laughs, but it's a hollow sound. "God, but I love ye so much, *mo chroí*."

Paddy...loves me? Oh my god. He loves me. I'm floating on air, my lungs and heart so full I think they're going to burst. Is it possible to die from happiness? I have a strange dichotomy inside me. My heart is wrenched apart – the loss of Mrs. Dawkins is one I won't easily move past – but at the same time, Paddy is knitting it together with words I never imagined I would hear him say to me.

He presses his forehead against mine again, kissing me gently, tenderly. He opens his mouth, but his phone rings, hard and loud against our private moment before he can speak.

"This better be fucking important," he growls into it, his nose nuzzling against my neck. Whatever is said at the other

end of the phone, he freezes, his hand tight in my hair.

“I’m not fucking leaving Lauren here alone,” he snaps, listening to whoever is on the other end of the line. “Fine. We’ll come to yours.”

Paddy tilts my head, dropping his phone, kissing me hard, and sighing.

“Have a shower and get dressed, *mo chroí*. We need to go to Seamus’s house.”

Now? But I want to hear more about Paddy loving me.



PADDY

Tiggy takes Lauren into the kitchen when we get to their home in West Roxbury while I follow Ronan into Seamus’s den. It’s harder than I thought it would be to be in a different room to Lauren.

The whole crew is already here, Liam flinching as I glare at him.

“How’s Lauren?” he asks, unable to meet my eyes. He’s lucky to be sitting here at all.

“She’ll be grand,” I spit back at him. He nods, still staring at the floor.

“I’ll apologize to her before you leave,” he mutters. Ronan’s head snaps around.

“What the feck kind of stupid thing did ye do now, lad?” he growls, and Liam flushes.

“Nothing. She just lost it -.” He shuts up pretty quickly when my fist smashes into his jaw.

“Ye come into my home uninvited and make my woman cry again; not even Ronan will be able to save ye from a bullet,” I hiss at him. Ronan’s face darkens with fury.

“Ye’ll apologize to the lass once we’re done here, and then after that, ye and I are going to have a little chat, lad.”

Liam’s eyes flicker over Ronan’s face as he swallows and nods.

Seamus clears his throat, and the room falls silent as we all turn our attention to him. I stalk over, propping myself against the windowsill while he taps on the iPad’s screen on the desk beside him.

“Gianni’s been in contact with Sean.” He nods to me, and I grind my teeth. “We’ve got the shopping list.”

His fingers stroke over the iPad again. I can’t see it from here, Gianni’s shopping list. The list of things I need to do to make sure Lauren is fucking *safe*. I’ll do them all, no matter what is written there.

“How bad is it?” Connor asks idly, but I can see that he’s got his fists clenched. Seamus’s eyes meet mine; worry etched across them.

“Bad,” he confirms. Jesus fuck. I want to punch something.
“You’ll be taking a dive, Paddy.”

Fuck. What is it with the Italians and fixing fucking fights? They want me to take the dive that Josh Carmichael wouldn’t? Fucking fine.

“Consider it fucking done,” I grit out through my clenched teeth as Seamus stares me down.

“Yer pride’s going to let ye take a dive, Paddy?” Ronan sounds shocked.

“If it keeps Lauren safe, I’ll take a million fucking dives,” I spit out, and Seamus nods. “They’ll recoup their fucking losses from Josh’s renegeing, and we’ll be clear.”

“Not quite,” Seamus sighs. My eyes snap back to his, fucking fury pulsing through me. Of course that’s not enough.

“What else?” I snap. Seamus taps his fingers on his iPad again.

“Four hits.”

“Jaysus feck,” Ronan breathes. “Gianni’s milking this.”

“He is,” Seamus agrees.

Niall speaks up from where he’s leaning against the wall in the corner of the room. “Give me the names. I’ll take care of them. The Italians will want bang for their buck. They’ll want the Reaper carrying out their murders.”

“One dive, four hits, then we’re clear, yeah?” Connor squints over at his cousin, grimacing as Seamus slowly shakes his head, and they lock eyes.

“You’ll have two houseguests for the foreseeable future, Lucky,” he grunts at his cousin. “Aunt Siobhan can look after them.”

“Jesus fuck,” I curse. “Collateral?”

“Moldovans. Seven and four.”

Children. Fucking children. Everyone in the room looks sick at the idea.

“They’ll be more comfortable with Aunt Siobhan than any of us. Pa’s already agreed to put guards on the house. Connor, you can stay here with us.”

Seamus turns back to me. “Paddy, you and Lauren should come and stay here too. I don’t like you being in the city. You’re too exposed there.”

“We’ll leave the city,” I growl in agreement. “But we’ll go to my place. It’s about time it had someone living in it.”

Seamus blinks in surprise but meets my eyes and nods.

“I’ll stay with them,” Connor suggests. “That way, Lauren will always have someone with her.”

My eyes flash over him, and I swallow. Lucky jokes around a lot, and he’s usually more annoying than a splinter, but right now, I’m reminded why he’s one of my best mates.

“It’s too much to fucking ask you lot,” I groan. “I’ll fucking sort it. Give me the list.”

“Fuck off, Paddy,” Connor snaps at me. “Just say fucking thank you and be done with it.”

“She’s your woman, Paddy,” Seamus nods to me. “That means she’s one of us. And we take care of our own.”

Before I can say anything else, Ronan stiffens, standing near the door to keep an ear out for Tiggy.

“Everyone shut the feck up,” he snaps. We all turn to him in surprise as he cracks open the door, cocking his head and frowning. “Can anyone else hear crying?”

Seamus is out of his chair in the blink of an eye, storming out of the room and hurrying into the kitchen as we follow. But it’s not Tiggy who is sobbing her heart out. It’s Lauren. Again. Jesus fuck, this is not good for my heart.

“It wasn’t me this time,” Liam mutters from behind me, a smack ringing out as someone whacks him upside the head.

Lauren is sitting at the breakfast bar, a mug of tea in front of her, hunched over, her face screwed up as she sobs. Tiggy is standing across from her, patting her hand awkwardly. Her eyes turn to us.

“I made her a cup of peppermint tea, and she started crying. She mumbled something about ‘killing Mrs. Dawkins’, but I didn’t understand much more than that. Does anyone know what that means?”

There are shaking heads as I drop onto the barstool beside Lauren, carefully lifting her into my arms, nuzzling my nose into her hair.

“*Mo chroí*, what’s going on? Why are ye crying?”

“Peppermint!” she wails, sobbing harder. I look around in alarm. But no one else seems to have a fucking clue either.

“The tea!” Tiggy blurts out, pushing it across the breakfast bar to us. “I made peppermint tea.”

“Ye don’t like peppermint tea?”

I’m at a fucking loss. This seems an overreaction to someone making tea you don’t like. Maybe Lauren is still emotional from her breakdown last night?

But she’s shaking her head, trying to swallow down her sobs, digging her hand into her purse, and pulling out her phone. Tapping around, Lauren shoves it into my hand, burying her face into my neck again. My eyes dip to the phone.

“Jesus fuck,” I breathe, my jaw clenching.

ANDIE: The Italian guys came back. They killed Mrs. Dawkins. I’m so sorry. Cops are here. Can’t talk. Stay hidden xx

“Andie, that’s yer neighbor back in Dot, isn’t it, lass?” I ask, and she nods against my neck, still sobbing.

I throw the phone to Seamus, who curses as he reads it.

“Who is Mrs. Dawkins, *mo chroi?*” I murmur, stroking her hair. Lauren lets out a small wail, burying her face in her hands. After about a minute or so, she calms down enough to talk, her cheek resting against my collarbone as I stroke her hair softly.

“She used to look after me. When Josh was busy. She’s the closest thing to a mother I had.” She sounds on the verge of breaking down again, and I can’t blame her.

“Hey!” Liam snatches the phone off Seamus, brandishing it at Lauren. “You got this message just before I got to Paddy’s last night. I’m not the reason you fucking lost it after all.”

He sounds relieved. Tiggy shoots him a glare, and he mouths something at her as she rolls her eyes. Before she can tell him off, Ronan grabs him by the scruff of his neck.

“Fecking *apologize*,” he growls at the lad.

“But...it wasn’t my fault,” Liam starts, falling silent when Ronan shakes him like a dog. “Sorry, Lauren,” he chokes out before Ronan drags him from the room.

“Come on, lass. Let’s get ye home,” I murmur against her ear. She sniffs, nodding and clinging to me as I lift her into my arms.

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Chapter Eighteen

LAUREN

Paddy carries me out of the house to the SUV. I feel wicked awful for losing it in front of everyone, but when Tiggy gave me the peppermint tea... the smell, I was back in Mrs. Dawkins' apartment, and then I fell apart.

Lucky climbs in the front and drives us, but we don't head back to the city. Instead, we drive for maybe five minutes, pulling into the driveway of a gorgeous three-story house with a porch, bay windows, and a garret roof.

Paddy gathers me in his arms, carrying me inside, up the gorgeous mahogany stairs, and into a bedroom. He tucks me into the double bed and crawls in beside me, snuggling up against my neck.

This is all I wanted before we went to see Tiggy and Fitzy. I wanted to stay curled up in bed with Paddy, mourning Mrs. Dawkins and dealing with the idea of Paddy loving me.

I bury my face in his neck and sob again. I'm not sure how long I cry, but I eventually fall asleep to the sound of Paddy whispering to me in Irish.

I'm lying on Paddy's chest while he strokes my hair when I wake up. He's propped up against the headboard, one arm behind his head, staring at the faded rock band poster tacked to the wall across from the bed.

As I sit up, Paddy's hand falls away from my hair. I glance around in surprise. This room looks like a time capsule to a teenager. From maybe fifteen years ago. Oh my god. I know where we are. I can't believe Paddy brought me here. My heart thuds painfully in my chest.

"Is this your bedroom?"

Paddy looks over at me, his eyes tight with pain. "Yes," he replies, his tone clipped.

I nod, not sure what else to say. This is his bedroom from before his parents were murdered. Given the tight eyes and the pain etched across his face... I don't think he's been here since they died. But he brought me here now. That's...wicked big.

Paddy sighs, reaching for me. I eagerly scramble into his arms as he kisses me. It's achingly, soul-searingly sweet, and I cling to him.

"This is the first time I've been back in fifteen years," Paddy says against my lips, and I hug him more tightly. I thought that might be the case.

"I don't mind if we stay somewhere else," I offer, but Paddy shakes his head.

"I *want* to stay here with ye, *mo chroí*."

Well. I absolutely melt at that, getting distracted when Paddy's hand moves to pop the button of my jeans.

"Now," he growls against my lips. "I have a teenage fantasy or two I'd like yer help with."

Apparently, we're not staying here *alone*. I wander downstairs searching for coffee, my eyes sliding over the dated furniture and family pictures. My eyes linger on a particular family photograph at the bottom of the stairs.

His mother, a beautiful woman with red hair and pale skin, is seated in front, dressed in a gorgeous green dress. Paddy and his father stand behind her, a hand on each of her shoulders. Paddy looks young – just as handsome – but carefree and looser around his eyes.

His father looks a lot like Paddy does now. A proud man with dark hair and eyebrows and handsome features. Tearing my eyes away, I continue walking from the staircase, turning the corner into the kitchen.

I shriek and tug Paddy's button-down shirt closed as Lucky blinks over at me in shock from his seat at the kitchen table. There's a thundering of footsteps, and Paddy crashes into the room.

"Are ye okay, lass?" he starts to ask, his eyes dancing over Lucky's slack jaw, my wide eyes, and the fact I am clutching his shirt closed over my chest.

"You didn't say we had company," I say faintly. Paddy smirks, his eyes boring into mine.

"Oh yeah." He jerks his thumb over his shoulder at the table. "Connor's your new bodyguard."

Connor must be Lucky's real name. Paddy's eyes drop to my body, and he stiffens as they linger on my hands.

"And he better not have seen anything," Paddy growls angrily, turning around and glaring at Connor, who raises his

hands in a ‘surrender’ position.

“Not a fecking thing, Paddy. Not a one,” he promises, smirking as he lounges back in his chair. Paddy tugs me against his bare chest, ignoring Connor, dropping a kiss in my hair.

“Coffee, *mo chroí?*” he asks, and I nod.

“I’ll get it.” I move across the kitchen to the coffee maker, and Connor flashes me a grin.

“I’ll take one as well, *seamair no cheithre duilleog.*”

I blink at him in confusion as Paddy strides across the room, smacking him upside the head.

“Lauren, or silence,” Paddy snaps, but Connor grins.

“As you say, Paddy,” he agrees easily.

Paddy glares at Connor as I set the ancient coffee machine going, digging his phone out of his pocket when its chiming ringtone fills the room.

“This better be important, Fitzzy,” he growls down the line. Connor looks over with interest, but I keep my eyes locked on the three mugs in front of me.

Paddy sighs into the phone. “I’ll see you soon.”

Crossing to me, he presses himself against my front, his fingers closing around an empty mug as his lips tickle the outer shell of my ear.

“I have to run an errand for Seamus. I’ll be back later, *mo chroí.*”

Connor's phone chimes as Paddy slides his fingers through my hair, tugging my head back and covering my mouth with his. I'm still getting used to kissing Paddy, but it's quickly becoming one of my favorite things to do.

Sighing, Paddy breaks the kiss, stepping back, taking the third mug with him. "I'll see ye later, *mo chroí*."

"Bye, Paddy," I breathe, blinking after him, feeling more than a little dazed.

My cheeks are flaming when I remember Connor is sitting at the table across the room. I busy myself making two mugs of coffee, the rumble of Paddy's SUV leaving. Taking the coffee, I slide one in front of Connor, sinking into a chair across from him, nursing the other.

"You didn't go with Paddy."

Connor throws an amused look at me, picking up his mug and saluting me with it.

