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Destructive TRUTHS

shauna mairéad

DESTRUCTIVE TRUTHS

SHAUNA MAIRÉAD

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DEDICATION

For all the

would've,

should've,

could've beens.

Life is a dick, but you still gotta ride it.

CONTENTS

Author Note

1. Saoirse
2. Saoirse
3. Liam
4. Saoirse
5. Saoirse
6. Rohan
7. Liam
8. Rohan
9. Saoirse
10. Saoirse
11. Liam
12. Saoirse
13. Saoirse
14. Liam
15. Saoirse
16. Liam
17. Rohan
18. Saoirse
19. Liam
20. Saoirse
21. Saoirse
22. Rohan
23. Liam
24. Rohan
25. Saoirse
26. Rohan
27. Liam
28. Saoirse
29. Saoirse
30. Rohan

31. [Saoirse](#)

32. [Saoirse](#)

33. [Saoirse](#)

34. [Liam](#)

35. [Rohan](#)

36. [Saoirse](#)

[MORE BY SHAUNA](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

AUTHOR NOTE

*NOTE: Shauna Mairéad (MUR-AID) writes in **British English**. Therefore, spelling and grammar may differ from American English. (Eg: added u, and extra l's)*

Pronunciation chart:

Rohan (ROW-EN)

Saoirse (SIR-SHA)

Éanna (Ay-NA)

Beibhinn (BEVAN)

Fiadh (FIA)

Áodhan (AI-DON)

Donnacha (DONE-NA-KA)

Lorcan (LOR-CAN)

Aoibhean (AV-EEN)

[Destructive Truths playlist \(available on Spotify\)](#)

*Destructive Truths is book two in the **Kings of Killybegs** trilogy and **MUST** be read second.*

This is a dark romance, mature new adult (17+), and contains dubious situations that some readers might find offensive.

This book is part of a trilogy and is **NOT** standalone, so expect a cliffhanger ending.

Full list of **TRIGGERS** can be found here: [Shauna Mairéad Links](#)

ONE

SAOIRSE

WHO KNEW DROWNING COULD FEEL *SO MUCH* LIKE LOVE? IT'S as if you are gasping for air while choking on the scorching breath searing your lungs. It's a serrated knife thrust into the centre of your chest, slicing your vulnerability wide open.

Then comes the wave, dragging you under, and the further you sink, the more it's bound to kill you.

I always thought that in my last moment my entire existence would flash before my eyes in a collection of memories and a lifetime of achievements, but my reality is far bleaker.

There is no slideshow of laughter and love, no Christmas mornings or past birthday parties. Instead, death greets me with crippling anxiety, sheer disappointment, and a shitload of dreams I will never fulfil.

I may have been born to become a queen, but as I choke on my final breath, the conclusion crashes through me: *I'll leave this world nothing more than a broken, naïve girl.*

The hands around my neck force me under, stealing the last ounce of life coursing through my veins. Finally, my flailing limbs give up the fight as the blurry figure fades from view. I'm on the edge of death, floating through a cloud of flower petals, disappearing into the darkness. As I drift

through the numbness, my mother's voice breaks through, providing me strength and begging me to fight harder. *Never feed your fears, Saoirse. Because if you do, they will eat you alive.*

She's right. This cannot be my final countdown. I refuse to leave this world marred by men who crave power—power that is rightfully mine.

Using every molecule of strength I have left, I force my body to push back. My fingers clasp Rohan's wrist while I straighten my spine and rear forward, thrusting against his unwavering grasp. My legs kick out as I fight to gain some traction.

"Stay still, you fucking cunt."

My brow tightens, creasing the lines around my closed eyes. Something about his tone irks me. It's different from the velvety bravado I'm used to—a deeper brogue littered with hatred and oozing distaste. Rohan's wild lilt once licked my skin with lust-filled desire. But now there is nothing but disdain, and it shutters through me, chilling me to the core.

The water makes it harder for him to keep his grip firm. My lengthy nails bite into his flesh, tearing at his arms as I struggle to wade through the shallow depths. Yet, I don't give up, refusing to go down without a fight.

"Fuck," he curses when I break the skin. "You'll pay for that, bitch."

My feet become my anchor, and I push against the aged brass tub and thrust my hips upward, momentarily knocking him off-kilter. It's not enough to free myself from his hold, but my head bursts through the water's surface, and I waste no time drawing a breath through my nose.

Reaching out, I grip the side of the bath. He pushes against me, but my arms hold me steady and unmoving. My eyes seek his, and once I latch on to his gaze, a flicker of uncertainty overwhelms me, and the breath I stole catches in the base of my throat.

I thought I knew those eyes—the ones that held me and caressed my skin with unspoken words. The same fucking eyes that promised to keep me safe, to protect me from the demons hiding in the shadows. Could I be wrong? Sure, the same hue of green with countless fiery specks of autumn gold shine back at me. But the softness, the glimmer of lust, the flicker of longing, the sparkle of mischief—all the things that made me a fool for the man behind the mask—are missing.

These eyes are different, darker, lifeless, and void of emotion. Realisation crashes in. This is not the same person who whispered promises and offered truths.

“Donnacha,” I croak. It seems the devil came to finish what he started. *Not to-fucking-day, arsehole.*

“In the flesh.” Malice coats his words as he hisses his reply, “Did you really think I’d let you live after last night?” His lips tilt into a sneer. “My brother should have killed me when he had the chance, sweetheart.” The slimy *sweetheart* rolls off his tongue and pierces my exterior, making my insides icy with hate. Nevertheless, I refuse to let this bastard win.

“How do you think he’ll feel when I drop your used corpse on his doorstep? With your pussy thoroughly fucked and dripping with my cum,” Donnacha continues, taunting me with his poisonous words.

Fury boils beneath my skin, igniting something untameable. There isn’t a chance in hell I’m letting this fucker

play out his sick, twisted fantasies. I'll kill him first or die trying.

From the corner of my eye, I spy a way out of this mess—a large white-and-blue china vase. With one hand around Donnacha's wrist, I stretch my free arm towards the priceless vase on the windowsill next to the bath. My fingertips barely graze the old antique, but I keep trying.

Donnacha dunks me again, but before I plunge beneath the water, I draw in as much air as possible and then use the backward momentum to shift to the right. With my new plan in place, the fight inside me bursts free, propelling me forward. This time I hurry. Reaching out, I grasp the neck of the vase and haul it towards his head. The porcelain shatters against his temple with a sharp crack causing Donnacha to weave. Then, as if instinctual, he releases my throat, and his hand rushes towards his head as he roars out, "Fucking cunt."

There's no time to hesitate. I lunge from the bath, splashing water everywhere as I dart towards the door. My shoulders rise and fall as my ragged breath dances to the tune of my erratic heart. Every inhale cuts into my lungs with the air's sharp bite, but I don't stop. Croaking out another round of breathless coughs, I burst through the open en suite door into the main bedroom.

My eyes land on the gun Rohan gave me earlier, sitting atop the bedside locker. I rush towards the edge of the bed, knowing it's my only hope of leaving this room alive. I'm almost there when fingers grasp my dripping-wet locks and wrench me backwards. A radiating sting spreads across my scalp, causing my eyes to water from the piercing pain as a scream expels past my lips.

“Not so fucking fast, you little cunt. Did you really think that pathetic attempt would work?” Unnerving humour laces his voice. “You’re not getting away this time.”

“Help!” I scream, but it’s pointless. We are miles away from anywhere. The castle on the hill is no longer my safe haven. It’s a hollow hell, far from any saviour.

“Nobody is coming, sweetheart. But by all means, keep screaming.” He pulls me close, wrapping his free hand around my waist, and moulding my bare back against his chest. “I like the sound of your fear.” Then, lowering his mouth, his vile breath trails along my skin, and my stomach flips as bile rises in my throat. His hold on me tightens, and he lifts me off my feet. I kick my legs through the air, and he grunts when my flailing elbow greets his rib cage. “Fucking bitch.” Pain licks his words.

Suddenly, my back hits the mattress, and Donnacha crawls above me, pinning me beneath him. Straddling my waist, he takes a hold of my arms and hikes them above my head, stapling them in place. Then, with his free hand, he reaches up to rip his mask off.

The sunlight streaming through the window hits his face, highlighting the shades of black, purple, yellow, and blue bruising around his nose, jaw, and eyes.

“Take a good fucking look. These bruises are your fault, and now you will pay for every hit Rohan inflicted on me.” His tongue trails across his lower lip, licking the deep swollen cut that’s still coated in dried blood. “Only this time, my cunt of a brother won’t be saving you.”

His grip on my wrists tightens, and he grinds his sordid dick against my exposed pussy. Vomit whirls up my

oesophagus, but I force the acid to stay down and think back to the day at the gym.

I spit in his face. “A queen knows how to save herself.”

I can do this. Liam taught me how to escape this exact hold. *Think, Saoirse. Think.*

I shimmy slightly, easing my body up the bed, and position my arms at a ninety-degree angle.

“Stop fucking wiggling.” Donnacha applies more pressure, but I don’t let him deter me. I shift my hips upward, thrusting until his body bucks, and he loses his balance. Quickly, I draw my head to the left as Donnacha tumbles forward, releasing his hold on my arms to catch himself before faceplanting into the headboard. Without hesitation, I bring my arms to my sides before wrapping them around his torso. He tries to wriggle from my grasp, but I cling to him as I manoeuvre my arm through his and use all my body weight against his elbow. With my right arm, I flip him onto his back. It happens so fast that it catches him off guard when I smash my forehead against his nose before jumping off the bed to grab the gun.

Aiming it directly at him, I watch as blood rushes from his nostrils as he hauls himself off the bed. Raising his arm to his face, he wipes the steady drip with the back of his hand. “Bad move, sweetheart,” he sneers as he stalks toward me.

My arms shudder, fighting to hold the gun steady. “Come any closer, and I’ll shoot your fucking dick off.”

A laugh barks past his lips. “I highly doubt it. Your hands are shaking.” He steps forward with slow, precise steps, almost like he’s a lion and I am his prey. “Have you ever shot someone?”

I don’t reply.

“Thought so.”

“I mean it! Don’t come closer.” I make a show of clicking the safety off, even though every inch of me vibrates with fear, adrenaline, and shock. This sick bastard won’t win. Racking my brain, I try to remember what Rohan whispered in my ear as we stood together in the hallway. I replay his lesson in my mind—him behind me, his breath dancing across my neck.