"I wasn't invited."

"So... you're just going to hang out here in his house?"

"Pretty much, lass, especially if the coffee is flowing."

Nodding, I glance around again. "Where's Ronan?"

Connor's eyebrows shoot up, and he glances around too. "Why would Ronan be here?"

"Uh." My cheeks flame. "Isn't he your bodyguard?"

Connor is definitely laughing at me. "No, lass. He's not my bodyguard. What gave you that idea?"

“A-at the fight. He was shadowing you.” My cheeks are burning hot. I’m not imagining things, and I’m not misremembering. Ronan was definitely flanking him.

“Ah.” Connor smirks, taking another sip of coffee. “Seamus can be a little overprotective at those fights.”

“Of you?”

“Sure. Of me, lass.”

“But...why?” My nose wrinkles and I study him carefully. Connor grins, examining my right back.

“It comes with the last name, lass.”

“The last name?”

“Sure. Fitzpatrick. Connor Fitzpatrick.” He points to himself, amusement dancing across his face.

“You’re Seamus’s...brother?”

“Cousin.”

“Oh. Good for you, I guess?”

Connor chuckles. “Sometimes. Mostly... Seamus can be an overbearing arse.”

“I heard that, Lucky.”

Our heads snap around as Seamus Fitzpatrick strides into the room, trailed by Ronan.

“Aye, and I meant every word, Fitzzy.”

“Fuck off. Both of you,” Seamus says easily, plucking the coffee mug out of Connor’s hands. Connor rises, and I quickly bound to my feet.

“Not you, lass,” Seamus turns to stare at me with raised eyebrows. “These two eejits.”

Connor smirks, mouthing “good luck” at me as he and Ronan melt out of the room. Seamus takes Connor’s vacated chair, gesturing with the coffee mug for me to resume my seat.

I slowly, nervously sink into it, staring across the table at him, my fingers fidgeting with my own mug.

“So.” Seamus’s eyes lazily drop to take in my form. “You’re what all this fuss is about.”

“Fuss?” My cheeks flame. What fuss? Paddy coming back here? The thing with the Italians?

“Aye, lass. The *fuss*,” Seamus agrees, bringing his eyes back to my face to study me. “Honestly, I don’t see what has Paddy so captivated. You must be an artist in the bedroom.”

My face flames at the implication. “I... I don’t know what he sees in me either.”

Seamus’s eyebrows raise, and he takes a sip of Connor’s coffee, staring at me. “But you’re thankful he sees something?”

“I mean....” I gesture down at myself, swallowing when I remember I’m wearing nothing but a pair of panties and Paddy’s button-down shirt. How embarrassing. “Paddy could have any woman he looked at.”

“And so he could, lass.”

“But he says he doesn’t see their faces.”

Seamus’s eyes burn into mine, intense like Paddy’s, but for a whole different reason.

“He doesn’t see their faces?”

“That’s what he said. He said he hasn’t since he met me.”

“And you believe him?”

“Uh. Well... yeah. Why wouldn’t I?”

Seamus nods, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “If I told you Paddy’s life was in danger because of you, and if you left Boston right now, he would be safe... what would you do?”

The air is cold in my nostrils. Paddy’s life is in danger? Because of me? Oh god. I should never have come to him for help. I should have hopped a bus to LA or something.

“If I leave now, he won’t be in danger anymore?” I clarify. Seamus blinks in surprise.

“If you left now, *my* life would be in danger,” he smirks, setting down the coffee mug. “But you would, you’d leave?”

“If it was going to keep Paddy safe, of course. Why would your life be in danger if I left? Because of the Italians?”

“Because Paddy would slaughter me if he thought I’d run you off,” Seamus says cheerfully, but I don’t think it’s a laughing matter. If Paddy hurt Seamus Fitzpatrick, he’d be in so much trouble that his life wouldn’t be worth living.

“I don’t want any trouble.”

“You brought trouble with you, lass,” Seamus sighs. My cheeks are hot again, and so are my eyes. “There’s no point in tears. What’s done is done.” He taps the table with his fingernail. “D’ye love him?”

“Paddy?” I raise my eyes to meet Seamus’s brown ones again as he nods slowly. “With all my heart. More than

anything.”

Draining the coffee, Seamus nods, standing and looking me over.

“I’ll have Lucky teach you the ropes.”

“What ropes?”

Seamus smirks down at me, looking remarkably like his cousin as amusement dances across his face, despite their differences in coloring.

“You’ll see, lass. We’ll find out how willing you are to stick by Paddy’s side.”

I stare at Seamus as he strides out of the room. What’s that supposed to mean? I don’t care what they do to me. The only thing that would drag me away from Paddy’s side is if he ordered me away himself.

I gamely meet Connor’s smirk as he strolls back into the room, his hands shoved in the pockets of his sharp gray suit.

“What kind of ropes am I about to learn?” I ask warily. Connor snorts.

“Seamus was just being intimidating. It’s what he does best. He has Paddy’s best interests at heart and wanted to know that you did too.”

“What do you think?” I cross my arms over my chest, glaring at him. Connor grins, raising his hands in a ‘surrender’ position.

“I think Paddy’s handy with his fists, and I don’t want to be on the receiving end of them. You’re all right in my book, lass. I’ll watch out for you.”

He picks up his empty coffee mug, wrinkling his nose. He does his best impression of puppy dog eyes, holding it out to me.

“You’ll be even more all right in my book if you keep me caffeinated.”

Rolling my eyes, I snatch his mug off him, moving across to the coffee machine and setting it going. Anything to keep the mobsters onside, I guess.

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Chapter Nineteen

LAUREN

Connor disappears so quickly out of the door that I almost panic he has heard something. Out here in West Roxbury, we're kind of more exposed. Sure, it's a nicer neighborhood, and Connor is always with me, but at least in Back Bay, they would have had to get into the building before getting to the apartment. Plus, we weren't accessible from all sides.

Paddy strides into the room, and I relax. I guess it's not an emergency. I think Connor doesn't want to be in the room with us. I don't know why. We don't really talk about personal stuff unless we're tucked in bed – cuddling.

“What are ye reading, lass?” he asks, Irish coloring his tone. I place the book on the end table beside me, next to my coffee mug.

“A history of jet propulsion air travel.”

Paddy's eyebrows shoot up, leaving him looking nonplussed. “Why?”

“Because there's not much else for me to do here.”

Surprise flickers across his face, quickly followed by an apologetic look as he scratches the back of his head.

“My mammy always seemed to have plenty to do. I didn't realize that ye were bored. I'm sorry, lass.”

I shake my head at him. Really, he can be so clueless sometimes. “I bet she was allowed to leave the house to go to the store.”

I would kill for a trip to the grocery store. It used to be one of my least favorite chores, but I’d love to walk those aisles right now.

Paddy nods, seemingly lost in thought. His eyes flash as he stalks over to where I’m seated on the sofa, my legs curled up beneath me. Dropping to his knees in front of me, he tugs my legs apart, sticking his head up my skirt and lashing my clit with his tongue without even a word of warning.

Not that I’m complaining. My head tips back, resting against the back of the sofa as I moan. I’m so close to coming when suddenly his lips disappear. No! I wasn’t ready for that to stop. I want to come.

Paddy’s head reappears from under my skirt as he slides onto the sofa next to me, reaching over and lifting me by the hips, dropping me onto his dick.

“Oh, *fuck*, Paddy,” I moan, shattering around him as I grind down.

“I love it when ye come on my mouth, *mo chroí*,” he murmurs against my neck. “But I love it more when ye come on my dick.”

This gorgeous man of mine has such a way with words.

“Ride me now, *mo chroí*. Fuck yerself on my dick.”

Okay. He might not ever get hired as a greeting card writer, but Paddy’s words are like an electric jolt to my clit. I do exactly what he says, rising onto my knees and fucking myself

on him while he rolls his hips, his fingers digging into the flesh at my waist.

Eventually, he takes over, grabbing my hips hard and slamming me down again and again while he thrusts up into me. I bury my face in his hair as I come again, Paddy groaning and holding deep inside me as he follows my release.

Hugging me to his chest, he doesn't bother to lift me off him, pressing kisses along my hairline.

"I might be home late tonight, *mo chroí*," he sighs. "I have a fight."

I lift my head and search his eyes. That doesn't make any sense. "But we don't fuck before your fights?"

Something dark flashes in his eyes as he lifts a hand and brushes my hair away from my face, tucking it behind my ear. His thumb moves down to graze against my lip.

Even though he kisses me now, this gesture is still one of his favorites. This time though, he leans forward, sucking my lip into his mouth and nibbling it with his teeth. Drawing back with a sigh, Paddy presses a chaste kiss against my lips, leaning back, his hands still anchoring my waist. I didn't even notice he was still inside me.

"I don't fuck ye before fights I'm aiming to win," he mutters. Wait. What?

"You're taking a fall?"

Paddy flinches at the censure in my voice. "I'm doing what I have to in order to keep ye safe, lass."

He rubs his knuckles over my cheekbone, my heart clenching with fear. He has to take a fall to keep me safe? There is only one way in the whole world that makes any sense.

“The Italians?”

Paddy nods. “The lads’ll bring me home after. I’ll be in a bad way, lass. They’ll clean me up. Ye don’t need to see me like that.”

I stare at him, my lips slightly parted. I know what he’s saying. It will hurt his pride to take a fall, but Paddy won’t lose by submission. It will be a fight to the knockout. Oh god. I can’t let him do that. Not for me. I remember the fight I saw, where the guy didn’t submit. It was brutal. My stomach twists. I don’t want that to happen to Paddy. Not because of me.

I shake my head as he captures my cheeks between his strong hands.

“I will do whatever it takes to keep ye safe, *mo chroí*. I love ye, and I would take a dive in every fight I ever have from now until eternity if it meant ye would be safe.”

My heart flutters. A warmth surges through me despite the brutal act we’re talking about. That’s wicked sweet. I nod, Paddy leaning forward to kiss my cheek gently, near my eye.

When his tongue darts out and swirls around, I realize he is kissing away a tear that has managed to leak out unbidden.

“Now.” He leans back, his mouth twisting into a humorless smirk. “If I’m going to be out of commission for the next week, I want to fuck ye at least three more times before I

leave. So, finish yer tea, lass, because ye've a lot of screaming to do in the next hour."

Oh, be still my beating heart.



PADDY

"How're you feeling, Paddy?" Seamus asks, his eyes full of concern as we wait beside the ring. The Italians are in force tonight on the other side of the ring. Here to make sure I keep my end of the bargain, unlike Josh Carmichael.

"All fucked out."

Despite his worry, Seamus's lips curl into a smirk. I left Lauren asleep on the sofa, absolutely exhausted from the six additional orgasms I delivered.

True to my word, I fucked her until she screamed, and then I fucked her until my dick felt like it wouldn't work anymore.

Ronan and Niall sit ringside, an empty chair for Seamus beside them. Liam is with Tiggy, and Connor is at home with Lauren.

Lucky was rather cocky that he didn't have to come to this fight because the lads have placed their usual bets to keep up appearances.

Tonight will cost me a mint because I will miss out on my takings when I lose, and I have insisted on paying for the lads' bets so that they won't be out of pocket. They weren't happy about it, especially Seamus, but they took one look at my face and agreed.

"Paddy Flynn!" Perry's voice rings out, announcing me. Seamus claps a hand on my shoulder, striding off to his waiting chair.

Taking a deep breath, I walk into the ring. The Italian Bull is dancing around it, pumping up the crowd and making obscene gestures in my direction. Fucking cunt. He knows as well as I do that this fight is fixed, yet he's still hamming it up. Have some fucking pride.

My eyes flicker over in the direction of the Italian section of the crowd and land on Gianni fucking Manchetti, seated in the front row. He nods to me, a challenge in his eye. I simply look away, my eyes finding Seamus's.

Seamus glares in Gianni's direction, but he glances at me, nodding stiffly. This nod, I return. Gianni is here to make sure I stick to my end of the bargain.

Cracking my neck, I turn to my opponent, who is now leering at me and spouting off a steady stream of Italian. Given the cheers and catcalls coming from his supporters, I'd say he's taunting me. He's probably talking shit about how he will leave me in a world of pain. I do not doubt it. This won't be pleasant.

I breathe and roll my shoulders back, flexing my fingers. I don't know Josh Carmichael's reasons for not taking a dive, but I know my reason for taking one.

Letting my eyes flutter closed, I picture Lauren's eyes. Pure amber ringed with black. Huge and trusting. The most perfect features ever bestowed on a human being. God truly outdid himself when he made Lauren's eyes.... I stagger as the first blow hits me in the jaw, my head snapping back.

My eyes fly open. I see my opponent's grin as his fists fly and connect with my gut and face. It's a punishment, pure and simple. I was expecting nothing less.

Every so often, the Bull will glance at Gianni, who will nod. I'm paying for my insolence. For keeping Lauren from them. For challenging them and not handing her over the second they went running to Sean.

I offer a few pulled punches, aimed at his gut where I couldn't possibly accidentally knock him out, to make it seem like I'm just having an off night rather than taking a dive. Sure, fight fixing happens here, but you're out if Delic finds out about it. I have no intention of being barred from fighting here.

The Bull draws it out, milking it for everything he can. You're not often offered my head on a platter with a certain win. He's right to savor it because the next time I face the Bull in a fight, sanctioned or otherwise, I'm going to fucking flay him alive.

After almost fifteen excruciating minutes, Gianni raises his eyebrows and nods, flicking his wrist dismissively. As the Bull's fist crunches against my temple, I think of amber, freckles, and fucking vanilla. So fucking worth it.

I can smell vanilla. It's faint underneath blood and sweat, but I can still smell it. I'm floating on a fucking cloud as my eyes flutter open. I've been pumped full of Vicodin. It's a strange feeling. I'm not sure I like it.