Wrap your hands around the grip. Your hold should be high and tight. No space between your flesh and the gun. Line up your sights. Don’t pull the trigger until both sights align.

Donnacha takes another step. My time is running out.

Now, shoot.

I pull the fucking trigger.

TWO

SAOIRSE

A RAPID PULSE THUNDERS IN MY EARDRUM AS THE TRIGGER depresses back against the flesh between my thumb and pointer finger. My heart freezes mid-beat as the whip of the bullet propels from the chamber, flooding the air with an unmistakable crack.

Donnacha's eyes widen, broadcasting his surprise, but it's too late for him to stop the inevitable. The wayward bullet whips through the space between us. It grazes the inside of his upper thigh, breaking his steady stance as it tears through his dark denim jeans, narrowly missing his dick.

A rush of adrenaline courses through me, kick-starting my heart until all I can hear is the erratic drumming against my chest. Realisation settles in, rounding my eyes with disbelief.

Oh. My. Fuck. I just shot someone.

My feet remain frozen to the floor as Donnacha's face contorts. Undiluted pain creeps across his brow line, tightening the creases around his eyes. A muffled curse slips past his clenched teeth, and he bends at the waist. "Motherfuckin' bitch." His hand clasps over his flesh wound. There is no mistaking the fury radiating off him. He's a wounded beast, and I antagonised him.

Wild flames narrow his angry eyes, promising penance for the sin I committed. Fearful of the repercussions, it takes everything in me to maintain eye contact and keep my chin raised. Even though I'm as naked as the day I was born—entirely vulnerable—I restrain the shaky tremors beneath my skin and keep my confident demeanour in place.

The Killybegs Syndicate is determined to destroy every shred of me. It's time to step into the role I was born to fill and show them I'm not easily broken.

Fake it until you make it, right?

I suck in a breath, squaring my shoulders with an edge of defiance. Donnacha staggers forward, dragging his right leg with him. “You’ve done it now, sweetheart. Bad, bad, move.”

I hide my fear behind a raised brow and pull my lips into a smug smile. “Touch me again, and I promise you, the next round I fire”—my eyes drop to my attacker’s crotch before slowly sliding back up his torso and meeting his murderous stare—“I won’t miss.”

With one last furious glance, he rushes me, his eyes trained on the gun clutched tightly in my grip. He grasps my wrist, and we each struggle for dominance. Using his injuries to my advantage, I raise my knee and connect it to his bruised ribs. With a grunt, he pushes against me, and I lose my balance. Suddenly, I’m falling backwards, and my back meets the floor with a bone-shaking crunch. The gun goes off again, and the bullet ripples through the air until it lodges in the wall behind him.

Stepping over me, he peers down at me with a victorious sneer pulled across his lips. Bile rushes up my throat, but I swallow it back down, unwilling to show this prick an ounce of weakness.

Donnacha reaches for me but stops when a loud, thunderous roar booms up the staircase, echoing through the open bedroom doorway. “Saoirse! SAOIRSE!” A raspy lilt littered with panic-stricken urgency greets my ears, followed by heavy footfalls racing up the staircase.

“Shit.” Donnacha’s haunted eyes flitter between me and the door.

I can see the wheels turning in his head. He knows he’s too injured to encounter whoever is coming. Indecision twists his features, and I use it to my advantage, placing doubt in his mind. “He’ll kill you for touching me. Run or die. The choice is yours, *sweetheart*.” The sentiment slides off my tongue, leaving a vile taste in its wake.

His split-second decision flashes in his eyes, and before I can process it, he’s stepping away from me and rushing out the door.

My shoulders sag with relief as I push up on my elbows and rest against the foot of the bed. Drawing the gun upward, I steady the grip against my forehead and desperately try to calm my breathing. With every inhale, a million razors slice my lungs, begging me to stop.

Lost in everything that has transpired, a chorus of gruff splutters ripple past my lips as the adrenaline disperses. Shock finally immobilises me, hitting me with the weight of a freight train. I’m vaguely aware of the echoed commotion in the hallway, and although my mind begs me to get up and do something, I can’t move.

My eyes weld shut, blocking out everything around me. I fight against the panic gripping my lungs and focus on my breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth, over

and over, until a gentle touch lands on my shoulder, startling me.

My grip on the gun tightens, and my eyes spring open, landing on a familiar boyish face.

“Easy there, Saoirse. It’s only me.” Aodhán’s masculine cadence hovers above me. “It’s okay. He’s gone. I got you,” he continues, keeping his tone gentle and somewhat melodious. Before I can respond to his quiet ease, Aodhán pulls his hoodie over his head and holds it towards me. “You must be freezing. Put this on.”

It takes more effort than I care to admit, but I place the gun on the floor and push my arms through the sleeves, pulling the hoodie over my head and covering my goose-pricked skin. “Thank you.”

I melt into the soft cotton as instant warmth wraps around me. My eyes never leave Aodhán’s as he pushes himself from his hunkers. Following his every move, I survey him as he reaches into his pocket, pulls out his phone, and taps the screen before raising it to his ear. “Come on, Rí.”

At the mention of Rohan’s name, guilt swarms through me, attacking my senses like a colony of angry bees.

I’d been so quick to believe my attacker was Rohan. There hadn’t been an ounce of doubt in my mind. *He* held me under, stealing the life from my body.

Time and time again, Rohan had sworn he wasn’t the villain in my tale, but a part of me always struggled to believe him. How could I when half-truths and pretty white lies were wrapped around every moment we’d spent together? He’d made it easy to fall for Donnacha’s façade. I’m sick of these

contradicting feelings and never knowing who or when to trust.

For the first time in my life, I feel alone with nowhere to turn. Everyone around me is withholding information, feeding me just enough that I don't starve. But also leaving me hungry for more.

I don't know what to think or how to feel. Sure, Rohan wasn't the man behind the mask—not this time—but who's to say he's not the puppeteer pulling all of my strings?

My arms encase my body, wrapping around me like a proverbial safety blanket. With my eyes still locked on Aodhán, I trail his every move, watching as he buries his free hand in his blond hair. "Pick up your fucking phone, dipshit." He paces back and forth before trying again. "Fuck! Where the hell is he?"

It's a rhetorical question, but I'd love the answer. My mind wanders back to this morning when I heard Rohan speaking on the phone with my dad. Could he be part of the scheme to get rid of me? God, why do the questions keep piling up? I need answers. *Now.*

I decide to keep my cards close to my chest, because even though Aodhán has given me no reason to doubt him, his loyalties lie with his best friend, and for now, I can't trust anyone. Not even the boy I shared last night with.

So, instead of disclosing what I know, I place my palms on the floor and push myself to my feet. Aodhán's oversized hoodie drapes over me, hitting the tops of my thighs. Unsure about what to do, I pull the cuffs over my palms and sit on the edge of the bed. My feet ground on the floorboards, and my legs shake as a blast of nervous energy courses through me. In a montage of moments, everything hits me all at once—

Donnacha, the bath, the gun. Bringing my hand to my mouth, I nibble on the edge of my thumbnail and zone out, losing myself in my thoughts. I'm vaguely aware of Aodhán's voice as he softly murmurs into the phone, but I tune him out.

"Hey, look at me. You're going to be okay." Aodhán balances on the balls of his feet as he brings himself to my level. "Lorcan is on the way, and he'll figure out what the hell is going on."

"Who's Lorcan?" My words are shaky, barely audible.

Aodhán drops his chin to his chest. "Someone Rohan trusts with his life."

Unease rolls off me. Do I really need another player entering the game that has become my life? "Is that supposed to reassure me?"

But in true Aodhán fashion, he brushes past the severe expression on my face and shoots a cheeky wink my way. "I've known Rohan my entire life. He's calculating, cruel, and borderline obsessive, but he is also loyal to a fault. And for you, all those traits heighten."

"Yeah, well, I trusted him with my life, and look where it got me."

"I know you're confused and scared. But please believe me when I say Rohan is not the bad guy. He hasn't told me why he's so hell-bent on keeping you safe, but our boy is secretive and selective about what he shares, so never doubt that Rohan's not doing everything he can to protect you."

I roll my eyes at his little speech. "Oh, yeah. And why not?"

"He's all in, Saoirse. He'd die before letting anyone touch you. Last night, when everything happened at the party, he

chose a side. We all saw it. Rohan went against his father. For you.”

Stunned by his words, I say nothing, allowing everything he said to sink in.

Had he chosen me?

Aodhán holds out his hand, pulling me from my thoughts. “Now, how about I get your bag from my car so you can get dressed? Then I’ll make you a cup of tea while we wait for Lorcan. After that, you can tell me what went down between you and Satan’s spawn.”

THREE

LIAM

MY FEET DRUM AGAINST THE SLATTED BELT OF MY TREADMILL as the heavy beat of “I’m Still Here” by Boy Epic blares through my AirPods. I keep pushing harder, faster, starving my lungs of oxygen, chasing the demons I’m trying to expel.

Rohan’s arms were around her waist, pulling her closer until he moulded her against his chest. The tilt of Saoirse’s chin as she peered up at him over the long lashes framing her soul-claiming eyes. That intimate, gentle, and caring touch she laid upon his face. Her empty, unrumpled bedsheets—a sure sign she didn’t sleep here last night.

Wild fury pricks my skin. Each snapshot eggs me on until my veins burn with inextinguishable jealousy that no amount of running will erase.

Done with my sprint down memory lane, I slap the stop button, drawing the machine to a swift halt. “Fuck!” My head falls forward as my chest rises and falls in time to my rapid breathing.

Tugging the small towel that hangs around my neck, I bring it to my face to wipe away the pearls of sweat off my forehead. I knew it was coming. The second I saw how they looked at each other—the first day at the gym—I *knew* Rohan King would be a problem.

Stupidly, I thought my shared past with Saoirse would be enough to cut the cord between her and Rohan. How wrong I was. Rohan welded his charm like a nuclear weapon, annihilating all other players in this war of hearts.

The plan was fucking simple. Let Saoirse find her feet, then remind her of the boy I was.

Only I'm not him. Not anymore.

I never thought she'd arrive before she turned eighteen, and I sure as fuck hadn't expected her to fall flat on her arse for a prick like Rohan King.

Closing my eyes, I run through every interaction I've had with Saoirse, irritating myself further.

I'm losing to a King, and that is something I refuse to do.