"You're okay, Paddy," Lauren whispers, her sweet-smelling hair tickling my nose as she leans over me. She's giving me a fucking sponge bath.

"What a fucking waste," I mumble.

There is laughing in the background. Probably Seamus. Fucking asshole.

"Fuck off, Fitzy, you cunt," I mutter. He laughs harder.

"I think he'll want to revisit the idea of a sponge bath once he's recovered," he chuckles to Lauren as she clucks her tongue at him.

"If you're just going to make crude jokes, you can leave," she scolds him. Seamus laughs harder, moving to help her sit me up so she can wash down my back. I know the movement should hurt, but I feel so disconnected from the rest of my body that it doesn't really feel like anything.

"Good job, Paddy," Seamus mutters as he leaves. Yeah. One item ticked off the list. Thank fuck it's over. I don't know if I've ever been in as much pain as I was after the fight.

A door slams, and there is silence as Lauren curls up next to me, her fingers gently stroking my face.

"I love you, Paddy," she whispers. I know. That's why I did this. "So don't ever do this to me again."

“I wasn’t planning on it, *mo chroí*,” I breathe, letting my eyes flutter closed as the Vicodin takes me off to a bed of feathers, inhaling deeply to fill my lungs with the smell of vanilla.

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Chapter Twenty

PADDY

Stepping out of the shower, I shut it off, toweling myself down and wincing as I lift my arms parallel with my shoulders. It's been a week since I took the worst beating of my life. The bruises have mostly faded, but some of the bone-deep aches remain.

Niall has assured me they will disappear soon. That can't happen soon enough. I miss being able to fuck Lauren in a variety of positions. In fact, I miss being able to fuck Lauren, period.

She's been very hands-off – afraid she'll hurt me. I tried to get her to snap out of that silly notion by pointing out that my dick was aching to the point of pain, but she simply gave me the most incredible blow job of my life. I'm not complaining, but I want to fuck my woman.

Tugging on jeans and a button-down shirt, I shove my feet into my shoes and jog down the stairs. I'm up and about. I'm ready to go with Niall to fulfill the next items on Gianni's list, and I'm ready to fuck Lauren.

Stepping into the kitchen, my eyes sweep over Lauren and Connor, seated on opposite sides of the kitchen table, cards spread out before them. Lauren has a tiny stack of poker chips. Connor has an obscenely large pile.

Lauren is officially terrible at poker. She wears her emotions on her fucking face, so Connor is cleaning the floor with her. The man could read tells on a fucking stone statue. I'm convinced he's half been touched with the sight. Reading Lauren must be like reading a picture book for him.

"How do you always know what my cards look like even before I do?" she whines. Connor smirks at her, lounging back in his seat, his suit jacket hanging from the back of his chair, his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows. Neither he nor Lauren has left the house since we arrived. I have no idea why he wears a suit every day.

"Ye give it away with your eyes, *seamair no cheithre duilleog*," he laughs, trying to duck out of the way as I aim a slap at the back of his head.

"Lauren," I grunt. She's his *nothing*. I know the lad is simply winding me up – as he has done for the last twenty years – but it's fucking working. Connor laughs, rolling his shoulders.

"Well, that's not *my* fault," she grumbles, hunching over her cards. Flickering to the three in the middle, her eyes light up. Jesus fuck. I'm barely half-decent at poker, and I know that's a tell. Connor immediately drops his hand on the table.

"Fold," he snickers. Lauren pouts, my dick hardening at the sight. Christ, that's sexy.

"But I had a full house!" she wails, throwing her cards down on the table.

I can't drag her away from the table when she's so distressed about the game. Abandoning my search for coffee, I

move around behind her as Connor deals the next hand. Leaning over her shoulder, my breath slides over her ear, and she shivers.

“*Mo chroí,*” I breathe, “ye need to work on yer poker face.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” she squirms, her voice breathy.

“It’s easy.” I move closer, sliding my lips up along the outer shell of her ear, my tongue darting out, drawing a shudder from her. “D’ye remember when ye didn’t know I loved ye?”

“Mm-hmm.” Lauren nods, pressing her thighs together tightly as she squirms. If my dick wasn’t hard before, now it rivals fucking steel.

“And ye didn’t want me to know how ye felt?”

I glower at the thought. Lauren should always want me to know how she feels. I need to know what’s going on inside her head at all times so I can keep her safe and loved.

She’s still squirming, nodding at my words. Now isn’t the time to get distracted. I have a goal in mind.

“How did ye hide how ye felt when I was around?”

“I don’t know.” She frowns, sounding frustrated.

Well, I fucking tried, didn’t I? Annoyed now, she snatches up her cards, still frowning fiercely. So much for helping her and not dragging her away from the table, frustrated at her skills. Sighing, I pull a chair over, dropping into it and tugging her closer so my legs stretch out around her and I’m looking at the side of her face.

“Just focus on the game,” I murmur. Lauren shivers again as my fingertips trace along her thigh at the hem of her dress, skating over the bare flesh pebbling beneath them.

“If your hand goes up her dress, I’m fucking out,” Connor snaps. I flip him off, sliding my lips along the underside of her jaw while she plays the game.

My fingertips swirl random patterns at her hem, creeping down to the inside of her thigh, and my tongue mimics those patterns down the side of her neck. Right as my hand is sliding up underneath her skirt, Lauren jolts and squeals.

“I won!”

Lauren turns and throws her arms around my neck, pressing her lips hard against mine in celebration.

“Ha!” she looks over to mock Connor, who scrunches his nose in disgust.

“You only won because Paddy distracted you so much that you’re tells disappeared,” he bitches.

“Is that against the rules?” she asks innocently, and he glowers at her.

“No,” he growls. “But it’s a cheap shot.”

I flip him off as Niall strolls into the kitchen. Fuck. I thought I had more time.

“Five minutes,” I tell him. He nods, moving to the coffee maker that I never got to.

I stand, tugging Lauren out of the room. We don’t go far, just into the parlor on the other side of the hall so that I can fuck her quick and dirty up against the wall.

My lips tease the hollow of Lauren's throat as I lift her, slamming my dick into her. Moaning, her mouth drops open, her legs hook around my waist, her fingers tightening at my shoulders.

"Yes, Paddy."

I wish we had more time, but the excitement on her face when she finally beat Connor in a hand was worth having to do this fast. My thumb finds her clit, grinding against it as I hammer into her.

"I need ye to come fast, *mo chroí*."

"Yes, Paddy."

That's a good girl. I keep grinding my thumb, pumping into her. Lauren's hips are bucking, and her pussy flutters around my dick. Thank fuck, she's close.

"That's it, lass."

Lauren comes with a breathy moan, her mouth falling open. I cover it with my own, my tongue delving into her mouth as I growl out my own release.

Too soon, I unhook her legs from my waist, setting her down. Fuck. I hate walking away from her. Now I understand why Seamus wanted to stay holed up with Tiggy after getting her out of that fucking warehouse. I was a cunt to him about it at the time, but I get it now.

"Don't wait up for me, *mo chroí*," I murmur into her hair as she slides back down the wall, her legs slightly unsteady from the force of her orgasm. "*Is breá liom tú*, lass." I graze my thumb along her lower lip and stare into her eyes. "I love ye."

“I love you too, Paddy,” she whispers, kissing the tip of my thumb. Groaning, I pull my hand away.

Lauren’s huge eyes watch me stride into the kitchen, smacking Connor upside the head as I jerk my chin to Niall. He sets down his mug, nodding to Connor as we leave.

“Have fun,” Connor calls after us. I flip him off, but Niall smirks, a glint in his eyes. Jesus fuck, the Reaper is chilling when he wants to be. I’m almost convinced he gets off on this shit.

I climb into his SUV, staring out the windshield as he drives us to the location, selecting an optimal parking space. For all the fucked up shite he does, Niall certainly seems to have the luck of the Irish on his side. Of all the parking spaces available, the one he gets is perfect for scoping out the mark. Maybe he is doing God’s work.

Niall parks the SUV and gets comfortable, his eyes locked across the road at the stoop of the old brick-fronted building.

“Ye’re very free with yer affection for the lass, Paddy,” he observes without looking at me. I turn my gaze to the stoop also.

“And so I am, Niall,” I agree, shrugging. “I love her. I know it. *She* knows it. Why would I hide it?”

He nods, brushing his thumb against the steering wheel. “How d’ye know it?”

I blink in surprise, my mouth popping open slightly. This has to be the most surreal moment of my life. I’m staking out a building, watching for a mark, waiting with the fucking Irish

Reaper so he can carry out a hit, and the sociopathic fucker is asking me how I know I love my woman.

“I just do,” I splutter, staring even harder at the stoop, practically willing the mark to appear so that this conversation will be fucking *over*. “It’s just a feeling you fucking have.”

“Aye, but....” He shrugs, digging his thumbnail into the leather stitching of the wheel. “How d’ye know that’s what the feeling is?”

I blow out a breath and run my hand through my hair in frustration. I think I’d rather take another forced beating in the fucking ring rather than have this conversation.

“D’ye want to do things for her?” I grit out through clenched teeth. “Like, things you wouldn’t do in a million years otherwise?”

“Like take a dive in a fight?”

Bastard. I flip him off. “Yeah, like that, I suppose.”

Niall nods, seemingly lost in thought.

“How’d ye make her love ye back then?” Niall asks right as I’m congratulating myself on this conversation being over. Jesus fuck.

“I don’t fucking know, Niall,” I sigh. “She said she didn’t mean to, so I guess I did it accidentally.” I’m about to change the subject when something occurs to me. “Is this about your little bartender?”

A smirk tugs at the corners of my mouth. Niall grunts, shrugging and gripping the steering wheel tightly. I’d bet a fucking mint it is.

“Did you tell her how you *feel*?” I smirk, teasing him. He flips me off without looking at me.

“Ye done yet?” he grunts, glowering across at the stoop like it fucked his mammy or something.

“Have you tried cuddling?” I ask innocently.

“Feck off, Paddy,” he snaps in a chillingly cold voice that says he will rip my face off and fucking enjoy it.

I nod. “Yep.”

He growls, falling silent, staring at the stoop. Thank fuck that’s over.

Chapter Twenty-One

LAUREN

“You *know* where they are. What they’re doing,” I whine. Connor’s eyes flicker over to me, his eyebrows raising.

“Aye, I do, lass.”

“So... you could just tell me. I wouldn’t tell anyone.”

Connor catches his grin. “I could.”

Yay! I look at him expectantly. He smirks at me, winking. “But I won’t.”

My lips move into a pout. Connor snickers, shooting me a pointed look.

“That might work for Paddy, lass, but it does less than nothing for me.”

Sighing, I shoot him a glare, stomping into the living room, dropping onto the sofa, and hugging a throw pillow to my chest, determined to sulk.

Connor slides into the room after another moment. Dropping into an armchair, propping his feet up on the coffee table, and pulling out his phone. Right. Bodyguard. That means he has to be in the room with me. How annoying.

We sit in silence for a while, ideas running through my head. I want to know. I think it might be about me. Like Paddy taking the dive in his fight. Doesn’t that give me a right to

know? I need to figure out how to make Connor tell me. He's a Fitzpatrick, so he'll be a tough nut to crack.

My eyes fix on his phone case. He's tapping around. Maybe he's playing online poker. He certainly really likes playing poker in person. I don't know if he plays professionally, but he's been bitching about only having Paddy and me to play with. Or mainly just me.

Paddy laughs and says he wants to keep his money. Connor and I don't play for real money. I'm broke, and even if I weren't, he'd clean me out in less than five minutes.

Connor's phone case is black, with the shapes of the card suits on it. The man really lives and breathes poker, huh. God, he was wicked pissed off when Paddy helped me lose my 'tells,' whatever they are. That gives me an idea....

"If you tell me, I promise not to let Paddy help me win poker against you anymore."

Connor's eyes lift slowly from his phone, moving to meet mine. I can see the war in his eyes. He's tempted. Wicked tempted.

"You promise?"

"Cross my heart."

Sighing, Connor pockets his phone, dropping his feet to the floor, leaning forward, resting his forearms on his knees, and squinting across the coffee table at me.

"The Italians wanted you, lass."

"To kill me?" I whisper. A dark look crosses Connor's face, but he banishes it, shaking his head slowly.

“No, lass. But what they wanted you for wasn’t pleasant.”

Oh, okay. “But I’m still here.”

Connor gives me a look like I’m an idiot. “Paddy was never going to give you up.”

Warmth shoots through me, a smug look crossing my face. Connor smirks at the sight.

“The Italians were willing to relinquish their claim on you for a price.”

A price? Paddy *paid* for me? Ugh. I’m not sure how I feel about that.

“So, what am I worth?” I pick at a nonexistent piece of fluff on the throw pillow, keeping my voice casual. Amusement flashes across Connor’s face.

“Not cash, lass. They gave us a shopping list.”

I blink at him, a frown dragging my eyebrows down. “They wanted you to buy their groceries?”

Connor snickers, shaking his head. “A shopping list is what a list of requirements is called.”

“What requirements?”

Connor blows out a breath, tangling his fingers together. “Paddy had to take his dive. I’m staying here because my mammy is looking after two children at my house.”

“The Italians wanted you to babysit for them?”

“No, lass. Someone owed them money and couldn’t pay. They demanded collateral. They took his children.”

My breath sucks in, bile churning in my stomach. “Your mother is holding two children hostage?”

“Collateral. And she’s doing it under protest. They mainly bake and watch TV. She told them their pa needed to travel for work, and she is looking after them. They Skype with him.”

Okay. That doesn’t sound as bad as I initially thought. But it doesn’t answer my initial question.

“So, where have Paddy and Niall gone? To visit your mother and the kids?”

Connor blows out a breath, shifting in his seat, looking decidedly uncomfortable. My eyes narrow at the sight. “What?”

“D’ye know who Niall is, lass?”

“Uh... Seamus Fitzpatrick’s bodyguard?”

Connor snickers, shaking his head. “That’s usually Paddy.”

Oh. So, Niall would be...?

“Niall is the Reaper.”

My heart thuds in my chest. The...Reaper? The...*Irish* Reaper? Holy fucking shit. He’s a renowned hitman. Everyone in Boston knows who the Irish Reaper is. He’s the bogeyman people tell their kids about.

“Paddy is... killing people?” I ask in a small voice.

Connor sighs, making a face. “Niall’s the one doing the actual...deed. Paddy could have stayed here but insisted on being with Niall.”

I sit back, hugging my pillow to my chest, my feet tucked up beneath me, my world tilted on an axis, my breath cold in my nostrils.

“Are you okay, lass?” Connor’s voice flutters at the side of my numbness.

“Why does Paddy want to be there? If he could be here... wh-why would he want to see that?”

“Paddy insists on being there because this is all so he can keep you. He feels responsible.”

Niall is doing it for Paddy? For us? So Paddy can keep me?

“It’s my fault?”

“Jesus fuck, lass. It’s no one’s fault. Paddy will do anything to keep you, to have you safe. He didn’t want you to know because he didn’t want you to feel like you do now. I shouldn’t have told you.”

“No! You should have. It’s right that I know.”

Connor looks doubtful. “Are you all right, lass?”

I nod, feeling ill. “I will be.... They go a lot. Do they just have to keep k-killing people until they’re told to stop?”

“No, lass. Four hits.”

Four. Tonight is the third time Niall collected Paddy, and they left together. So... it’s almost over. Shoving to my feet, I drop my pillow, hugging my middle and staring out the window.

“How long does it take? They’ve been gone for a wicked long time tonight.”

“Patience, *seamair no cheithre duilleog*,” Connor smirks at me, climbing to his feet, shoving his hands into his pockets. I turn away from the window to glare at him.

“Uh, I don’t know what that means. I don’t speak Irish.” I roll my eyes at him, which earns me a mischievous grin.

“It means ‘my four-leaf clover’,” he drawls, winking at me. Huh. No wonder Paddy doesn’t like it when Connor calls me that.

“I’m not your anything,” I sniff at him, turning back to the window. He’s still grinning as he comes to stand beside me there.

“Yes, you are. I’ve never had such a streak of luck as that night you were at the fight.”

“If you weren’t lucky until you met me, why are you called *Lucky*?”

Connor snorts, shrugging, his eyes locked on the street outside the window with me. “Some people think my skill at the poker table is down to luck.”

“Is it?”

“No, lass. I read faces, not tarot cards.” A smirk tugs at his lips. “Besides, Paddy hates it when I call you *seamair no cheithre duilleog*.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “So you do it to rile Paddy up?”

“Ah, come now.” He grins easily at me. “Sure, and it’s my favorite pastime.”

It is? But Paddy said Seamus and Connor were his two closest friends. Why would one of his best friends want to rile

him up? That sounds like a weird friendship. Men are weird.

“Maybe you should look into getting new hobbies,” I snipe good-naturedly at him, feeling defensive of Paddy. Connor laughs at me.

“Doesn’t Paddy call you things in Irish?” he asks me curiously, a blush heating my cheeks. “Or does he stick to *lass*?”

There’s a strange look on his face as he says the last word, emphasizing it strongly.

“He calls me *mo chroí*,” I admit, butchering the words as my tongue twists around the unfamiliar sounds.

Connor snickers, shoving his hands in his pockets again. “Of course he does. The sappy fuck is head over heels for you.”

Okay. That’s seriously heartwarming. To have one of Paddy’s best friends think he’s head over heels for me. I poke his arm.

“What does it mean?”

“*Mo chroí*?” he asks, and I nod. “My heart.”

Well, *my* heart has officially melted into a pool on the floor. Paddy calls me his heart? That’s so romantic.

“Jesus, give me strength,” Connor mutters from beside me at the sappy look crossing my face. I laugh, flipping him off.

“Why would annoying your best friend be your favorite pastime?” I ask, frowning at the street through the window.

Connor’s sigh drags my gaze over to him. He’s not grinning anymore. He looks...tired.

“We’re best mates *now*,” he clarifies. “Because when you’re twenty-nine and thirty, a year is nothing. But when you’re eight and nine....”

“A year is a lifetime?” I guess. Connor nods, his eyes glued out the window.

“Paddy was forever convincing Seamus that I was just his annoying little cousin, tagging along with them.”

“So you started trying to rile him up?”

“Every chance I got.” His mischievous grin is back now. “Bad habits take a lifetime to break.”

“God, you’re such a shit.”

Connor snorts. “And you’ve been hanging out with Paddy too much. You’re even starting to sound like him. They’re here.”

He nods through the window where a dark SUV has pulled up to the curb. My heart thuds, my head whipping around as Paddy and Niall climb out of the car. Oh god. I flinch, swallowing down bile at the sight of all the blood covering them, but I don’t look away. The air in my nostrils is cold again. I am cold all over, fighting the urge to shiver. This was for us.

They talk as they walk up the path, stepping into the house where we are waiting. Paddy freezes when he sees me, the words dying on his tongue, his eyes burning into mine as he swallows roughly.

Behind him, Niall is frozen too, his eyes locked on my face like he’s afraid I’m about to faint or run away screaming.

“What are ye doing awake, lass?” Paddy breathes, his voice rough and quiet. “I told ye not to wait up.”

“I wanted to make sure that you were okay,” I whisper. Something indecipherable flickers in Paddy’s eyes.

“I’m all right, *mo chroí*,” he assures me, shifting uncomfortably. “Are ye?”

I assume he’s talking about all the blood. I frown at his shirt.

“Of course.”

“Lass -.”

“We need to soak that, or the blood will set, and we’ll never get the stain out.”

Both he and Niall blink in surprise at my words. I’m determined to make all this seem normal. It’s what Paddy needs. I know it is.

“Ye aren’t upset about the blood?” Paddy asks at last, sounding uncertain. I swallow some more bile.

“I don’t particularly want to know the details. And I’d rather you didn’t touch me until you’ve had a shower. But,” I shudder out a breath, “you have to do what you have to do. It’s part of who you are, and I love you just the way you are.”

Niall makes a strangled noise, drawing my gaze over Paddy’s shoulder to him. He’s staring at me like I’ve grown an extra head. Niall grunts, turning on his heel and striding out of the house like he has somewhere he needs to be.

“Where’s he off to then?” Connor asks, making me jump. Shit. I forgot he was here. Paddy glances over my shoulder

briefly, his eyes sliding back to mine.

“Off to figure out how to make a bartender fall in love with him, I’d say,” Paddy guesses. I bite back a smile. Mellie won’t know what hit her. “We’re going to bed, Connor.”

“All right. Sleep well,” Connor agrees. Paddy gestures for me to lead the way up the stairs without looking at his friend. Thank goodness.

While I’m okay with it, *in theory*, it’s pretty hard to look at all the blood and not remember that it used to be inside a person who also used to be alive.

“Wait for me in bed, lass,” Paddy’s breath brushes my ear as he murmurs to me, but otherwise, he makes sure not to touch me.

I move to the bed as he strides off into the bathroom. Quickly stripping off my clothing, I slide beneath the covers, my eyes locked on the closed bathroom door.

Paddy is back in ten minutes, lifting the comforter off me.

“I even remembered to soak the shirt.”

My lips lift into a smile. It’s cute how proud he sounds about that. Paddy slides into bed, down my body, and buries his face between my legs with a groan.

Shit. My fingers grip the comforter, my legs widening as his tongue licks through my folds, flicking my clit. I will never get used to how good this feels. Paddy’s thumb presses inside me, pumping as his teeth and tongue work my clit over. I’m going to come wicked quick. I have no idea how Paddy knows exactly which buttons to press to get me off, but I love that he does.

“Paddy!” I gasp, my head tipping back as I come.

He growls, kissing his way up my body, pulling the comforter up with him. Paddy tugs me into his arms, curling his body around me, holding me close.

I’m sated, but Paddy isn’t. I move my hand over his dick, stroking him through his fitted trunks. Before I can curl my fingers around it, Paddy grabs my hand, stopping me. Huh? That’s different. The only time he stops me from touching his dick is if he has a fight to win.

Lifting my hand from his crotch, Paddy rests it against his bare chest, holding it here.

“Can I just hold ye for a bit, lass?” he asks me, sounding unsure. Uh, the answer to that question will never be no.

“Of course.” I snuggle into him, trying to offer him comfort. “Are you okay? Connor told me what you have to do.”

“Ah, lass,” Paddy sighs, stroking my hair gently. “He shouldn’t have told ye. Ye’ll only worry.”

Well, of course I’ll worry. “I do worry. About you. I want you to be okay.”

“I am okay,” he sounds surprised that I would think otherwise. “And why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well,” I hesitate. “You had to....” I pause, whispering the word, “*kill* someone.”

Paddy laughs softly. I hardly think this is a laughing matter.

“And so I did, lass. It comes with the territory.”

I mean. That makes sense. He doesn’t *sound* upset.

“But...you just want to hold me?” I whisper, seriously confused. Paddy breathes out a sigh, pressing a kiss against my temple.

“*Mo chroí.* I saw yer face when I walked in. I just want to hold ye, so I know ye’re okay. That ye’re not going to run screaming for the hills.”

I snort at the suggestion, smoothing my hand against his chest.

“But you’re here. What would I do in the hills?”

“*A ghrá mo chroí,*” he murmurs, pressing his lips to my forehead. “*Ní ligfidh mé go deo thú.*”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

PADDY

“Ye’re sure that’s the one ye want?” Niall scrunches his nose at the ring the jeweler lays on the little felt mat on the counter.

“I’m sure.” I eye the ring with certainty.

“It’s brown. Aren’t diamonds supposed to be sparkly and white?” Niall is dubious now.

“It’s *amber*.” I point at it. “It’s the exact same color as the lass’ eyes.”

He’s nodding, but I can see he’s not convinced.

“Besides, it has all the sparkly white ones around the outside.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be round?” Niall asks again. I glare at him. Who the fuck said it had to be round? I’ve never heard that before. The man has less than no fucking clue.

“What does the shape matter? It’s a diamond-shaped diamond. It’s on a gold band. It’s surrounded by sparkly white diamonds. It’s a fecking engagement ring!”

“But those look like the rings ye see on the telly.” Niall pokes his finger at the generic, giant diamonds that look like every single ring you see on the telly.

“I don’t want something you see on the telly,” I glower at him. “I want this one because when I look at it, I think of Lauren.”

The fucker finally shuts up, and the jeweler beams at me as he wraps the box up and goes on and on about care instructions.

Why do I give a fuck about care instructions? It's a ring. Lauren's a lass. She'll figure it out.

"When are ye going to ask her?" Niall asks as we step out of the store, heading back for the SUV. Why the fuck is the man so invested in my fucking proposal?

"When I'm not covered in blood and haven't been covered in blood for a few days." I roll my eyes at him, and he grunts, finally dropping the subject.

In another spot of luck, the pawnshop is empty apart from the owner when we arrive.

"What can I help you gentlemen with?" the owner asks as we step inside. I stride purposefully to the back of the shop, Niall trailing after me.

"What about this one?" I point at a random item along the back wall, calling to Niall over my shoulder, who shrugs silently.

"Practically an antique," the owner gushes, rounding the counter and hurrying toward us, away from the windows at the front of the store. He stops beside me, spouting random facts about some radio. I grab him by the throat, slamming him against the back wall.

"What's going on," he chokes as my fingers tighten around his neck. Niall's knife slashes out, raking through the shirt and biting into the flesh underneath. I curse as blood spurts against my shirt.

“Lauren will never do my laundry again,” I mutter.

Niall grunts beside me, narrowing his eyes at the pawnshop owner.

“Gianni sends his regards.” Niall’s voice is dangerously smooth. The man blinks in terror.

“I-I don’t have any beef with the Irish,” he gurgles, his hands moving over his chest, attempting to stem the bleeding. Good luck with that. He’s cut from chin to cock.

Niall raises an eyebrow. “If ye have beef with Gianni, ye have beef with the Irish.”

The man gurgles again, his eyes widening with the realization of his impending death.

“I’ll make things right with Gianni,” he pleads, but I shake my head. It’s a bit too late for that. This is the fourth hit. Nothing is derailing this. I need Lauren safe.

“The Reaper doesn’t come visiting as a warning.” I tip my head at Niall, and the owner starts sobbing, Niall staring at him in disgust.

“I hate when they cry,” he grumbles. “What happened to dying like a man?”

Niall’s hand snaps out, disemboweling the sobbing man.

“Time to go,” I tell him, and we beat a hasty exit, sliding into the SUV as Niall pulls away from the curb.

We don’t drive to my house this time, going to Seamus’s instead. He and Tiggy are sitting in the den, some trashy reality show on the telly, while she eats pickles and ice cream, and he rubs her feet. How domesticated.

Any other time, I would think it ridiculous how the mighty Seamus Fitzpatrick had fallen. Now? Now I'm thinking this would be nice to do with Lauren. Maybe not the feet rubbing, but the cuddling and watching the telly? I want that with the lass.

"Jaysus feck." Niall wrinkles his nose at Tiggy's plate, distracting me from the fantasy floating before my eyes. "That's fecking disgusting. Ye shouldn't eat shite like that."

"From your lips to God's ears," Seamus murmurs in agreement. Tiggy scowls at her husband. He quickly drops his eyes back to her feet and keeps massaging.

Appeased, Tiggy's eyes drift over us, and she looks down at her food, gagging.

"I think I'm going to be sick," she mutters. In an instant, Seamus has dropped her feet, reaching for her.