Goodbye, Mr Nice Guy. If Rohan wants a war, I'll come at him guns blazing.

Suddenly, my gaze flicks toward the mirrored wall to my right, catching sight of the stone-faced man leaning against the doorframe.

"Son," my father greets as he pushes off the jamb and strides toward me. The last thing I want to do is rehash how I allowed another man to escort my date home—possibly out of her dress. But judging by the steely glint in Oliver Devereux's eyes, that is precisely what I'm in for.

"Tell me this ..."

His tone holds an air of condescension as he circles the treadmill with his narrowed eyes laser-focused on me. "Why did you allow Saoirse Ryan to disgrace our family name? People talk, Liam. Word is spreading—my son's date left a syndicate event with another man. And if that wasn't pitiful enough, it was the same guy who destroyed him in the ring mere days before."

My chin dips to my chest as his words wash through me. “You said—”

“Enlighten me, Devin Liam Devereux.” He drops my full name, letting me know how pissed he is. “What exactly did I tell you?”

“Make Saoirse Ryan fall in love with me.”

His left brow hitches, challenging me to admit how much I’ve screwed up. “How’s that going for you? Cause from where I’m standing, you’re doing the opposite.” Disappointment settles across his forehead, punctuated by the crease of fine lines at the edge of his eyes. “Well?”

“I can ... I was giving her space to adjust to this life.”

“Space? For fuck’s sake, Liam. You know what’s at stake. You’re running out of time. Once she learns what awaits, she will have to choose. So do yourself a favour and ensure you’re the one by her side when the time comes for her to face her last trial.”

He holds my gaze, and my chin dips in agreement. “Yes, sir.”

A proud grin slides across his face. “That’s my boy. Now, go. I will not allow history to repeat itself. Show that girl why a Devereux is the better option.”

Flashing a forced smile, I quickly gather my things and head for the door.

“Oh, and Liam?”

I halt, tossing a glance over my shoulder. Then, in his eyes, I read his unspoken words and relay them aloud. “Not a word to Beibhinn and Mam about our arrangement.” He tips his chin up, giving me permission to leave.

I don't need to be told twice.

I have one more trial to complete before I earn my seat on the opposite side of the syndicate table—and her name is Saoirse Ryan.



AFTER CHECKING EVERY ROOM IN OUR LODGE—BEIBHINN'S Smut Nook included—my sister is nowhere to be seen. She's my best bet at locating Saoirse, which is why I'm dirt biking up the mountain behind our house, hoping she's at her favourite spot. As I close in on the range clearing, my bike rumbles to a stop. I spot her right away, earmuffs on, gun raised, as she easily manoeuvres her way through the obstacle course.

Cocking the bike on its kickstand, I pull off my helmet, hang it off the handlebar, and watch my sister in her element. A smile glides across my face as she annihilates the countless rubber dummies dotted throughout the tree-line, the sound of bullets whips through the air with unmistakable cracks. Being a woman in a man's world, Beibhinn has spent hours and hours out here, honing her skills to perfection. She's a bona fide badass, and there is not a man in this fucking town who could beat her shot when it comes down to aim and precision.

Dismounting my bike, I stalk towards the small hut on the outskirts of the course, then lean against the pillar, waiting for her to finish up. Several seconds pass before she finally runs out of ammo.

Her gaze tracks across the course, landing on mine with a curious glare before she averts her attention to the gun safe in the back of her all-black Land Rover Defender.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your presence?” Her voice travels over her shoulder as she cleans up her gun.

I push off the pillar and stride toward her. “Can’t a brother want to talk to his sister?”

“Sure.” She turns, trapping me in her knowing glare. “But we both know that’s not why you’re here.”

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I straighten my spine. Beibhinn is a no-nonsense chick. She is a straight shooter who can sniff out bullshit like a highly trained K9. I need to tread carefully with my intentions towards her newfound friend. She can’t know what Dad is scheming, and if I want to keep my relationship with my twin intact, she can’t find out that I agreed to help him execute his plan.

“I was wondering if you knew where Saoirse was. I tried calling her, but her phone is off.”

“She stayed at Rohan’s.” Four words and they stifle the air. “He texted me last night, so I wouldn’t worry about her not coming home.”

Finally, Beibhinn turns to face me, a teasing smile tugging the corners of her lips. Her eyes narrow as her gaze roams over the hardened contours of my face. I knew Saoirse was with Rohan, but hearing it hits a little different. Immobilised by rage, I bite down on the inside of my cheek.

“What’s the matter, Liamie?” Beibhinn smirks, her words dripping with sarcasm. “Is your big ego bruised?”

Capturing the tip of my tongue between my teeth, I bite down, locking my jaw. Finally, when I cage my feelings, I ask, “Why are you so against the idea of Saoirse and me? You’ve been pushing her towards Rohan since she arrived.”

Beibhinn rolls her eyes and places her hand on her hip. “I’m not against it ... not entirely, anyway.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Look.” She drops her shoulders with a deep exhale. “The syndicate has been your sole focus for the longest. You’ve expressed repeatedly that you will do anything to earn a seat on the ‘*adult side*’”—she raises her hands in the air, punctuating the words with finger quotes—“of the table. But then, the long-lost heir rolls into town, and you’re all in with her.” She raises a brow, calling bullshit. “I like Saoirse, Liam. Being thrust into our lifestyle is enough for her to deal with. Forgive me if I don’t want you to use her as a pawn in whatever game you’re playing.”

Even if she’s bordering on the truth, her words sting more than they should. But I play it off. “That’s not what I’m doing, Bev.”

Disappointment lingers in her eyes, and then she turns back to her Defender and resumes packing up her things. Finally, after a long minute of silence, she peers over her shoulder. “If you’re not in it for the right reasons, Liam, leave the girl alone and let her figure out how to navigate a life she knows nothing about.”

My throat constricts, but I manage a crooked reply. “And if I am?”

Beibhinn’s eyes bore into mine. “Then, prove me wrong.”

FOUR

SAOIRSE

FRESHLY SHOWERED AND WEARING A CLEAN SET OF CLOTHES, I sit with my fingers curled around a delicate porcelain teacup, the hot beverage warming my hands. Finally, I draw the piping-hot tea toward my lips. The steam fills my nose as I savour the sugary liquid sliding past my tongue. I don't know what it is, but to every Irish person, a cuppa tea is the answer to all life's problems.

As I sip, Aodhán never takes his eyes off me, watching me as though any second now, I'm bound to break. The deafening silence pierces the air, both of us waiting for the other to proceed. Finally, when I can't stand the sorrowful pity in his eyes, I rest my cup on the countertop, run my tongue along my bottom lip, and expel a heavy exhale out of my nose. My need for answers is far stronger than my need for avoidance. But if I'm to understand the life my mother unwillingly thrust me into, the people surrounding me had better shed some light.

"Don't take this the wrong way, because I sure as shit am glad you turned up, but what are you doing here?" I ask, levelling Aodhán with a raised brow. "And for the love of my sanity, please don't hit me with any of that cryptic bullshit your friend loves to dish out. I'm beyond the white lies and twisted mind games. Donnacha almost fucking killed me. That

disgusting excuse for a human being assaulted me twice in twenty-four hours. I deserve some truths.”

Aodhán leans back against the counter, his legs stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles, and his arms folded across his chest. If it weren’t for the tight knit of his brow or the twisted corners of his lips, I’d almost believe he was relaxed, but I guess that’s all part of his easy-going, unfazed demeanour.

He stares at me for a moment, his teeth nibbling his lip as he contemplates how to proceed. A huffed breath flees his nostrils, accentuated by the dip of his shoulders. “Rohan phoned me early this morning. Said he had to take care of a few things after last night. He was stressing about you being here alone with everything that happened.”

Resting my elbow on the countertop, I tuck my hand beneath my chin, nodding at him to continue.

“He asked if I could drop in with some food and bring you some clothes. When I pulled up, I heard the gunshot. I was halfway up the stairs when Donnacha ploughed into me.”

My brows narrow. With the injuries Donnacha had, Aodhán could have easily stopped him from taking off. My mind is reeling, and after everything that has happened, I’m questioning every move and the motive behind it.

Trust is earned, not given freely.

The words my mother wrote on the back of the photograph—the same words Rohan spoke in the closet on my first day of school—blast through my mind, echoing like a freight ship foghorn. “Why didn’t you stop him?”

“Because getting to you was more important. I had to make sure you were okay.”

His tone is sincere, and his eyes hold a genuineness I can't ignore. I know I shouldn't trust him blindly, and I don't, but something about the unadulterated concern painted on his boyish face makes me believe he's telling the truth. About his arrival, at least.

My next question flees my mouth unfiltered. "Did Rohan tell you where he was going?"

"No." His tone is firm. *Another truth.* "And honestly, I didn't ask. In case you haven't noticed, Rohan isn't very forthcoming."

"Well, that's a fucking understatement," I mutter. It's no secret half of the time Rohan talks in riddles. His words hold a million different meanings and even more hidden messages. Every sentence that leaves his mouth is purposeful, and unfortunately for those around him, you never know what the purpose is until you're headfirst in, trying to remain afloat.

With nothing to lose, I probe Aodhán for more answers, pushing a little further. "Don't you think it's a little weird that every time he disappears, something bad happens to me?"

"No, not really." Aodhán pushes off the counter and plonks himself onto the stool across from me. He rests his forearms on the counter, exposing his chest. I'm not a body language expert, but his entire profile is open and relaxed. There is no sign of him hiding or concealing himself. As he speaks, I pay attention to the set of his lips, and the truth beaming from his eye contact. "Contrary to his recent actions, Donnacha isn't stupid. He would never make a move if Rohan were around because he knows Rí is lethal. There would be no hesitation, Saoirse. He'd tear Donnacha apart, and D knows that."

My eyes narrow into slits as I work over his statement. "Why is that?"

His face twists with confusion. “Why is what?”

“Rohan. He’s eighteen years old. How is he so ... *lethal*?”

For the first time since we started talking, Aodhán’s shoulders stiffen, and even though it’s subtle, I notice a slight twitch in his left eye. If I had to guess, I’d say he’s pondering on how much information he should give me. I don’t back down, though. Raising my brow, I silently push him to continue. His tongue slides across his front teeth, and his eyes narrow. “How much do you know about the syndicate?”

Lowering my eyes to my mug, I draw circles around the rim with the tip of my finger. “Rohan told me a little.” My gaze settles back to his, and I add, “Four families control the four provinces of Ireland, right? Reilly, Connelly, Murphy ... and the Ryan families.”

He nods.

“But when my mother failed to complete her trials, the syndicate gave her place to Gabriel King. He was supposed to keep things running in the Leinster area until the next Ryan heir became of age. Which is ... me?”

“Correct. There are sixteen main families. The four head families—one for each province—and then each quarter has an additional three families that make up the syndicate council. There are other foot-soldier families involved, but the main sixteen have all the power. When one of the main families can’t fulfil a leadership role, they will vote one of the other families as a placeholder. That’s how Gabriel got your mam’s seat.”

“So, the other families voted him in?”

“Unfortunately, yes. From what I heard, it was a close vote between Oliver Devereux and Gabriel. But Gabriel is ruthless,

and his name holds a lot of weight in the syndicate's world."

"What has this got to do with Rohan being lethal?"

"Nothing and everything." He pauses, drawing his bottom lip between his teeth. "Being a syndicate heir comes with its own stipulations. Our training starts at about thirteen. We don't get to be kids." His eyes flick towards the countertop, and when they find mine again, they're glazed with sadness. "Instead, we're thrust into a world of men. We learn things that most children wouldn't understand—fighting, guns, drug deals, sex. Nothing is off-limits. We aren't normal eighteen-year-olds, Saoirse. This lifestyle has hardened us. We've become products of our environment."

His prominent Adam's apple bobs with his deep swallow. "Rohan's circumstances were different. Gabriel brought him into the fold far younger than the rest of us. His story is not mine to tell, but Rohan has never had it easy. While we were out enjoying the small ounce of youth we had, he was living in the shadows his father kept him in. He worked twice as hard as any of us, but no matter what he did, he could never come close to the expectations his dad placed on him."

For the first time since I arrived in Killybegs, I'm thankful to my mam for shielding my childhood from the shackles of the syndicate. And even though I'm completely ill-prepared for everything I am about to face, at least I had some semblance of a normal life. My heart aches for the young boy Rohan never got to be, that none of them got to be. Suddenly, the image of a drunk Rohan—lying on my bed—filters through my mind. That version of him was so different from the stone-faced guy he shows the world. There was a vulnerability to him that night, a need for affection. I didn't

know it then, but now I see it for what it was. A little boy craving love.

“Rohan’s hatred for his dad fuelled him to be the best,” Aodhán continues, pulling me from the memory of that night. “That’s where Lorcan comes in. He saw something in Rohan that his father didn’t—a hunger to win, to be better than all the others. Maybe he saw a younger version of himself. I don’t know that much about Lorcan’s story, because, like Rohan, he keeps his cards close to his chest. But while the rest of us were training at the gym and gun range, Rohan spent all his time training alongside Lorcan. He taught Rohan everything he knows, and that’s why Rohan is so fucking lethal. He had the best mentor in the syndicate.”

A deep, Northern brogue rumbles from behind me, sliding across my skin and leaving goose pimples in its wake. “Now, now, pup. Keep talkin’ like that and you’ll give a man a complex.”

I don’t move, frozen to my chair as Aodhán peers over my shoulder at the intruder. That voice ... I know that voice.

“Hey, Boss Man,” Aodhán greets with a smile. Thankfully, he’s too busy sliding from his stool to notice my widened eyes. Boss Man, the nickname tumbles around my head, repeating over and over.

Boss Man.

Boss Man.

Boss Man.

That’s the same name Rohan used earlier when he was on the phone to— My heart pounds against my rib cage, and blood rushes to my ears, filling my eardrums with a thumping rhythm. I will myself to turn, to look at the man behind me ...

possibly the second half of my DNA. My limbs are shaking, but I force myself to rise from my chair and turn on my heel.

Greeted by an impeccably fitted navy three-piece suit, covering a broad frame, the man before me is fucking huge. His large, tattooed hands tug his crisp white shirt cuffs as he floods the doorway with his large presence. Finally, my eyes lock on his face, and a gasp bubbles in the base of my throat. It's been a few years since I last saw him, but there is no doubt about it. This suit-clad man is the same man who taught me how to swim, how to ride a bike, and how to fucking fish. I've met him many times before today—every summer at the cabin until I turned thirteen. “La-Lachie.” His name scratches my throat as it stutters from my open mouth.

“Hello, doll. It's been a dot in time.”

Holy fucking shit! I've known my dad all along.

FIVE

SAOIRSE

I'M FROZEN TO THE FLOOR, TRAPPED IN AN ALL-CONSUMING standoff with a set of eerily familiar eyes. It's ludicrous that I've never put the puzzle together before, especially when my gaze bores into a face I'd spent endless summer days with ... Lachie, the friendly giant from the cabin next to ours. Devin's—or should I say Liam's—godfather.

My heart thunders as I roam over his expensive tailored suit. A far cry from the old, worn jeans and eighties rock 'n' roll band tees my younger self remembers.

"I'm your daughter, aren't I?" It feels like a rhetorical question because I already know his reply. I can see it in how he looks at me. But I need to hear it out loud.

My eyes never leave his, daring him to tell me the truth painted in the golden amber shade of his irises. A replica of my own.

"Aye."

How? Why?

The silent questions crash through my entire body, hitting me with the weight of a proverbial freight train, stealing the breath from my lungs until I'm all but smothered beneath years of treacherous lies.

There are so many things I want to say, so many answers I need to hear, and yet, all I can do is stare. Instead, my words are held prisoner by the giant lump forming in the back of my throat.

A tremor of anger reverberates up my spine, spreading like a blazing inferno through every inch of my core. Seventeen years I've spent craving the love of a man who I thought abandoned my mother and me. When, in reality, he's stood on the sideline of my life. Every summer, he played pretend, made me wish I had someone like him in my life to guide me.

Oh, the irony!

Lorcan steps forward, his face twisted in pain. "Saoirse, let me ex—"

My hand shoots out, halting his pursuit. "Don't." My throat tightens. "Just ... stay away from me." Closing my eyes, I attempt to rifle through my feelings, but one after the other, they consume me—sadness, fear, disappointment, and anger. They blend, twisting in my gut, forming a hurricane spiral that shakes me to my core.

How could they? I spent most of my life wondering why my father never wanted me, never cared enough to show up when I needed him. All along, he was right there, dropping into my life for a few measly summer weeks, then vanishing with the first sign of autumn leaves. Why would they do this to me? They should've told me. Maybe then I wouldn't have felt so lost, as though a vital piece of my existence was missing.

Finally, my eyes open, and I divert my attention to Aodhán, unable to look at the man who lied to me for all my life. Aodhán's bluish eyes are wide globes, flicking between Lorcan and me.

It seems I'm not the only one who's surprised by this revelation.

A deep crease mars his golden brow. "Holy fuck! You're a —" He directs towards me, but Lorcan cuts him off.

"A Reilly and a Ryan," Lorcan finishes. Suddenly, his gaze lands on me. "Sole heir to the Leinster and Ulster Syndicates."

As if the deceit wasn't bad enough, a tremor of shock trundles through me, and my jaw falls slack.

What the fuck did he just say?

Anxiety burns a trail towards my heart, scorching my chest with vicious flames. I shake my head, a sharp slice left and right, unable to process what he's announced. My hands cover my face, and I breathe into my palms, releasing a slow puff of air. It's all too much, and I'm struggling to stay afloat.

My dad is one of the syndicate kings. I'm the heir to the Leinster and Ulster chapters.

"But?" Aodhán questions. "The four head families can't have any personal relations. It's the oldest fucking rule in the book. And for good reason. It shifts the dynamic. And would turn the four equal quarters into three unlevel playing fields. Being the heir of two kingdoms makes her the most powerful syndicate heir. They'll kill her, Lorcan." His panic rocks the room, ricocheting off the stone walls.

"They'll ...? What?!"

With a guilt-ridden look my way, Lorcan turns and stalks over to Aodhán, leering over him with a fiery, dominating stare. "Nobody can find out. You can't tell anyone about this. Gabriel's need for power is bad enough. If word spread about Saoirse's lineage, we'd have the entire organisation on our

arses. They'd come gunning for her, and her safety is something I'm not willin' to risk."

From the corner of my eye, I watch the two men as they share a look that would make most people crumble. My arms circle my waist in an unconscious gesture to protect myself—not that it will do any good. I'm ill-prepared for all of this, and as much as I deserve the truth, there is a part of me that wishes I could turn the clock back to when I knew nothing of the world around me. But I can't. There is already a massive target painted on my back. I'm fucked. I may not know a lot, but of that much I am sure.

Finally, Aodhán swallows, replying silently with a dip of his head.

"I trust you'll keep your mouth closed because I won't hesitate to place an ounce of lead behind your kneecaps if anyone finds out. Understood?" Lorcan continues.

"Yes, Boss Man."

Lorcan's words spark a fury inside me, and I don't have the energy to keep it contained. As I try to expel the turbulence brewing, I pace the kitchen. Two sets of eyes follow my every step, but I don't care. In a matter of weeks, my life has gone from a socially awkward teen to the sole heir of not one but two sectors of a nationwide crime organisation.

How is this my life?

It's too much—all of it. I need to get out of here, away from it all.

"I can't deal with this." Edging towards the doorway leading to the walled garden, I turn away from Lorcan and Aodhán, needing a moment to process all the information and

events that led me to this point. I'm so overwhelmed I can barely see straight.

Before I can swing the door open, a large hand clamps down on my shoulder. "You can't go out there. Not alone."

"Fuck off." I turn to face Lorcan, spitting out my words as I glare at him with disdain. "You don't get to dictate my actions. You lost that right when you decided you didn't want to be present in my life."

Anger rolls off him in waves, dampened by the guilt swarming his eyes. His nostrils flare as he sucks in a calming breath. "I know you're angry, but I was keeping you safe. My absence was unrelated to my love for you, or your mother for that matter. It was the only way to ensure your safety."

"Yeah, well, I wasn't very safe when I was assaulted at a party last night. Or this morning while I was held underwater until I couldn't breathe."

His palm covers my arm, wrapping around my elbow. Suddenly, his gaze dips, eyes focused on the floor. "I did what I thought was best. Evidently, I was wrong." Then, finally, he peers back at me, flooded with something I can't quite place. "You can hate me all you want, doll. Scream, shout, stomp around like a fuckin' disobedient pup, but do not question my role as your da." The gravel in his tone is fierce and deadly. "Every sacrifice I made was to keep you alive. There hasn't been a minute where your safety wasn't my top priority. Trust me when I tell you, princess, the last thing I'll ever do is fuck off."