"What do you need, *a mhuirnín*?"

Her eyes flicker over us again as she makes the gagging noise.

"To not be in a room with so much blood," she replies thickly.

Before we can blink, Seamus is on his feet, hustling us from the room.

"Fucking out!" he barks. We obediently move into the parlor.

"She can eat pickles and ice cream but can't look at blood?" Niall shakes his head. "Pregnant women are a strange breed."

“That’s my wife you’re talking about,” Seamus snaps at him, but Niall shrugs, undeterred by Fitzzy’s dark tone.

“Ye saw what she was eating,” he mutters mulishly. Enough of this. I want to be home with Lauren.

“It’s done,” I tell Seamus, who nods.

“I figured as much with the look of the two of you.” He turns to leave – back to Tiggy – when neither of us moves to leave, he hesitates. “Is there something else?”

“I’m going to ask Lauren to marry me.”

Seamus smirks at me. “Sure, and she’ll make a grand bride for you.” He fixes a more serious look at me. “I’m happy for you, Paddy. Really, I am.”

I nod, making to leave when Niall clears his throat. My feet freeze, and I turn back.

“I need a few days off, Fitzzy. If ye don’t mind.”

Seamus blinks at the Reaper in surprise. “Is everything all right, Niall?”

The man grunts and shrugs. “I just need to get some errands run.”

He looks uncomfortable as his eyes flicker over me. I get the message.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Seamus.” I clap Niall’s shoulder on my way out. “I’ll wait in the SUV.”



LAUREN

Connor said there were four names on the Italian shopping list, and four times Paddy has come home covered in blood and had me wait naked in bed while he showered before eating me out and cuddling me until I fell asleep. I think I should be safe with Paddy now.

“*Mo chroí.*” I smile as Paddy’s arms wrap around my middle, and he presses a kiss on the back of my head.

Placing the shirt I was folding back into the laundry basket, I turn in his arms, grinning at him.

“I have a surprise for you,” he smirks, dropping a kiss on my cheek. “But you have to close your eyes.”

A surprise? I’d like that. Smiling, I shut my eyes tightly, squealing softly as Paddy swings me up in his arms. Is it going to be a sexy surprise?

“Keep them shut, lass,” he gently chides as my eyes flutter open. Oops. I got too excited. I squeeze them shut again.

I’m deposited in a leather seat, squeaking in surprise, my eyes flying open as he clips the seatbelt around me. Oh my god. I’m *outside*. Best. Surprise. Ever.

“I get to leave the house?”

Paddy smirks at me as he slides into the driver’s seat and starts the ignition. “You get to leave the house.”

“Are we going to the store?”

Honestly, I have been cooped up for so long that alone would be a treat. Also, Liam never buys the coffee I like.

“No. You have to close your eyes again.”

Throwing him a curious look, I do as I’m told, smiling gently as Paddy reaches over, tangling his fingers with mine.

We drive for about ten minutes before the SUV stops moving.

“Keep them closed, lass. No matter what,” Paddy’s voice floats over me. I nod, still squeezing my eyes shut, and hear Paddy’s door open and close.

The door beside me opens, Paddy’s arm pressing against my stomach as he leans in to unclasp the seatbelt. I’m ready this time when he gently lifts me out, my arms snaking around his neck.

It’s hard, but I fight the urge to peek as he carries me for another five minutes, gently setting me down on a wooden bench. Around us, leaves are rustling in trees. We must still be outside. There is some shuffling, and I grip the bench on either side of me to stop myself from peeping.

“Ye can open yer eyes now, *a ghrá mo chroí*,” Paddy murmurs, his voice husky.

When my eyes flutter open, I see the trees surrounding us and the small lake in front of us. We’re completely secluded.

A soft smile crosses my lips. It's beautiful. But Paddy isn't sitting on the bench beside me.

My eyes drop, looking for him, and I blink in surprise. Paddy is down on one knee in front of me, looking as gorgeous as all get out, holding a jewelry box. Oh. My. *God*. Is this really happening? To *me*?

"Paddy?" I whisper, uncertainty in my voice.

"Lass." He smiles softly at me. "*Mo chroí*. I need ye. I need ye in my life. I need to wake up with ye in my arms each morning and fall asleep with ye in my arms each night. Ye crept into my heart and made yerself at home there, and now I can't imagine a day without ye in it. I need ye to marry me."

I blink. Paddy is off his knee instantly, seated beside me, cupping my cheek and brushing the tears away with his thumb.

"Lass?" he asks, sounding nervous. "Are ye all right?"

I hiccup and nod. I have never been more all right in my entire life.

"You want to marry me?" I whisper. His face relaxes into a beautiful smile.

"I don't just want to marry ye," he clarifies. "I *need* to marry ye. Will ye have me?"

I stare at him again. Is he serious? In what universe would I say no to this question?

"Yes," I finally manage to choke out. Paddy sags with relief.

"Well, thank Christ for that," he mutters, hesitantly holding up the jewelry box.

We both stare at the closed box, and I cautiously reach my hand out for it.

“It’s not round or white or sparkly,” Paddy blurts out, my hand freezing in midair.

“I’m sure it’s beautiful. You picked it for me.”

“That I did, lass. But Niall seemed to think that it was all wrong.”

Who gives a shit what Niall thinks?

“Niall’s not the one asking me to marry him.”

Paddy smirks, looking a little more like his confident self. “Good thing or I’d have to gut the prick.”

I snort at his earnestness. He sighs, tentatively placing the box in my upturned hand.

“Before ye see it, I want ye to know why I picked it.”

I freeze. Is it wicked ugly or something? I know I will love it because Paddy is giving it to me to symbolize to the world that he wants me to be his wife, but he seems wicked worried right now.

“It’s the color of yer eyes.”

I blush. He picked an engagement ring the color of my eyes? Paddy hesitates like he’s unsure he should say what he’s about to but presses on.

“When I first saw ye, lass. Ye were sitting beside Seamus with Connor’s arm about your neck, and I remember thinking that while ye were pretty, there were prettier lasses for Connor to pay attention to.”

My blush deepens. I know he has asked me to marry him, but no one wants to be told they are merely “pretty” and there are “prettier” girls. Sensing my discomfort, Paddy rushes on.

“Then ye looked at me, and all I could see were yer eyes. I couldn’t look away. It’s like ye hypnotized me. Ye sat next to me on that bench while I was covered in blood and sweat, and ye told me ye needed my help, and ye looked at me with those fecking mesmerizing eyes, and I’ve not seen another lass’ face since.”

Okay. That’s wicked sweet. I didn’t think it was possible to love him more. I can’t believe he’s been *mesmerized* by me since we met. I thought it was just me who felt like that. But Paddy isn’t finished.

“This ring is like that. When ye first look at it, ye think; that’s a pretty ring. But when ye really look at it, ye realize it’s just about the most stunning thing ye’ve ever laid your eyes on.”

He blows out a breath, opening the ring box. But I’m not looking at the ring. I’m staring into his eyes, trying not to cry because if I weren’t in love with him before, I would have tumbled headfirst in love at that speech.

“I picked this ring because when I look at it, I think of ye,” he whispers. Paddy breaks eye contact to look down at the ring, his eyes softening like when he’s stroking my hair in bed at night.

My eyes dip to it, and I see exactly what he means. It sits on a golden band. Square cut, set on an angle, so it looks like a diamond on a playing card. The large stone is an amber-colored brown diamond framed by smaller white diamonds.

It's a pretty ring. A striking ring. As I look at it, Paddy takes it and slips it onto my finger. We both sit in silence and stare at it for a while.

Every time my eyes move away and look back at it, I see a new aspect, and I agree with Paddy. It's just about the most gorgeous ring I've ever seen.

Eventually, I look up at Paddy, who is chewing on his lower lip, looking nervous. His face clears at the look in my eyes.

"I love it," I whisper, reaching up and cupping his face with my hands. "It's perfect."

"I love ye, Lauren. I can't wait for ye to be my wife."

He kisses me tenderly and slowly, the heat building until he's eating at my mouth.

"Is breá liom tú, lass, ní ligfidh mé go deo thú."

Chapter Twenty-Three

LAUREN

“You look amazing!” Tiggy gushes, fussing with my hair, while Mellie and Fiona get the bouquets ready.

“Does it make you think fondly of your wedding day, Tiggy?” Fiona smirks at her while Mellie snorts.

Tiggy flips them off, making a face at me. I know why they’re teasing her. She admitted to me that her marriage was an arranged one. I still find it wicked hard to believe, considering how head over heels in love with her Seamus Fitzpatrick is, but there you go.

Watching them all laugh with each other, I feel a pang of sadness. I wish Andie were here as one of my bridesmaids. I always imagined that Andie would be my maid of honor if I ever got married. But, though she is invited to the wedding, I didn’t want her to be too immersed in my new world. It’s not exactly the safest place, and she doesn’t have a Paddy to look out for her.

Tiggy beams at me as I look carefully at my reflection. I chose a simple dress. Anything too fancy or elaborate would overshadow me. Andie told me that was the most idiotic thing I’d ever said, but I stuck to my guns.

It’s ivory-colored, with a square neckline and thick straps, fitted to my waist, where there is a satin bow at the front before flaring to the ground. I feel like a princess.

Certainly, if I'd stayed in Dot and never met Paddy, I would never have owned a dress like this. I decided against a veil. I'm not really a traditional bride. Apart from Andie, I have no one to sit on my side of the church. No one to give me away. No one here for me at all.

When I got a bit sniffly and morose at the thought, Paddy had cuddled me close and told me that *he* would be in the church for me. That made me feel much better. Besides, I will have one guest. Well, two. Andie and her boyfriend are coming.

"I know something you don't," Tiggy teases me as Mellie hands me my flowers. Given that she's Seamus Fitzpatrick's wife, I would imagine there are many things she knows that I don't. I'm okay with that.

"What is it then?"

Tiggy grins. "You'll have your house to yourselves in about a week."

I blink in surprise, a huge grin creeping across my face. "Connor's going home? It's over with the Italians?"

Tiggy beams as she nods. "Almost. The children are going back to their father next Tuesday. He's paid what he owes, but Gianni's making him sweat. Sean demanded an end date, and next Tuesday it is."

"It's time." Fiona has her ear to the door, opening it at the knock. Ronan is standing there, but he is speechless. He's staring at Fiona like she's the most stunning thing he's ever seen.

“Ye look incredible, *leannán*,” he breathes. Fiona rolls her eyes at him.

“Still not your sweetheart,” she snips, but when she turns to ask if I’m ready to go, there is a hint of a blush on her cheeks.

We make our way outside, Connor meeting us. He looks distracted, but grins at me as he ushers me into the SUV. Ronan gets into an SUV with Tiggy, Mellie, and Fiona. I slide into the back of Connor’s vehicle, on my own until he climbs into the front seat, pulling away from the curb.

“Nervous?” he asks, pinning his eyes on me in the rearview mirror.

“Not even in the slightest,” I answer confidently, drawing a laugh.

“Where *do* you find your courage?”

He is teasing, but I smile wider. “Paddy will be waiting for me at the other end of the aisle. What’s there to be nervous about?”

“What indeed?” Connor murmurs, pulling up outside the church.



PADDY

The church is full. I haven't set foot in here since Seamus's wedding. Now it's my turn. The atmosphere is very different this time around. Everyone is relaxed. There are only friends here. A blonde I've never seen before walks in, looking gorgeous and more than a little nervous.

She glances around, her eyes lingering cautiously over Sean, where he's holding court in the front pew. Nodding to Seamus, I stride along the aisle, brushing aside one of the ushers as I reach her.

"Andie Halpern?" I ask. She blinks up at me, relaxing.

"That's me. Paddy Flynn?"

"Aye, lass. You're up the front on Lauren's side."

She nods, following me up the aisle, clutching her purse to her chest as she sinks into the pew where I gesture. Sean glances over but turns back to Seamus, standing in front of him, hands in his pockets, chatting.

"This is Niall. You stick with him. You'll be fine." I gesture to Niall, who turns and looks her over, nodding.

"Andie is Lauren's best friend," I tell Niall. He looks her over again, nodding.

"I'll look after ye, lass."

She manages a faint smile, still hugging her purse. I'd stay and chat, but the priest nods to me, and I leave them, standing at the alter, Seamus finishing his conversation with his pa and moving to stand beside me.

Ronan steps inside, hovering at the door, holding it open. His eyes lock with me, and he nods. Showtime. I can't fucking

wait.

The music starts as Ronan's little blonde stripper appears, strutting down the aisle in a flowing pale blue dress. There's an intake of breath beside me, and I glance at Seamus as Tiggy walks in, also wearing a flowing blue dress. Seamus's eyes drink in the sight of his wife, his eyes burning into hers.

"Keep it in your pants, Fitzzy," I murmur to him. "It's my fucking wedding."

"And so it is, Paddy." His eyes cut away from Tiggy to grin at me. "And I am happy for you. She's a grand lass."

Aye, she is. Ronan is still holding the door, saying something as Niall's bartender appears. In the front pew, Niall has eyes for no one else.

When she makes it to the end of the aisle, taking her position next to Tiggy, she stands directly in front of Niall, who stretches out his leg and tucks his foot underneath the hem of her dress where it brushes the ground, like he can't bear not to touch her for another moment. I smirk as my eyes catch his, and he flips me off.

The strains of the wedding march sound, and I'm not thinking about Fitzzy undressing his wife with his eyes or Niall feeling up his bartender with his foot.

My eyes are glued to the door where Lauren will appear. Connor slides in, flanking the other side of the entrance to Ronan, and then she's here, my breath catching in my throat and my heart thudding loudly in my ears.

I have no idea how I could ever have thought Lauren anything other than plain gorgeous. Her dark hair tumbles

down her breast over one shoulder, her dress looks like it's from a fairytale, and her huge, alluring amber eyes burn into mine as she walks herself down the aisle to me.

When she reaches me and takes my hands after giving her bouquet to Mellie, I lift them to my lips, pressing a kiss to her fingers.

“Ye dazzle me, lass,” I murmur, and she smiles shyly at me. “Ye’re a *chuisle mo chroí*.”

Pulse of my heart. Before I met Lauren, I always thought that phrase was a pack of nonsense. Not anymore.

I listen to every word the priest utters, my eyes never leaving Lauren's. Finally, we're bound together for the rest of our lives, and I'm allowed to fucking kiss her.

Crushing her to me, I eat at her mouth until the congregation starts to laugh. Breaking apart, I hug her close, wrapping my arms around her and pressing my lips to her forehead.

“Ye're mine now, *mo chroí*. *Ní ligfidh mé go deo thú*.”

Lauren closes her eyes and sighs contentedly. “You better not.”

I grin against her forehead. I *knew* she'd been asking Connor to teach her the meanings of the Irish phrases I use with her. And it's true. I *won't* ever let her go. Not now I've finally found her.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

LAUREN

The reception is at a *very* fancy hotel in Back Bay, and Andie is gawking at it all when I stop to hug her.

“You’re a long way from Dot now, girl,” she sighs, holding me close. “And *West Roxbury*. You’ll forget you were ever a Townie.”

“That’s unlikely,” I snort at her, jerking my head to the bridal table where Fiona and Mellie are giggling together. “The blonde is from Roxbury, and the brunette is from Southie.”

Andie glances over at them in surprise, laughing as she eyes the two of them.

“Well, they’d better keep you grounded. I’d be devastated if you forgot all about me.”

I roll my eyes at her. Andie understood my reasons for not asking her to be a bridesmaid. If anything, she looked relieved.

“We’ve been through thick and thin, girl. You can’t get rid of me that easily. Where’s Hamish?”

Something flashes in Andie’s eyes as she shrugs. “Gone. Done.”

She waves her hand dismissively, but I hear the thread of pain in her voice, the one she’s trying so hard to hide, and hug her close again.

“I’m so sorry, girl,” I murmur into her ear.

“I’m better off without him. It’s just a pity I’m now homeless and jobless.”

“Where are you staying? We have space. Stay with us!”

I grab her hands, but she’s already shaking her head. “I’m fine, Low. Really, I am. I’m sofa surfing and applying for every job I can find. But I don’t want charity. Though, keep an ear to the ground for me? If you hear of a job going, I’m the girl for it. Seriously.” She grabs my hand and holds my gaze. “I’ll do *anything*.”

I nod, starting to promise I’ll keep my ears open when Paddy comes to find me.

“Dance with me, *mo chroí*,” he murmurs, his lips sliding along my ear as I shiver.

Andie smiles and melts into the crowd as Paddy pulls me into his arms on the dance floor. Seamus and Tiggy are already dancing, and Connor has his tongue down some woman’s throat in the corner of the room.

Liam is in another corner, some woman sitting on his lap, with his hand up her skirt. Lovely. Niall is seated at the otherwise empty bridal table with Mellie, crowding her with his legs, his arm resting along the back of her chair, glaring at any other man who happens to look in Mellie’s direction.

She is tracing patterns on his forearm where it rests on the table in front of her. I can’t imagine being comfortable with touching the Reaper. Mellie is so brave.

“Let’s get out of here, *mo chroí*,” Paddy whispers, tearing my attention away from where Niall is now nibbling Mellie’s

earlobe. “I want to crawl under that skirt, and I’m losing my patience.”

Um. Yes, *please*.

“Let’s go!” I whisper backer eagerly. Paddy’s pupils dilate, his fingers tightening on mine as he nods sharply to Seamus on the dancefloor and Sean Fitzpatrick, sitting at a table with a glass of whiskey in his hand.

“Come on, lass.” Paddy pulls me out of the room, ignoring the cheers and catcalls.

As we leave the ballroom, my eyes widen with shock.

“Fucking finally,” Paddy mutters, catching my eye and hustling me with a grin away from where Ronan and Fiona are glued together in a small alcove, kissing passionately while Ronan presses her against the wall with his body.



PADDY

The second I have Lauren through the door to our suite, I strip off my suit jacket and tie. Leading her to an easy chair, I sit her down, dropping to my knees in front of her, slowly lifting her skirt. I’ve been waiting for this moment since she walked into that church. It was fucking worth the wait.

“Jesus fuck,” I mutter, my eyes widening, my mouth suddenly drier than the Sahara Desert at the sight greeting me.

Lauren is wearing ivory lingerie to match her dress, all lacy and see-through. There’s a garter belt, and I don’t know where to look or put my lips first.

She smirks down at me, hunger in her eyes. I’m feeling that same hunger right now. I grin widely at her, probably looking for all the world like a lad on Christmas morning. I can’t wait for a second longer. Ducking under her skirt, I let the heavy material fall over my head, covering me.

Sliding my hands up her legs, I kiss every bit of exposed flesh I can, teasing her with my tongue and teeth, working my way up to my goal. Reaching her tiny lace panties, I snap them off, and through all the material I’m covered in, I hear her moan.

Parting her folds, I slide my tongue through them, finding her clit and rolling it between my teeth, her legs jerking on either side of my ears. Fuck. My wife tastes so sweet.

I work her clit over with my tongue and teeth, sliding two fingers inside and finger fucking her furiously until she screams out my name, coming on my mouth and fingers. That was satisfyingly quick. Smirking smugly, I duck out from underneath her skirt.

“My turn, lass,” I murmur huskily, straightening and unzipping my pants as she leans forward eagerly.

Taking my dick out of my trousers, Lauren pumps it slowly, wrapping her lips around it, swallowing it down until the

entire thing has disappeared down her throat. Jesus fuck, this will never get old.

I let her set the pace, fucking enjoying myself until the sneaky lass reaches into my trousers, raking her fingernails over my balls. My control snaps, and I grab her conveniently gathered hair, fucking her mouth as she moans around me, the humming vibrations pushing me over the edge faster than I would have liked. I can't complain.

“Jaysus feck, *lass*,” I groan, coming hard, blinking to chase away the stars bursting before my eyes.

Sitting back on the easy chair, Lauren smirks smugly up at me. This is the best day of my life. I drop back to my knees, tugging her out of the chair and against me on the floor, burying my face in her hair. All the shit that has happened until now has been worth it for this moment.

“I’m so glad ye came and found me, *lass*,” I whisper. Lauren snuggles closer, butting her head underneath my chin as she kneels in front of me, and I inhale in her vanilla scent. “Ye coming to that fight is the best thing that’s ever happened in my life.”

“Mine too,” she whispers into the hollow of my throat, pressing a kiss there. As I groan, the minx darts out her tongue and licks me.

“D’ye have a matching bra on, *lass*?” I murmur, fucking hard again. I will never be able to get enough of my wife.

Instead of answering, Lauren pushes away from me, standing and sauntering into the bedroom. As she reaches the doorway, she turns and holds my gaze with a giggle.

“You’ll just have to come and find out.” She holds up a finger, beckoning to me. I’ve never moved so fucking fast in my life.

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Epilogue

PADDY

Sean is seated at his desk when Seamus and I walk into the room. Connor is already here, standing against the wall to the side of the study, his hands in his pockets as he stares at the ground in front of him.

“You all right, Lucky?” I call to him. His eyes flicker up but drop straight back to the ground without acknowledging me further. That’s weird. Nothing phases Lucky.

My eyes are still glued to him as I sink into the waiting chair. My attention is only pulled away when Sean speaks.

“My congratulations again on the wedding, Paddy.”

I nod to him, Seamus casting a curious look over Connor, who doesn’t look up again.

“It was a grand occasion,” Sean continues.

“And to be sure it was,” I agree, unable to keep the grin off my face at the thought of Lauren being bound to me forever.

“Ye’ll be glad to have the house to yerselves at last, now the issue with the Italians is in the past.” Sean’s eyes flicker to Connor, still staring at the floor, his hands in his suit pockets.

“Lauren is excited about the prospect of leaving the house to go to the store,” I admit, casting my eyes over to Connor’s statue-like form. “And I’m sure Connor will be happy to be

heading home. There's nothing like his own bed to tickle a man's fancy."

"Aye, that's true." Sean nods, turning his eyes to Connor again. "Of course, Connor might not be heading back home."

Connor shifts uneasily as Seamus and I look over, our faces twin masks of surprise.

"Are you taking a vacation, Lucky?" Seamus drawls. There is a dark edge to his voice. Fitzzy doesn't like surprises, especially when it comes to his family or his crew. And Connor is lucky enough to be both.

"Mammy's moving back to Dublin," Connor sighs, his eyes lifting to meet Seamus's, right as Seamus does a double-take.

"Is she now?" he asks, his eyes narrowing on Connor's face. Connor nods, returning his eyes to the floor again as Sean picks up the story.

"Siobhan says she's done. She wants to go home and live out the rest of her days as a lady of leisure in Dublin. No more crime, no more mafia."

Jesus fuck. That's a bombshell. My eyes find Connor's face again. He looks fucking exhausted. I wonder how often he's attempted to talk her out of this decision before it's come to a head.

"It seems a sudden decision," I note. Seamus growls, nodding in agreement.

Siobhan Fitzpatrick knew the life she was marrying into when she wed Sean's brother. She knew the life she was committing to when she relocated to America with Sean and his family after Lachlan Fitzpatrick died.

She knows the life she's living now, keeping her son's house while he's out doing mafia business. So why is she suddenly so leery. If she wanted to live elsewhere in Boston, Connor wouldn't stop her. She only keeps his house because she wants to, and he has enough sense of familial responsibility to allow it.

"It was the collateral," Connor says to no one in particular, rubbing his tired eyes. Sean sighs, shaking his head sadly.

"Siobhan says she draws the line at holding children hostage. Now they're back with their Pa; she's done. I've agreed to pay her way back and finance a monthly amount."

"That's very generous of you, Pa," Seamus nods. "Connor's sure to be grateful."

"Connor's not said whether he's leaving too," Sean replies coolly, and both our heads snap around to look at him again. Why the fuck would Connor go back to Ireland with her? His place is here. He's never so much as voiced a desire to leave.

"Siobhan wants him with her. Says his place is with his mammy, to care for her in her twilight years."

"Does she now?" Seamus's voice is cold, and I hold my tongue. This is a family matter. It's not my place to get involved.

"And what say ye, Connor?" Seamus' voice lilts, betraying just how angry he is right now. Connor sighs, rolling his eyes as he locks them with Seamus's.

"I say I'm loyal to ye, Fitzzy," he says evenly. "I pledged my life to ye, and I meant it. I'm not going anywhere. I'm surprised ye even have to ask."

“Jaysus feck, thank Christ for that,” Seamus mutters. Connor nods, dropping his gaze back to the carpet again.

“I just have to tell me mammy.”

I don’t envy him that responsibility. Siobhan Fitzpatrick has been a mafia wife for a long time. The woman knows her way around a pistol. Connor better watch himself.

Sean looks like the cat that got the cream, turning to his nephew. “Ye’re a good lad, Connor. Sure, and I’m proud of you, and so will yer mammy be. She’ll come round eventually.” He glares at Connor. “But ye tell her that she needs to watch her mouth, no matter how upset with yer decision she is. The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

“The road to hell is paved with the bones of lads who broke their mammy’s hearts,” Connor mutters low under his breath as he trails Seamus and me out of the house.



LAUREN

Paddy is quiet as we eat dinner, lost in thought. Honestly, this isn’t how I thought our first night truly alone in our home would be, especially only a week after our wedding.

“Is everything all right, Paddy?”

He looks up from his meatloaf, blinking in surprise. “It’s Connor’s mammy. She’s moving back to Ireland, done with the lot of us.”

I feel a pang in my chest. After all the time we’ve spent together, Connor is one of my closest friends in this life. Even if his mission in life is to rile up my husband. My husband – I smile privately to myself – I like the sound of that.

“Connor’s staying,” Paddy continues, like he can read my mind. “But the lad’s going to be a bit lost. He’s almost thirty, and he’s never done laundry a day in his life.”

Of course that’s what Paddy would be worried about. *Men.*

“There are services you can hire to do your laundry, Paddy.”

He seems surprised to hear it. “Well, he won’t be able to clean that huge house all on his own. The lad doesn’t know which end of a broom to hold.”

“So he’ll contract a cleaning service.” I wave my hand dismissively because I’m pretty sure I know where Paddy is going with this, and it is out of the question.

“And the lad can’t cook.” He looks genuinely concerned now. “He’ll fucking starve.”

I shrug. “He can order takeaway.”

“For breakfast?” Paddy seems doubtful now.

“He can hire a cook,” I huff, but Paddy shakes his head.

“That’s a lot of services to be hiring. The lad’s not made of money.”

“He’s not coming back to live with us, Paddy!” I warn him as he opens his mouth to argue with me.

“But his mammy’s only leaving because she didn’t like having to keep the kiddies with her. She only had them there because of us. Because of the Italians.”

Holy crap. It’s guilt. Paddy is going to insist on saddling us with a roommate because he feels guilty. Not on my watch, mister!

“What’re ye doing?” he asks, his delicious brogue entering his voice as his pupils dilate while he watches me unbutton my top.

“I’m feeling a bit warm,” I murmur, sliding my shirt off my shoulders and dropping it onto the floor.

I *accidentally* spill a drop onto my jeans reaching for my red wine.

“Oops! How clumsy!” I spring up, unbuttoning my jeans and sliding them off.

Paddy’s heated eyes follow them the whole way down, drinking in the sight of my bare legs, trailing their way up over my lacy panties and matching bra. I can feel it like he’s touching me.

His eyes lock on mine, and heat pools between my thighs at the hungry look in his eye.