Tearing my arm from his grasp, I stand tall. No more playing the poor pathetic little girl without a clue, and I sure as fuck am fed up with all the secrets. Pulling the door open, I strike him with my parting words. "News flash, Daddy." My

words drip with sarcasm. “Since I stepped foot in this town, there has been no regard for my safety. The two people—the parents I needed—were nowhere to be found. So, excuse me if I don’t buy the bullshit you’re selling.” The fresh cool breeze assaults my face, and I tilt my head towards the sky, breathing in the crisp evening air.

Unfortunately, Lorcan ruins my grand exit by following me outside and polluting my peace. “There are things in this world you don’t understand. Your ma and I did what we thought was best for you. The syndicate wasn’t a safe place for you to grow up. When the time came, we led you toward trusted people.”

“The Devereux family, right?”

He raises a brow, a pointed look on his face. “I wouldn’t trust a Devereux as far as I’d throw them. Some people take after their fathers, Saoirse. But others—the people you should be placin’ your trust in—they have their mother’s blood flowin’ through their veins.”

I spin on my heel, darting a glare his way. “Jesus, you really taught Rohan everything, huh? Can we stop with the cryptic meanings? I can’t take it anymore. Between you, Rohan, and my missing mother, why can’t you just tell me who is on my side? All this back-and-forth is eating me alive. I’m over it, Lorcan. No more games.”

I’m furious, grappling at straws to figure out the meaning of it all. Rage heats my cheeks, but the disappointment in Lorcan and my mother floors me, flooding my veins, rushing through me like a tsunami. Hot tears spring from my eyes. “Where is Rohan, anyway?” I hate asking, but after everything we shared last night, I think being here with me is the least he owes me.

Something dark glazes over Lorcan's face. His angular features are unreadable with his jaw set into a tight bite, and his eyes expressionless.

"What? Did the self-proclaimed king get what he wanted then disappear into thin fucking air? Just like everyone else in my life. Typical man treating a woman like a rental car. Take it for one or two spins, then drop it off." My eyes roll back, punctuating my sass, and then I turn on my heel and take off towards the walled garden.

"He's missing, Saoirse." Lorcan's statement halts my movements, but I don't turn around. "I found his car by the docks. Whoever took him left his phone and wallet on the passenger seat."

Blood rushes to my ears, accentuating the thunderous roar of my racing heart. My breaths quicken, lodging in my clogged throat. Saliva dampens my mouth as I force myself to swallow the ache crushing my chest. Lorcan's footfalls sound behind me, crunching against the pebbled walkway. He places his palm on my shoulder when he reaches me, giving it a gentle squeeze that makes me turn around.

I blink, processing what he said. Finally, my words croak past my lips. "How ... how do you know someone took him? Maybe he ran off."

Lorcan's stare holds steady, but his expression changes to something sinister. Almost psychotic. "He didn't leave willingly."

"How do you know that? Rohan isn't exactly forthcoming with his plans."

"I know Rohan. His job was to keep you safe. He wouldn't have left you behind."

His job. Six letters, yet they cut through me with a razor-sharp edge. Was that all I was to him? Some worthless assignment, a syndicate order he needed to follow? *Jesus, Saoirse. How could you be so naïve?*

Ignoring the acceleration in my chest, I scan Lorcan's features and note the tight-knit lines woven across his brow line. "What are you hiding?"

"There were signs of a struggle—bloodstains and shattered glass on the concrete next to the driver's door. Whoever took him knew what they were doing. Rohan is made of tough stuff; he wouldn't have gone down without a fight. Unless—" Lorcan falls silent, and the surrounding air thins.

"What, Lorcan? Unless what?" Panic coats my rushed words, leaving me airy and breathless. *Me.* "Unless he was protecting me."

At that realisation, Lorcan shifts and his eyes dart around the property, searching for any sign of a threat. "We need to leave. Now!"

There is no arguing with his command. His fingertips curl around my arm as he tugs me towards the castle's back door. Once inside, he barks an order at Aodhán to gather my belongings before he rushes us to the safe Rohan showed me earlier this morning.

"Where are we going?" I stand rigid as he stashes guns and ammo into a large black duffel bag.

Ignoring my question, he closes the safe and pulls me out the main entrance towards a sleek black Mercedes.

Forcing myself to a halt, I rip my forearm from his grip. "I'm not leaving until you tell me where you're taking me."

“Christ, you’re just like your mother,” he groans as a heavy, frustrated breath rushes from his nostrils.

“It’s all there, Boss Man,” Aodhán interrupts, holding out my school bag. “That’s everything she left in the Devereux lodge.”

“I’m standing right here.”

“Get in the car, doll.”

“Tell me where you’re taking me or I’m staying put.”

Lorcan’s focus shifts between Aodhán and me. Finally, he settles his attention on me. “Where the sun kisses the horizon, and the tree-line shadows the sky. Two hidden hideouts, where pretty—”

“Free birds fly,” I finish. The old sonnet from our campfire days knocks the wind from my chest. A distant memory I had forgotten. *Free birds*. That’s why Liam’s nickname sounded so familiar.

“She’s waiting.” That’s the last thing he says before opening the passenger door and gesturing for me to get in.

It takes me a second to realise he doesn’t want Aodhán to know where we’re going, but luckily, I understand the meaning behind his hidden message. *He’s taking me to the cabins, where my mam is waiting.*

ROHAN

I REMAIN ROOTED IN THE DRIVEWAY, WATCHING AS MY MOTHER tosses the last of her and my sister's belongings into the back of her Range Rover. I want to go with them, to escape the hell I call home, but I can't.

He'd never allow it.

Squeezing down on the smaller hand clenched in my palm, I turn my gaze to Aoibheann's innocent face. Even though she's only eleven months younger than me, her head barely reaches my shoulder. We're nothing alike. While I got my dad's dark features, Aoibheann is all light; a golden ray of sunshine, just like our mother.

"Hey." I draw her gaze to mine and almost break at the sight. A river of tears streams down her puffed cheeks. "It's going to be okay." The lie falls past my lips, leaving a bitter taste on my tongue. "I'll come to visit. I promise you."

Her baby blues sear into my soul. "I don't want to leave you behind, Rí. Why can't you come with us?"

Before I can feed Aoibheann another tale, my mother lowers herself in front of me. Her lavender scent fills my nose, and her soft hands clutch either side of my face. Then, with her gentle touch, she guides my face towards hers and places a long, lingering kiss on my forehead. She pulls back slightly,

and I peer into her bloodshot eyes. She doesn't know I heard her, but she has spent most of this week in her room, crying, battling with herself about leaving me behind, alone and exposed to the devil's hand. She has no choice, and I'm aware of that. Gabriel King would never let her leave with his male heir. He'd kill her if she even tried.

"I'm so, so sorry, mo rí beag." I both loved and hated when she called me her little king. "I wish I could take you with me."

My palms cover her hands as I give her a slight nod. "Don't worry, Mam. I'll be okay." My words are supposed to reassure her, but even I know they hold very little conviction.

A lone tear slips from her eye, slowly gliding over her cheek until it finally settles at the edge of her lip. "Ná lig do dhorchadas d'athar do sholas a ghditheroid. Tá grá agam duit, Rohan." Don't let your father's darkness steal your light. I love you, Rohan.

"Grá tú níos mó." Love you more.

"One day, I'll come back for you."

She'd lied.

Barely lucid, the musky, damp stench of mould penetrates my nose as I fight to pull my eyelids open. My entire body aches, battered, bruised, and bloody from hours of pain inflicted by my sadistic cunt of a father.

"You were always weak." His roar rumbles like thunder, clattering off the basement walls. "Just like your whore mother was." He swings the wooden baseball bat, smashing it against my rib cage. A loud crack echoes through the hollow space, and I grunt through the pain but keep my mouth shut.

“One taste of a Ryan pussy, and you think you can fuck me over?” he continues, greeting my other side with a matching crack.

The pain is excruciating, but I don’t give him the satisfaction of seeing me react. I harden my features, clamping my teeth tight and remaining stoic. He steps closer, lowering himself to my eye level. Placing the bat upright between his legs, he leans on the knob, using it for support as he hunkers down.

Aiming my murderous stare his way, I dampen my dry, busted lip with a swipe of my tongue. The coppery taste of blood greets my taste buds, but I push past the stinging sensation. “Perception, old man.” My words are strained as they croak past my lips. “What you may consider my weakness”—I pause, gently drawing in a breath and fighting against the searing pain in my chest—“I see as my greatest strength.”

“You stun me with your delusions. I told you once, and a thousand times after, a Ryan woman is a one-way road to a King’s downfall.”

Raising a brow, I release a strained laugh. “We will see about that.”

“Don’t get cocky, boy.” He slides his tongue across his front teeth. “My son—the one who should have been by my side all along—will arrive any moment, carting your precious addiction with him.”

My breath lodges in my lungs. It’s no secret that the last thing I wanted to do this morning was leave Saoirse alone and unprotected in her big, empty house. Sure, it’s one thing to slap a Glock in her hand and demand her to shoot at any unfortunate cunt that walks through the door uninvited. But

it's another to expect her to do it without hesitation. Saoirse is naïve to the legacy she was born into. She doesn't know the first thing about being a queen amongst *her* army of kings—kings who would kill her without a second thought for a seat on her throne.

The Leinster Syndicate wants what's rightfully hers, and they will go to any length to claim it. The second I walked out of her house, I knew leaving her was a piss-poor idea. I just hope Aodhán did what I asked, because if Donnacha got to her first ... *fuck*.

“Let's see how strong you are when I rip your little slut apart right before your eyes. You disobeyed me, boy. And that won't go unpunished.”

Raising his bat, he uses the end cap at the tip to tilt my chin. “You chose the wrong side, Rohan. I don't know who you're helping, but I will find out. That, I can guarantee.”

My shoulders throb from my outstretched arms chained to the walls of this dingy basement, but that doesn't stop me from tugging against the shackles clamped around my wrists. My knees ache from kneeling on the hard, damp concrete beneath me, and although it takes everything in me to keep my heavy head high, I do. Because there is no way I'm letting this bastard win. “I-I'm going t-to fuckin' k-kill you.”

“Your threats mean nothing, boy. In case you forgot, you have no power here. Killybegs is my kingdom.”

That's where you're wrong. Killybegs belongs to her, as do I.

Sucking on my tongue, I gather enough moisture to spit in his face. His hands swipe at his cheek as he surveys me with a dangerous glare.

Done with his disgust-filled perusal, he rises to his feet and turns towards the table nestled in the corner, seeking his next torture tool. The longer he takes, the faster my chest rises, expelling heavy breaths.

When he turns back to me with a leather belt dangling from his grip, a reel of childhood memories flash through my mind, holding me hostage.

With every step he takes, I fight against the fearful little boy I once was, begging him not to break free. *We are not him, not anymore.* I remind myself. *We are stronger now. Don't let him win.* The little boy inside me fights back the tears, but I remind him that I have him.

My name is Rohan, motherfucking King.

I am strength.

I am loyalty.

I demand respect.

The chains clang as I thrash, using all my strength to break the hold. But it's fucking pointless. I'm trapped.

"You'd think you'd know by now that all the fighting gets you nowhere." He circles me, stopping behind my back.

"Fuck y—" The leather cracks against my spine, jutting me forward as the burn scorches my skin.

"You are a disrespectful little son of a bitch. The heir you were supposed to be must've rolled down your mother's leg."

He doesn't let up. Lash after lash, insult after insult, all marring my bare skin with raised welts while preying on my mental state.

Suddenly, the loud creak of seized hinges echoes off the walls. Dense footsteps ripple down the staircase and then Donnacha's voice penetrates my ears. "Well, if it isn't my baby brother."

Prying my weighty eyelids open, my gaze travels over him, searching for— No, *hoping* Saoirse is not with him.

"Not so hot, now. Are you, Rohan?" His hoarse sneer grates on my last nerve, and if I weren't otherwise occupied, I'd wipe the smug look right off his pompous face.

"Where's the girl?" My father's voice drips with disappointment, gaining all my attention. I swear to fuck, if Donnacha laid a finger on Saoirse, I will bury him alive—as soon as I figure out how to get out of these fucking chains.

Eyes on Donnacha, I watch as he swallows back the answer to our father's question. As he shifts on his feet, I let my blurred vision take him in.

He looks worse for wear. His face is a swollen black-and-blue mess, courtesy of last night's altercation. But when my eyes land on the dark red fluid staining his denim-covered thigh, a slow malicious smile curls on my lips. Gabriel must notice it at the same time as I do because he stalks around me, eyes trained on the torn denim of Donnacha's jeans. "What happened?" he demands.

"The bitch fucking shot me!"

I can't help the sputter of laughter that barrels past my lips.

That's my good girl.

"What the fuck are you laughing at?" Gabriel grasps hold of my hair, tearing my head back with so much force it almost dislocates from my shoulders.

I slide my tongue along my front teeth while raising my left brow. My blatant disregard spurs him on, fuelling the monster that lives behind his perfected mask. I shouldn't feed the beast, but here I am, typical Rohan, disobeying rules.

I can't help it. Maybe it's the concussion, or perhaps the sedative my dad injected into my bloodstream, but I erupt into an all-out, slightly deranged cackle. The vision Donnacha's words paint is too glorious to ignore.

I can't believe she shot the bastard. And so close to his shrivelled cock, too. Golden! Honestly, I'm a little pissed that I missed her in action. I would have paid good money to see Donnacha's face at that moment. Maybe Aodhán caught it on camera? Oh fuck, what if he wasn't there? I swear if Donnacha hurt her, I'll cut him up, wrap every piece of him in a body bag, and bury him six feet under hell.

Reality slams into me when Gabriel rounds my body, hikes his leg, and belts his foot against my jaw. The echo of my crunching bone chills my eardrums, but I clamp my lips shut, swallowing back the curse on the tip of my tongue. *Fuck, that one stung.*

Finally, my head falls forward, my exhausted body incapable of holding its weight.

"Is that all you got, old man?" My taunt is airy and breathless, grumbled into my chest, but he hears it nonetheless.

"Shut the fuck up, you little cunt." A fist slams into my rib cage, knocking the remaining wind from my chest. I blink through the aching of my bones while sputtering up a lung.

Jesus Christ, the devil is a relentless bastard.

My eyes fog over, dulling the room, stealing my definition, and making everything fade into a shapeless blur.

My senses are dwindling, so I focus on the one I still have control over—my hearing.

With my ears pricked, I zone in on the pacing footfalls and mumbled grumbles.

“Fuck. What are we going to do? There is no way we’re getting to her after this. Whoever is protecting this stupid bitch will be on high alert.”

“We could—” Donnacha tries before my father abruptly halts him.

“Don’t you think you’ve done enough? She’s escaped your clutches twice now.”

“What if—”

“For fuck’s sake, Donnacha! Keep your fucking trap closed. I can’t think over your incessant bullshit.”

The room falls silent, except for the thud of Gabriel’s feet as he strides back and forth, reminding me why Donnacha is my sperm donor’s favourite. Donnacha is a lamb, loyal to his shepherd. But here’s the thing about shepherds—they only breed lambs for slaughter. My father failed to make me comply, to follow him blindly in his ruthless schemes, and he certainly couldn’t manipulate me into doing his bidding. My lack of respect for him paved the road to our father-son demise. Now, I am nothing but a blooming flower in hell’s garden, too pure for the Devil’s soul.



ICE WATER DOUSES MY SKIN, CHILLING ME TO THE BONE, AND dragging me from my haunted abyss.

“Wake the fuck up, you useless piece of shite,” Gabriel growls as he stands over me, holding an empty bucket.

The room spins as I lift my head, only for it to collapse against my chest instantly. Mentally exhausted and physically drained, my mind screams at me to close my eyes, to fade into the grey.

“I’ve got a plan,” Cuntface, aka Daddy dearest, continues.

Metal scrapes along the concrete, polluting the air with a teeth-clenching sound. He pulls a chair across the basement, positioning it in my line of sight, the backrest forward. Finally, he plonks his arse down, straddling the seat. His arms drape over the back as he leans forward, glaring at me with wild eyes. “Listen up, boy!” He slides his tongue over his bottom lip, and I raise my brow in response.

“Here’s what’s gonna happen ...”

SEVEN

LIAM

PROVE ME WRONG. BEIBHINN'S WORDS STAY WITH ME, replaying in my head. Thankfully, the hum of my bike eases the thoughts coursing through my mind as I ride back down the mountainside. However, nothing could stop my stomach from flipping with the guilt ransacking my gut.

I despise lying to my sister. We're close, as close as most people would imagine twins to be. When we were younger, we had a pact, a promise never to keep things from one another. And we didn't ... for a while, anyway.

When we hit our teens, our dynamic-duo relationship shifted, changing drastically in the last couple years. Being the eldest by two whole minutes makes me the next successor of the Devereux seat—a seat I had no interest in taking. I never wanted the life my father yearned for me to fulfil, but the syndicate didn't give me a choice. My choice was removed altogether, and before long, I was bound to the role I had to play. Eventually, I jumped all in, accepting my reality with hesitant arms. Now, I play a soldier in a civil war, not knowing which side I'm supposed to be on.

It never mattered how lethal Beibhinn became. Our father doesn't hold us to the same expectations. To him, Bev will always be the weaker sex, unable to fill the space of a king's

shoe. He views the syndicate as a man's world, and there is no room for "a bitch in heat." His words, not mine. To the outside world, my father is a doting husband, a golden father, but I know better. Sure, he loves my mother and Beibhinn in his own fucked-up way, but he will never believe they could hold power over him. In his mind, a man can do his job better than any female. Ironical considering the woman he married is as cutthroat as they come.

But my dad doesn't see it that way. He expects certain things from me as his male heir. Things he'd never ask from my sister; things Bev would never understand. Part of me would love to confide in her, to let her know what's being demanded of me, but I know better. Not in a million years would she agree to his special brand of lunacy. It leaves me no choice. I can't tell her. And I know if this plan blows up in my face, I'll lose the person who means the most to me in this corrupt world ... my sister.

I wish it were simpler, but I have a part to play, an obligation to my father, Killybegs, and the syndicate, and I must abide by the instructions given. I have a task, a job, and a commitment—one I promised I'd keep.

My job is simple—remove Gabriel King from his false throne and take over as the next king, no matter the cost. This is not a matter of the heart, it's strategic. Will I regret it? Well, that remains to be seen.



BEFORE LONG, I'M PULLING IN MY DRIVEWAY WITH ONLY ONE thing on my mind—find Saoirse Ryan and make her mine.

Lost to that train of thought, I almost miss the low mumble coming from somewhere near the well-manicured shrubbery a few feet away. As I insert the key into the lock of the gate-lodge Bev and I share, I halt, straining my ears.

Seconds pass, but there's nothing other than the soft rustling of leaves. I shake my head and mutter, "I'm hearing things."

Finally, I push the door open with my foot, and just as I step over the threshold, I hear it again. A low, grumbled groan. "Ahmmnn."

"Beibhinn?" I call out, even though it's impossible she arrived home ahead of me.

There's no way she could have made it back yet. She needs to take the main roads in her jeep, whereas I drove straight across the countryside on my dirt bike, cutting the trip in half.

Reaching for the metal baseball bat we keep just inside the doorway in the umbrella stand, I then click on the outdoor lights, illuminating the place with a flick of a switch. My feet edge forward, and I follow the direction the sound came from as I scan the rest of the area on high alert, searching for any threat. I find nothing.

Right as I am about to turn on my heel, pinning the sound on the little stray kitten Beibhinn likes to feed from time to time, I hear it again. Only now, I make out my grunted name. "Li-Lia-Liam."

I round the bushes within seconds, and my eyes widen to giant saucers. Curled in a ball on his side, arms concealing his face and wearing nothing but a dirty pair of drenched jeans, lies a defeated, broken Rohan King.

What in the actual fuck?

My eyes scan his vulnerable state. Blood covers his exposed torso, crusting over the raised welts enveloping his entire back, and a mirage of bruising litters his skin in a painful-looking blend of purples and blues. There's no doubt about it. He has been through hell, and God knows as well as I do, that's hard to do. Sure, I dislike the guy—hate him, even—but he's a fucking beast in the cage. Speed, precision, accuracy, he has them all down pat. Whoever did this meant business, and they didn't hesitate to inflict as much hurt as possible.

Dropping to my hunkers next to him, I use the butt of the bat to help flip him. Without protest, he flops on his back, and his face contorts into a world of pain.