“I know what ye’re doing, lass.”

Yeah, and I think it’s working. I shrug, trying to look cool and unaffected as I strut over to the sink, shaking my ass as I go.

“I’m only soaking my jeans so the red wine doesn’t stain,” I say innocently, filling the sink up and dropping them in.

“Come here, lass.”

I shiver at the command in his tone, turning and sauntering over to him. Paddy has pushed away from the table, unzipping his jeans as he reaches out for me with his other hand.

“I want ye naked.”

I want that too. I quickly strip off my bra, stepping out of my panties and coming to a halt in front of him, naked as the day I was born, while he is fully clothed, with just his jeans open.

Reaching for me, Paddy picks me up by the waist and drops me on his dick, groaning as I gasp and grip his shoulders tightly. I roll my hips, enjoying the undone look on his gorgeous face as he growls with pleasure.

“We wouldn’t be able to do this if Connor lived here,” I breathe. His eyes snap to mine. He’s thinking. I can see it in his eyes.

Paddy cups my jaw, brushing his thumb along my lower lip. I stare deep into his eyes as I bite down gently on the pad of his thumb. I know he likes that.

“Feck. Ye’re so sexy, *mo chroí*,” he groans, tugging his thumb out of my teeth and crushing his lips against mine, devouring my mouth as he manipulates my hips to roll against him.

“And if Connor lived here,” I breathe against his lips, “I’d have to wear clothes. *All. The. Time.*”

The sound he makes is somewhere between a groan and a growl, his eyes flying open to lock with mine. I roll my hips again.

“I want you to be able to fuck me whenever the feeling strikes.” I pout, and his eyes widen in surprise as he comes with a grunt.

“Ye win, *mo chroí*,” he breathes as he wraps his arms around me, anchoring me against his chest and nuzzling his face into my hair. “We won’t ask Connor to come live with us.”

Good. But, I mean, I don’t want him actually to *starve*. I have an idea.

I lift my head, locking my eyes with Paddy’s. “I might have a solution to his dilemma.”

He strokes his fingertips along my cheekbone. “What’s that then, lass?”

“My neighbor, Andie. She’s just lost her job, and her boyfriend’s kicked her out. She’s couch surfing at the moment, but she’d jump at a live-in job. She can cook *and* do laundry. And,” I eye him carefully, “she can keep her mouth shut.”

Paddy watches me for a beat, nodding thoughtfully.

“Ye mention it to her then, lass. We’ll take it to Connor if she’s happy with the idea.”

I smile at him, frowning as he trails his fingertips back and forth over my nose, smiling like an idiot.

“What are you doing?”

Paddy's eyes flicker to mine, dropping back to my nose to watch his moving hand.

“Touching yer freckles.”

“Why?”

“Because I love ye, and they're part of ye,” he breathes.

Huh. Maybe there's hope for him in the greeting card business after all. I tug him to me, moaning as his tongue tangles with mine.

“I love you too, Paddy,” I whisper. He smirks against my mouth.

“Shut up and kiss me, lass,” he mutters, deepening the kiss for a moment before he speaks again. “Feck, I love ye, *mo chroí*.”

THE END.

Irish Phrases:

My heart = *mo chroí* (Muh khree)

Sweetheart/beloved = *leannán* (lan-awn)

My darling = *a mhuirnín* (Ah woor-neen)

My own true love = *mo mhuirnín dilis* (Muh woor-neen deelish)

My heart's beloved = *a ghrá mo chroí* (Ah ghraw muh khree)

Pulse of my heart = *a chuisle mo chroí* (Ah khwish-leh muh khree)

Cheers = *Sliánte* (slawn-che)

Fun/news/gossip/entertainment = *Craic* (krak)

I love you, my beloved wife = *Is breá liom tú, mo bhean chéile* (Iss braw lum too, muh vyan khay-leh)

I love you = *Is breá liom tú* (Iss braw lum too)

You are my whole life = *Is tú mo shaol ar fad* (Iss too muh he-um er fard)

My four-leaf clover = *seamair no cheithre duilleog* (sham-widge nu hair-da dill-log)

I'll never let you go = *Ní ligfidh mé go deo thú* (Knee li-key may guh-jaw who)

You are my everything = *Is tú mo gah rud* (Iss too muh gar rud)

Health to the men, and may the women live forever! = *Sláinte chuig na fir, agus go mairfidh na mná go deo.* (slawn-cha kwig)

nah fur, og-us guh mar-fig nah mnaw guh joe)

My seven blessings on you! = *Mo sheacht mbeannacht ort!*
(Muh shocked bannocked urt!)

May you live long! = *Go maire tú!* (Guh morra too!)

May you live to be 100! = *Go dté tú an céad!* (Guh day too un
cay-ad!)

God's blessing on you = *Beannacht Dé leat!* (Bannocked day
lat!)

May your journey be successful = *Go n-éirí an bóthar leat!*
(Guh nye-ree un bow-her lat!)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing has always been a hobby for me, ever since I was little. But it wasn't until I took some time off from work to raise my daughter that I really had a little more time to set aside to properly focus on my passion and bring the very real people in my head alive on the page.

I find the best way for me to write is to immerse myself in a story, let my characters take me where they want to go, and hope for the best. When finishing a book, I always like to leave my characters at a point in their lives where I know that they are happy, in love, and hopefully, going to go off and live good lives without me looking over their shoulders. I hope that I have managed that!

When I'm not living in the world of my characters, I live in Brisbane, Australia, with my very understanding husband, our wonderful little girl and chilled out son, and our two energetic cats.

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Find out more about K.S. Ellis' latest releases at ksellis.com
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available here.

Chapter One

MELLIE

Oracle, in West Boston, doesn't look like a strip club. There's no neon sign with "X's" or the word "GIRLS" flashing anywhere. There are no scantily clad women out the front, luring patrons in. There are no pictures of scantily clad women in the windows.

It looks like any other bar, situated in a gorgeous historical stone building. It has an imposing façade in the daytime, and I imagine it must look quite spectacular at night when it's all lit up.

There is a nondescript, dark-colored sedan across the road with two men sitting in it. They're clearly cops. I'm not sure whether they are not bothering to hide the fact that they are staking the place out or if they don't care.

Ignoring the feeling of their eyes on me, I clutch my denim jacket closer to my chest as I hurry up the stairs and dart inside the club.

I pass a small coat check area, unmanned and empty since it is only one in the afternoon. Continuing through the silent hallway, I walk through an elaborately carved wooden doorframe into a largish bar area.

I haven't been into many strip clubs in my life – Dad would have had my head – but it's exactly how I imagined one would look.

There is a stage at the far end with a prominent pole for the strippers. An old-school wooden bar runs the length of one side of the room, and tables and red leather-clad booths are scattered around the space. There are no exterior windows, though the overhead lights are currently brightly lit. I can see a strobe light mounted on the ceiling, and the stage appears to have a serious lighting system.

Over near the bar, there's a shiny jukebox, and to the side of the stage, a DJ's booth. This is a pretty cool space. I'd totally come to a party here. The club isn't completely deserted. A sole male bartender stands watching me, stacking glasses.

He has a bushy red beard and matching bushy eyebrows and glances up when I enter, eyebrows raised.

“Are you lost, love?”

I relax at once as his broad Boston accent rings out. I don't *know*, but I don't imagine the Irish Mafia would have broad Boston accents. Would they? Wait. Do the mobsters in *Goodfellas* have New York accents? Oh god. What if he is an Irish mobster? Everyone in town knows they own this club, which explains those two cops out the front.

I'm here because the Irish run this place, but that's my business. And just because I know they run this place doesn't mean I'm ready to come face to face with one of them.

The bartender is still staring at me, looking condescendingly up and down my body. Shit. I should have dressed differently. I shuffle by strappy stiletto sandals and wish my dress was a little longer.

"No, I'm not lost." I square my shoulders, approaching the bar. "I'm here for a job."

His bushy red eyebrows rise as he sweeps his gaze over me. I definitely wish I wore a different skirt. This isn't the best start for a job interview in a strip club; hating how this guy's eyes linger on me.

I clutch my jacket tightly to my chest, fighting the urge to wrinkle my nose at this asshole. I might be here to try to get a job as a stripper, but I'm not about to give away the goods for free.

If he wants a look, he can pay me. Plus, I'm sure the person who has the final say in who gets hired wouldn't be stacking glasses in the middle of the day.

"If you want a job, you'll have to impress Seamus Fitzpatrick. He interviews all the girls. He's not in for a few more hours. You'll need to come back then."

I blink, telling myself that I'm not going to cry. I only just managed to get the nerve to stroll in here once. Leaving isn't an option. Not until I know I've got a job.

"That's okay." I flash him what I hope is a winning smile. "I'll wait."

He opens his mouth to say more but doesn't get the chance. I turn on my heels, striding across the room and planting my ass down on one of the red-leather booth seats, sliding along to the wall.

If they want me out of here, they can drag me kicking and screaming, but I won't make it easy for them. I need this job.



NIALL

“Please, Jesus, *please*.”

They always beg. Always. No matter how tough they act when they first land on my table, in the end, they always beg.

“Jaysus can't hear ye down here,” I tell him.

He shudders at the sound of my voice, his eyes wide with fear, tinged with pain.

“I have money,” he gurgles, causing my eyebrows to raise. Well, we've moved rather quickly from begging to bargaining. That has to be some record.

“I have money too,” I assure him, pausing as he screams in agony when I use the gardening shears to remove his pinky toe from his right foot.

“Why are you doing this?” he sobs as I move to his left foot, grabbing his pinky toe. Glancing over, I snip, waiting for the screams to die down before I reply.

“Because I’ve been told to.”

He doesn’t understand. I can see it in his eyes. How could he? In his world, if he doesn’t like what he’s told to do, he just walks away. Quits or raises his complaint with HR. But that’s not my world. You don’t walk away from the Irish Mafia. You stay, or you die. And if you stay, eventually, you’ll probably die.

What I do doesn’t bother me. It never has. Call it one part personality and three parts upbringing. It’s why Seamus picked me for the job. It’s how I got my rather unflattering nickname. I suppose it should bother me, being known as the Irish Reaper, but it doesn’t. I deal in death; my nickname probably should reflect that fact.

When I first picked up a knife for the Fitzpatricks, Seamus and Connor started calling me *dúlachán*. Sean Fitzpatrick dubbed me the Reaper. He thought it would be more intimidating in case the people strapped to my table didn’t know Irish mythology.

“You don’t have to, though.”

I stop what I’m doing, glancing down at him in surprise. He seems relieved that I have stopped and keeps talking as though it will delay or maybe even postpone the inevitable.

“No one can force you to torture and kill if you don’t want to. No one can force you to taint your soul in such a way....”

He’s getting into the swing of his sermon now. I wonder if he actually believes what he’s saying or if he likes the sound of his own voice? It’s probably a bit of both. It’s usually a bit of both with these sermonizing types.

“One day, you’ll have to face Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates, and he’ll ask you to look back on your life. And what are you going to say to explain all this?”

Gazing at him in fascination, I let him run on for a bit, finally digging the tip of the shears into his side, cutting him off midsentence as he pants with pain.

“I’ve no intention of getting as far as the Pearly Gates,” I smirk at him. “But since ye’re so fecking sure ye’ll get there, maybe ye can put in a good word for me?”

He doesn’t talk anymore after that. He’s too busy screaming.

Chapter Two

NIALL

Striding into the main bar, tugging on my fresh button-down shirt, the first thing I hear is arguing. There shouldn't be any arguing here in the middle of the afternoon. Frowning, I hurry my footsteps. Those fucking Vice cops better not have finally found the balls to wander in here.

“But if this Seamus is here, why can't I see him?” A melodic female voice is heated and raised.

“Because you walked in off the street and proceeded to sit here all afternoon when I told you to come back later to see him,” the head bartender, Daryl, replies, his voice also raised.

I step into the room, lingering by the door, my eyes fixed on the scene. None of the three people present observe my entry. They are all glaring at each other, standing near the bar.

The young woman has her back to me. A denim jacket over a very short dress, miles of tanned skin, and masses of thick, dark brown hair are all I can see from this angle. I like her voice. It's nice. I could fall asleep to a voice like hers.

“Shit, Daryl,” the younger bartender, Arthur, interjects. “She's here. Seamus is here. Just let her dance for him.”

“Yeah, Daryl,” the lass snipes, “let me dance for him. Who died and made you king of Oracle anyway?”

“Bitch, as far as you’re concerned, I’m King, Emperor, and God of Oracle,” Daryl snaps back at her.

I can’t stand liars, and that’s a fucking lie if ever I’ve heard one. I clear my throat, the three of them turning hurriedly to look at me.

Daryl looks scared, probably because he’s *nothing* when it comes to Oracle, and he won’t like that I heard his proclamation. Arthur looks faintly amused for the same reason, but I don’t give a flying fuck about either of those cunts. I’m focused on the lass, and there’s only one thought running on a loop through my brain as I look at her.

Blue eyes. Jesus fuck. How is it even possible for eyes to be that fucking blue?

“Ye’re here to see Seamus, lass?” I finally find my voice as she stares at me, her blue, blue eyes locked on mine.

“Yes.” She turns, flicking a glare in Daryl’s direction. “But it seems I have arbitrarily pissed off the wrong person, and now I can’t have a job here.”

What? Fuck that. She has to get a job here. I need to see more of those fucking eyes. Her working here is the best way to make that happen.

“I’ll take ye to see Seamus, lass.”

I wave at the door through to the back offices. After one final glare at Daryl, she walks in the direction I am gesturing. I turn, fixing my eyes on Daryl. As our eyes meet, his face pales.

I watch him for a beat longer until he looks like he’s about to piss himself. Turning, I stalk over to the blue-eyed reason

for my existence, holding the door and gesturing for her to walk through.