Holy shite! If I thought his back was bad, it has nothing on his face. He's barely recognisable beneath the swelling. I'm no doctor, but if I had to wager a guess, I'd say his left eye socket looks shattered, his nose seems broken, and that's not even half of it. The cut above his eyebrow from our fight is open again, pissing blood down his cheek. Not to mention the slice on his bottom lip, crusted over with congealed blood. "Rí, can you hear me?" His movements are subtle, but his chin tips down towards his chest in acknowledgement.

My hands shift to my hair, running through the messy strands on top. "What the hell happened, man?" Realisation slams into me. If Rohan is here ... then— "Wait! Where is Saoirse? Wasn't she with you?"

He groans again, coughing up a lung when he tries to speak through gritted teeth. His mumbles are inaudible grunts, doing nothing to ease the frantic pounding in my chest.

Using the bat for leverage, I push myself to my feet, whip my phone from my pocket, and pull up Saoirse's number.

After pressing the call button, I pace back and forth as I wait for her to pick up. Nothing. I dial twice more and still no answer. “Shit!”

“What the fuck, Liam!” Beibhinn appears out of thin fucking air and pushes past me to get to Rohan. She drops to her knees next to him before tossing a look over her shoulder. I see the cogs in her head moving as she assesses me, eyes flicking between me and the bat clutched in my left hand. “What the hell did you do?”

“Me?” Her accusation pisses me off more than it should. But after everything, I can’t *really* blame her for her mind going there. After all, things between Rohan and me have always been tense, and there is also the fact he stole my date right out from under me and probably fucked her seven ways to Sunday. Rohan has always loved to get under my skin, and unfortunately for me, he’s figured out Saoirse is now the best way to do it.

Her brows hike up, disappearing beneath her white mane as she tries to read my facial expressions.

“For fuck’s sake, Bev. I didn’t touch him. I found him here.”

“Well,” she demands as she interprets the disappointment on my face. “What was I supposed to think when you’re standing over him with a fucking bat?”

“Touché.”

“Who would do this to him? Sure, Gabriel has a lot of enemies, but Rohan can look after himself.”

“I don’t know, Bev. Whoever it was, they dumped him for a purpose. But, as you can see, he’s not exactly talkative right now.”

Her fingertips settle on Rohan's neck, then once she's finished checking him over, she tosses a look my way. "Pack your ego away and get over here. I need help to get him into the house."

"What!" He's not stepping foot in our lodge. She can pack him into her Defender and take him home. There's no chance on earth I'm playing nurse to a fucking King.

"Jesus, Liam. Get the fuck over yourself. We can't leave him out here. He'll catch his death. He's ice-cold as it is. Not to mention the extensive injuries. He needs help."

Her tone is fierce, leaving zero room for any argument. With a heavy exhale, my shoulders deflate. "Fine. But I'm not babysitting his arse. I've got shit to do." *Like finding my raven-haired princess.*

EIGHT

ROHAN

OVERCOME BY THROBBING PAIN I CAN'T PINPOINT, I'M immobilised. Everything fucking hurts, right down to my marrow. My flesh stings, my bones ache, and my insides feel as though they're alight, scorched to ashes by reckless flames. It's a familiar feeling. My mind is awake, but I'm still floating in the blackness of a semi-conscious state.

With heavy limbs and closed eyes, I lie still, listening to my surroundings, wondering where in the fuck I am. Copper coats my mouth, leaving a horrific taste on my tongue, but as I try to dampen my lips, a groan ripples in my chest and a piercing pain clamps my jaw.

The pulsation between my ears pounds to a steady beat, distorting the surrounding voices to nothing but a dull murmur. *Fucking hell! Why does it feel like a convoy of buses hit me then catapulted me into the air, only to land in a field of overgrown nettles?*

The relentless throbbing continues, but the hushed voices become louder as Beibhinn rips Liam a new arsehole.

The Devereux twins.

“Pack it in, you overgrown ape. Sure, Rohan's not your biggest fan and vice versa. But he's still family. He needs our help.”

“Don’t pull the family card, Bev. Blood may be thicker than water, but it’s harder to swallow. He might be my cousin, but he hasn’t been *family* in a long fucking time.”

The feeling is mutual, cunt!

“When did you turn into a hate-filled bastard? You should know better than anyone. We are not all products of our surnames. Yes, Rohan is a King, but he has Brady blood in his veins, just like you and I.”

“Mam hasn’t spoken to her sister in years, and if Rohan were worthy of saving, Elouise would have taken him with her when she ran.” *Low blow, Liam. Then again, you always were beneath me.* “We both know Rohan’s cut from the same cloth as his old man. So, excuse fucking me if I don’t want to nurse baby Cain back to life.” *Well, that’s just insulting. I’m nothing like that devious prick.*

“Fine, do whatever you want. But good luck finding Saoirse without him. Considering he was the last one with her.”

Saoirse. Fuck. I need to get to her.

My thunderous roar vibrates through me, gathering in my chest and ricocheting against my windpipe. But unfortunately, the fierceness of the cry dies as it pushes past my lips, filling the air with nothing but a disgruntled, pain-filled groan.

My eyes peel open—slightly—giving way to a blurry blonde. “Rohan.” Beibhinn drops next to me. “Can you hear me?”

Clenching my stomach muscles, I attempt to lift myself into a sitting position, but a sharp pain shoots across my rib cage, forcing me to lie back down. “Fuck.”

“Easy.” Beibhinn’s hand falls to my shoulder. “You’re pretty beat, Rí. No sudden movements. You’re hooked up to an IV to help with the pain.”

My gaze follows hers, stopping when I see the needle shoved into my forearm.

“Wh-here did you get a fuckin’ IV?”

Bev rolls her eyes. “I’m the daughter of a crime boss, Rohan. So, while you boys were having all the fun, I was learning how to patch you fuckers up. Cause you know, there’s a vagina between my legs, so God forbid I wield a gun.”

Sarcasm drips from her statement, which is half bullshit. The truth is Beibhinn didn’t train with us, but that didn’t stop her from becoming a badass on her own merit. She’s a sniper, and she knows it.

“Take it out, Bev. S-Saoirse. I’ve to f-find her.” *Fuckin’ hell, my mouth’s drier than a nun’s cunt.* I push forward again, clenching my teeth when fiery pain explodes throughout my body.

Worry flitters across her face, and a heaviness creases her brow. “Jesus. Stop! You’re in no state to go anywhere. You look like you’ve gone ten rounds with Ali.”

“They could’ve hurt her.”

Beibhinn’s gaze flicks towards the doorway to where Liam is watching my pathetic display.

“Who’s they, Rohan?” she asks as Liam closes the distance between us with a question of his own.

“Where the fuck is she?”

Battered as I am, there’s no way I’m letting this tattooed gobshite speak to me like he’s God and I’m one of his

disciples. “Choke on a bag of dicks, Devereux.”

Fury mars his face, shaping his lips in a bitter scowl. “Don’t press me, King. Or I’ll knock you the fuck out.”

My brow hikes up. *Well, as far as it can rise with the sheer amount of swelling on my face.* “Do it, pussy. We both know it’s the only chance you’ll get, considering I’m already halfway there.”

Beibhinn throws her head back, guides her hands into a prayer position, and then speaks to the ceiling. “Lord, grant me the patience I need to deal with all this Big Dick Energy. Because if you don’t, I’ll get charged with double homicide. Amen.”

“Swallow your pride, King. Where is Saoirse?”

“I’m not telling you shit.” I push down on the palm of my hand and scoot back until my spine greets the back of the pull-out couch in Beibhinn’s library, but the movement causes a fresh bout of pain. “Motherfucker. That stings.”

“Shit! I never cleaned your back.” Beibhinn’s eyes widen. “Liam, go get me some more bandages from the first aid kit,” she barks as she reaches for a basin of water and the bag of cotton balls from the side table. Suddenly, the distinct scent of antiseptic assaults my nose.

“I’m not going anywhere until he tells me where Saoirse is.”

Beibhinn explodes, fury lacing every word. “For fuck’s sake, Liam. Do it now! Unless you’d rather wash his wounds.”

If I weren’t in a world of hurt, I’d laugh at the disgusted look that takes over his features. “Fine. But when I get back, he’d better start talking.”

Liam turns on his heel, but I bite as he steps over the threshold. “That’s it, Devereux. Do what your little sister says.”

Beibhinn mutters something under her breath that sounds distinctly like “Help me, Jesus,” but I keep my eyes on Liam. His shoulders rise as he steadies his breath before stepping out of sight without another word.

“Why do you insist on riling him up?” Beibhinn prompts while burning my back with a cotton ball soaked in Dettol.

“It’s too easy.”

“You’re both intolerable. Two chauvinist pigs from the same farm.”

Silence falls around us, and I think back to Donnacha and the bullet hole in his thigh. He said Saoirse had shot him, but what else happened? Is she safe? Did Aodhán find her before something unimaginable happened? *Fuck, I need to know she’s okay.*

“Can I borrow your Rover?”

Beibhinn peers over my shoulder. “Are you concussed? You can barely stand, Rí. There is no way you’re fit to drive.”

“I need to find Saoirse and make sure she’s okay.”

Her eyes close, and her breaths become louder, deeper, before finally releasing with a heavy sigh. “What happened? Tell me, and I can help you.”

“She wasn’t with me, Bev. I left her this morning, and I promised I’d be back. I told Aodhán to bring her all her stuff. She’s probably with him. At least I fucking hope she is.”

“Aodhán was here this morning. I gave him all her belongings, but I haven’t heard from him since he left. I tried

his phone a few times, but he's not picking up. Neither is Saoirse."

"Shit."

She's quiet for a moment. Then her icy-blue gaze captures mine. "Please tell me what happened, Rohan. Who did this to you? And why are you so concerned about Saoirse if she wasn't with you?"

"It's a long story, B."

She wants to argue with me. I can see it in the hard cut of her eyes, but she doesn't push for whatever reason. "In all the years I've known you, you've never had this look in your eye."

I tease my bottom lip between my teeth. "What look?"

"Fear, Rohan. You look fucking terrified."

She's right. For the first time in a long time, I'm losing grasp of my emotions. Knowing what my father wants me to do and what it means for the girl who holds my black heart ... No lie, it scares me fucking shitless. There is no good outcome. I won't do what Gabriel wants, even if it means I lose Saoirse in the process.