We walk silently down the polished wooden corridor, past the doors to the kitchenette, storerooms, and strippers' dressing room, until I halt in front of the unassuming door reading *Manager*.

The lass's eyes flicker over it, and she looks a little nervous. I pause for a moment, giving her a chance to throw back her shoulders, take a deep breath, and raise her chin. I like that.

Raising a hand, I hold her gaze, her blue eyes staring into mine, deep and fathomless, as I hammer on the door.

“Come in. It better be fucking important.”

Oh. It fucking is. I open the door, motioning for the lass to precede me into the room. Seamus glances up from whatever spreadsheet he's looking at on his desk, his eyes sparkling with interest when they land on my blue-eyed lass.

I'm loyal to Seamus and no one else, but that doesn't mean I won't fight him on this. He has a reputation as a ladies' man, and he's going nowhere near my blue-eyed lass. He'd tear her apart and discard her like a used condom.

“What can I help you with?” he asks her, his eyes roaming over her body. Sure, and it's a fine body, but he needs to keep his eyes to himself. I need to make my stance clear without spooking her. If I scare her away, she'll never apply for a job here.

“The lass is here for a job interview,” I growl. “Not to be leered at by the likes of ye.”

Seamus's eyes dance over me at my words, and he nods to me. The lass doesn't even notice, but I do. Seamus's nod tells me that he understands the lass is mine and off-limits. He'll keep his eyes on her face and only her face in the fucking future. Sometimes being the Reaper has its benefits.

"You're here for a job?" Seamus asks, turning his eyes back to her face. The lass nods, darting a glance at me, turning back to him.

"Yes." She lifts her jaw and looks him in the eye. Brave lass. "I know how to work a pole."

Fuck that. Not fucking happening. I have no intention of letting any other man see what's underneath her clothes. Seamus's eyes flicker to me for the briefest moment, correctly reading my disapproval of the lass's plan.

Continuing their progress, Seamus's gaze lands on the well-stocked bar he keeps in here.

"Before you dance for us, perhaps you can fetch us some whiskey," he sighs, waving his hand at the numerous bottles of liquor lined up on the cabinet over by the wall. The lass won't be dancing for anyone, but she can bring him a drink before she's told so.

The lass's eyes follow his, and she pauses for a moment without moving.

"Do you want the blended or the single malt?"

Seamus leans forward in his seat with interest. "Surprise me."

The lass takes a step toward the bar, hesitating and pursing her lips.

“Neat or on the rocks?”

“Neat.”

Stepping up to the bar, she prepares him a glass of neat single malt, setting it on the large hardwood desk in front of Seamus and turning those piercing eyes on me.

“And you?”

While studying the lass, I’ve noticed she has pretty pink, plump lips in addition to her gloriously blue eyes. Perfect. She’s perfect. And I need her to be mine.

“Same.” I shrug, watching as she quickly prepares a glass, handing it to me.

My fingers brush hers when she passes me the glass, and after she steps away, I can still feel the heat of her fingers as she moves into the empty space between Seamus’s desk and the door, pulling out her phone.

“I brought some music. Shall I play it on my phone? There’s no pole here, but I can maybe do a lap dance?”

I choke on my whiskey. That’s not fucking happening.

Seamus rushes to correct her. “There’s no need. We’ve no need for any new strippers at the moment.”

She opens her pretty mouth to argue but closes it again at the foreboding look on Seamus’s face. His tone is firm, and her face falls.

“But I didn’t even get to audition,” she whispers. Seamus’s eyes flicker over to me, and I tilt my head in her direction.

“We’ve an opening for a bartender if ye’re interested.”

Both the lass and Seamus turn to me, eyes wide with surprise.

“Indeed,” Seamus murmurs, trying to hide a smirk, while the lass gazes at me, relieved. Thank fuck for that.

“A... bartender?” she asks, sounding uncertain.

“Aye. We’ve recently decided to let Daryl go from his position and promote Arthur to head bartender, so we need another bartender.”

Seamus is staring at me like I’ve grown an extra head, but he cops on quickly.

“Exactly so, lass. You seem to know your way around a whiskey bottle. We’d be happy to offer you a trial.”

The lass’s eyes dart between Seamus and me, a beaming smile crossing her lips like the sun rose on her face.

“Thank you for this opportunity! I won’t let you down. I can start immediately.”

Seamus nods, done with this conversation. I drain my drink, setting the empty glass on the wooden desk, gesturing to the door.

“I’ll walk ye out, lass.”

I hold the door open for her, and Seamus calls out after us.

“We’ll need you to start tonight. Seven o’clock. And what’s your name?”

“Amelia Rogan.” She stops, turning to look at him as she speaks. “But I go by Mellie.”

Mellie. It suits her. Light and bubbly. Seamus nods, waving his hand dismissively.

“Seven o’clock, Mellie. And Niall,” his eyes meet mine as I glance at him, my eyebrow raised, “send Arthur and Daryl in.”

I nod. Daryl is lucky he’s only getting fired after the way he spoke to a stranger about his position here at the club.

If Seamus had heard his proclamation, he might have ended up downstairs strapped to my table.



MELLIE

The unmarked dark sedan is still out of the front of the club, though the two men inside look different. I swear one was a blonde earlier today.

There’s a gorgeous woman at the coat check when I walk in.

“Coat?” she asks, her bright red lips complementing her curled, jet-black hair.

“Oh. I’m starting work here tonight as a bartender. Do I leave my coat with you?”

Her coal-black eyes dip to take in my dark skinny jeans and black button-down shirt. It’s what Arthur and Daryl were wearing – or as close as I had – and I wanted to fit in.

“No. Go through. The strippers have lockers in their dressing room. Everyone else manages. Good luck.”

Effectively dismissed, I turn and walk through the elaborate archway. The overhead lights are off, and a stripper is shaking her ass on the stage, moving to the pole and doing a seriously talented swinging move. There was no way I could have managed something like that in those heels. Good for her.

“You lost?”

Jumping, I spin and find myself face to face with a petite blonde, stacked like all get out, wearing little more than a thong and stiletto heels.

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?” I call over the song. Her eyes trail over my outfit, her eyebrows raising.

“Because you look like you’ll jump out of your skin if someone says boo to you?”

“I’m tougher than I look,” I sniff, squaring my shoulders. The blonde stripper grins at me, sweeping her hair over her shoulder.

“Good for you. If you’re not lost, where are you supposed to be?”

“I’m supposed to be starting as a bartender.”

Her eyes dart over me again, an inscrutable look there.

“You’ll want Arthur. He’s the new head bartender.”

My head swivels as I look around the room, filling up with patrons. I don’t see either Arthur or Daryl here.

“He’s in the VIP room, this way.”

My new guide jerks her head, leading me back through the hallway the hot blonde guy, Niall, from earlier today, took me through.

We step into the smaller bar, which is also no longer brightly lit. This one is cozy and sultry. I love it. Arthur is standing at the bar and jerks his head at me when we walk in.

“Good luck, girl.” My blonde stripper smirks as she moves to the door through to the back area.

“Thanks. I’m Mellie.”

“Fiona.”

She disappears after telling me her name. Fiona. I’ll remember that.

“Oh, good. You’re here.” Arthur flaps a hand at me. “Stick your pocketbook and coat under there.”

I shove them into the small space under the bar he pointed to, straightening and turning to the glasses he has laid out.

“Have you ever bartended before?”

“Not officially.”

He hesitates, sighing and shaking his head. “That’s Seamus Fitzpatrick’s problem. Not mine.”

“I don’t want to be a problem.”

“Then just don’t fuck it up, gorgeous.”

“So, what do I do?”

Arthur eyes me carefully, pursing his lips together. “You listen. You take everything in. You do exactly what I tell you, and you don’t fucking anything up tonight.”

“I can do that.”

Smirking, he proceeds to run me through a wicked fast training session. I learn the till, the schedules, which drinks to push, and he walks away.

“Uh, where are you going?”

“To the main bar. You’re the new VIP bartender. Seamus Fitzpatrick’s orders.”

“What... on my own?”

“You caught someone’s eye, girl. Good luck!”

Wait. No. I can’t do this. The bar here in the VIP room is smaller than out in the main area, where I saw at least two other bartenders working.

Right when I’m about to start hyperventilating, a solid body drops into one of the barstools, drawing my attention. The golden gorgeousness of my blonde Irishman is seated before me in all his glory. His eyes land on me, burning into my face.

A blush spreads across my cheeks as I carefully pour him the same whiskey I did this afternoon. When I place the glass on the bar in front of him, and he takes it, our fingers brush, making me feel like flames are licking over my face.

I’m wicked sure I owe getting this job to him. I was so confident about getting work as a stripper, but since they aren’t hiring new strippers, I wouldn’t have even made it through the Manager’s door without his interceding with Daryl.

Sipping his drink, he remains seated at the bar, watching me. I wonder if he’s in charge of assessing me for my review period.

I smile at him, but he doesn't smile back, watching me with a serious expression in his emerald green eyes. I'm not entirely sure what it is about him, but I can feel his eyes in my panties when he watches me.

By the end of my shift, I'm convinced that women can get blue balls because, having experienced the heat of his gaze all night, I need him to throw me down and fuck me. Wicked hard.

"Great job tonight." Arthur smiles at me, handing me a bottle of water after I finish wiping down the bar. "You'll need to come in at two tomorrow afternoon, and we'll run through stocking the bar and doing inventory."

I still have a job tomorrow. Thank goodness for that!

"Thanks." I beam at him. Today couldn't have worked out better. A job right where I want one. I'm untouchable.

"I'll walk ye out," my gorgeous Irishman rumbles, a fluttering in my panties. Um. Yes, please. I flash him an appreciative smile, trailing him out to the parking lot.

"I wanted to say thanks."

He looks at me in surprise, reaching over and helping me into my coat, his hands smoothing the thick fabric at my shoulders. Oh god. More of that, please.

"Thanks for what, lass?"

Uh, everything?

"You know...because I'm pretty sure I only have this job because of you, so...thanks."

He nods, lifting his hands off my shoulders and looking at the small number of parked cars in the staff-only parking lot.

“Which one is yers?” He gestures at the vehicles. I wish I had a car, but that’s a little out of my price range. Plus, there’s terrible parking near my apartment.

“I got the bus.” I shrug, pointing a finger at the bus stop across the road. “Have a good night.”

Throwing a smile over my shoulder, I glance at the road, but no cars are coming – it’s late, I wouldn’t expect it to be busy – and step off the curb.

His hand shoots out, grasping my upper arm and jerking me back to him. Shit. My breath hitches at the contact, especially since he’s been driving me crazy all night with his eyes.

He notices my change in breathing, his emerald eyes darkening to jade as his eyes dip to my lips for the briefest moment.

“I’ll give ye a lift home, lass,” he rumbles. I shiver at the undercurrent of authority in his voice. “Ye’ll not be getting the bus at this time of night. Where d’ye live?”

“Southie.”

He doesn’t even blink, nodding and steering me into the staff parking lot to a dark SUV. He hits a key in his pocket, and the lights flash as it unlocks. I can’t believe he’s going to drive me to Southie. It’s so far.

Before I can ask him if he’s sure, he holds the passenger door open for me. Blushing, I grasp the door handle to climb in, swallowing a needy gasp as his fingers close around my elbow, helping me inside.

He waits until I clip the belt before he closes the door. It's silent in the SUV as my eyes track his movement around the hood and watch him climb in.

“Where in Southie, lass?”

I'm sure I'm not supposed to give out my address to random men – Dad's voice is quietly fluttering somewhere in the back of my mind – but it's easy to ignore as I tell him what he wants to know.

Nodding, he pulls out of the parking lot, his eyes sweeping over the unmarked dark sedan. He totally knows they're cops, but he ignores them, heading for Southie while I toy with the zipper of my pocketbook.

During the trip to my apartment, the car is silent, making the intense sexual tension ramp up to an eleven. Finally, we park at the curb in the loading zone in front of my building. He leans closer to me as he peers through my window at the front door, six yards away.

I open my mouth to thank him for the lift when he slides out of the SUV, rounding the hood and opening my door. My cheeks heat up. How gentlemanly. His fingers close around my elbow as he helps me climb down. Thankfully, I don't make any wicked embarrassing noises this time, though my cheeks flame.

I miss the feeling of his hand on my elbow immediately as he releases it, walking me right to the door of my building. As we mount the small brick stoop, he hesitates.

“Have a good night, lass. I'll see ye tomorrow.”

Wait? That's all? Disappointment courses through me as he nods, turning back to his vehicle.

"Thanks for the lift. Hey!" I call after him, my hand resting on the door handle. He turns back to me with surprise in his eyes. "What's your name?"

"Niall," he replies, his eyes burning into mine. "Niall Byrne."

It suits him. "Thanks, Niall."

But he doesn't hear my words, already moving back to his SUV. I watch him climb in, but he doesn't drive off. The window where I had been sitting lowers.

"Inside, lass," he calls through the window. Wow. Very much a gentleman. Grinning, I raise a hand to wave to him. He doesn't respond, staring at me through the window until I wrench the door open, stepping inside.

The door closes behind me, and through the glass top half, I watch his window raise, and the SUV pulls away from the curb, the taillights visible as the dark vehicle melts into the night.

What a night. Dashing up the stairs, I let myself into my crappy apartment, dropping my bag on the small, square kitchen table. Opening the creaky fridge, I grab a soda, flipping off the lights as I move down the narrow hallway and drop onto the springless sofa, popping the top off the bottle.

I don't bother to turn on the TV. I curl my feet below me, grabbing a throw pillow and hugging it to my chest as I sip the icy, fizzy drink.

My eyes flutter closed, my head tipping and resting on the back of the sofa. A small smile flutters across my lips. Niall Byrne. My savior.

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