Earlier, my father asked me how far I was willing to go. At the time, I didn't answer, I couldn't. Because the truth petrified me.

Liam barges in, begrudgingly holding the first aid kit Beibhinn sent him to get. And as much as it chills me to the core, I know what I need to do.

How far am I willing to go? For her, as far as it fuckin' takes.

The demon beneath my skin wages a war with the angel on my shoulder, and soon he's choking on the pride he's forced to swallow. Eyes locked on Liam, I force the words past my stubborn tongue. "I need your help."

NINE

SAOIRSE

LOST IN THOUGHT, I TRACE THE RAINDROPS WITH MY GAZE, watching as they travel down the window, blurring the thick tree-line framing the winding mountain road. The weight of unspoken words leaves a lingering heaviness neither Lorcan nor I bother to dissect. After all, how does one broach a conversation when there is so much betrayal and deceit wrapped around every moment?

The further down the mountain we descend, the more my adrenaline fades, giving way to aching muscles and weighty bones. I am exhausted—in every sense—struggling to keep swimming against the current. Every moment since I stepped foot in Killybegs has tested me, and I'm so close to breaking. Stuck on a proverbial see-saw, I fight to find the balance between the girl I once was and the girl I was born to be.

Heavy is the head that shoulders the crown, but how can I believe I am strong enough to carry the weight of the syndicate when the people around me won't trust me with the truth?

Suddenly, the cab fills with a persistent ringing, drawing my gaze from beyond the window to the huge fancy display screen in the centre of the dashboard where two round icons flash beneath the caller's name—a car and a Bluetooth symbol. Lorcan keeps his posture ramrod straight, but I don't

miss how his eyes dart towards the display. The ringing fades to nothing, and D. L. Devereux's contact disappears from the screen—the call left unanswered.

Before long, the ringing starts again. With a heavy inhale, Lorcan fishes a small black earpiece from the centre console. Placing it in his ear, he clicks the Bluetooth icon, shielding me from the other half of the conversation. “Devin,”—his Northern brogue is curt—“now's not a good time. Can I call you back?”

I strain my ears, eager to hear Liam's response. Our date last night—at the syndicate party—seems like a lifetime ago. I feel guilty for abandoning him to dance with Rohan, but for whatever reason, I can't resist Rí's pull. Things with Liam got complicated. We share a childhood full of memories, but do I feel the same about him as I do Rohan? Honestly, I don't know.

There is so much going on in my life. I haven't had a second to figure out which way is up, let alone my feelings for the two Killybegs heirs. I planned to talk to Liam when I returned to the gate-lodge, but I never made it that far.

After Donnacha attacked me at the party, everything else vacated my mind, Liam included. Once again, I ran. Only this time, I jumped into all things Rohan, subsequently escaping reality.

Looking back on the party, and after digesting everything Rohan said about his father, I realise Gabriel distracted Liam at the bar so Donnacha could make his move without getting caught. I feel terrible for how things have played out with him, but there is something about Rohan that draws out my inner stupid.

My mind screams Liam is the logical choice. But the beating organ in my chest dances to a different tune. Before I become consumed in the green-eyed enigma that is Rohan King, Lorcan's deep baritone pulls my focus back to the present.

"Fuckin' hell, kid! How's about ye?" A breath rushes from his lungs, relieving the worried furrow knitting his harsh brow. He listens intently as Liam's inaudible mumbles travel down the line. "Aye, I have 'er. Aodhán called me." His eyes flick toward me, scanning every inch of my face with a cautious yet tender perusal. "She's seen better." Lorcan's head bobs as he processes whatever is being said. Next, his fingers tighten on the wheel, forcing the skin of his tattooed knuckles to whiten. "Don't worry. That wee cunt has sealed his fate. Nobody messes with mine. Fuckin' nobody."

A grit wraps around his words, sending a shock of fear up my spine. He sounds lethal and borderline unhinged. Gone is the fun-loving guy I spent my summer nights with, and in his place is a hard-faced warrior. Suddenly, his stony gaze finds mine, and a haunted look flashes behind his eyes, stealing my breath. He's terrifying. There is no doubt about it. This man could murder me with his bare hands and not break a sweat. But when his tight lips tug to one side, reassuring me with a softened smile. Finally, he breaks his fatherly stare and faces the road again before he continues talking. "Are you sure, kid?" Lorcan's teeth sink into his bottom lip. "Aye. I'll tell 'er." Lorcan looks at me with guilt wrapped in unconditional love. *Tell me what?*

"We'll be in the cabins if you change your mind. Okay, stay outta trouble."

Too stubborn and confused about how I am feeling, I refused to break my silence and ask what's going on. I won't beg for the truth, not anymore. If Lorcan wants to be in my life, he needs to be more forthcoming. But that doesn't stop my mind from running away with a thousand questions.

Why is Liam safe? Did someone come for him, too? Maybe Donnacha went there before coming to the Ryan manor? Does Liam know where Rohan is?

The possibilities are endless, but I refuse to break first.



THE SKY TURNS A DEEPER SHADE OF BLUE AS NIGHT STEALS the day. The gravel beneath the tires crunches as Lorcan effortlessly glides his black Mercedes AMG GT through the nature-made tunnel of trees. Once we break through the clearing, the glow of the moonlight reflects off the lake, highlighting the two hidden hideouts.

Years have passed, yet the reminiscent feeling of happier times floods my veins. The core of who I am, and my most cherished memories are all forged on the edge of the age-old pier that connects the waterline to land. When I was a child, the cabins were my safe place, the only constant in an unstable life. Always on the move, shuffling from town to town, I lived for the familiarity this place never failed to deliver. Little had I known that beyond the trees, at the tip of the mountain, less than fifteen miles away, lived the past my mother was shielding me from.

The car lights illuminate the driveway as we round the front of the cabin toward the back of the property. The beams shoot enough glow to light up everything in front of us,

including the tiny figure pacing up and down the back porch. Her arms wrap around her centre as she chews nervously on her bottom lip, but as soon as the car comes into full view, she bounds down the short four steps, rushing toward us.

She rips the passenger door open within seconds, then pulls me from the car and into her chest. “Oh my God, Saor.” I bury my nose in her chunky knit, and the familiar scent of freshly bloomed lavender assaults my senses. A cornucopia of emotion erupts beneath my skin, each fighting to be felt. My body stiffens in her grip as I process how I feel. Sure, I love her, and I am happy to see her safe and well. But I’m also hurt, angry, and confused. For almost two weeks, she’d vanished into thin fucking air, leaving me when I needed her most.

“I’m so glad you’re okay.” She steps back, clutching my shoulders as she does a slow perusal from the tips of my toes to the top of my head.

“Glad I’m okay?” I tear from her grasp, stepping back and creating space between us. A sad look washes across her face, but I am too wound up to care. She told me to run, knowing I’d land in Killybegs completely unprepared for what it was I’d find. She spent years shielding me from the information I’d need to survive this hellhole, then hid while I scrambled to find my footing. Fuck her.

Before I can stop myself, my arm raises, and my palm greets her cheek with an open-handed blow.

Her mouth falls open, and her eyes round.

“Saoirse,” Lorcan scolds, but I ignore him and keep my eyes trained on my mother.

“In the past twenty-four hours, a fucking psycho violated me—not once, but twice. He held me underwater as I fought

for my life. Then, I shot him. A real human being—I *shot* someone. And after that, I found out the man I looked up to as a child is, in fact, my real father. All within the same fucking day!” I step closer as the words spewed from my mouth with disgust. “So, fuck you, and your pathetic ‘I’m glad you’re okay’!”

“Saoirse—”

“Save it, *Éanna*. I’ve had a rough day. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to bed before it gets any worse.”

“Okay, honey.” She keeps her eyes on the ground. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

Turning on my heel I head for the cabin, hoping to God it hasn’t changed since the last time I was here.

TEN

SAOIRSE

SLEEP ELUDES ME.

I don't know how long has passed, but it feels like hours since I began counting the knots in the large wooden support beams along the bedroom ceiling. My mind hops from one thing to another; my brain is so scrambled it can't focus on one thought for more than a few seconds before the next grabs hold.

Finally, sitting upright in the bed, I haul myself against the headboard and assess the rest of my surroundings. Everything about this room is familiar, from the soft blush curtains and matching bedding to the faint musky scent of dampness from months—or in this case, years—of being left vacant. At least the bedsheets smell fresh. I'm guessing my mother washed them when she fled like a coward, leaving her only child to fend for herself.

Bitterness spirals around my heart, squeezing so tight it might shatter. It's hard not to judge the woman who raised me, especially when I'm none the wiser about everything she and Lorcan expect of me. Maybe I should have heard her out when I arrived, but I wasn't in the headspace to listen. I needed a little breathing room away from all the white noise,

somewhere I could digest the past few weeks. But nothing seems to clear the fog.

When my mind is still reeling a couple hours later, I push back the duvet, slide off the double bed, and dig through the matching bedside locker for my old wind-up flashlight, feeling victorious when my fingers wrap around it, hidden at the back of the drawer.

Thankfully, my bedroom is on the ground floor at the back of the cabin, so I slip into my Nikes and escape out the window with one destination in mind. With each step, my feet sludge through the spongy grass, but I soon forget about dirtying my pristine trainers when a familiar sense of calm washes through me as the lake's edge comes into view.

My feet greet the dock, and an audible creak echoes through the peaceful sky. The aged wood has seen better days—disintegrating at the edges and patched with slippery green moss—but I don't let it deter me.

Watching my step, I creep towards the edge and lower myself to sit. Finally, I tilt my chin towards the purple sky, close my eyes and listen as the robins serenade the dawn's arrival. For the first time in weeks, I allow myself to relax and lower my guard, feeling completely at one with the surrounding nature.

There is something magical about dangling your feet above the water as the wind tangles your hair that eases the soul like no other. Devin and I used to come out here to watch the sunset when we were kids. Back then, everything seemed so simple. I was just a normal girl hanging out with a cute boy, enjoying endless summer days.

But that was then. Now, everything's changed—Devin, Lachie, Mam—everything I once knew is all gone. Changed,

evolved into something unrecognisable. I'm grasping to hang on to a past that never really existed. Every memory I made was a perfect illusion.

Liam, Lorcan, Éanna.

They aren't the people I thought they were. How am I to trust the truth when my life is nothing but a construction of lies?

The lake air fills my lungs as I draw in a laboured breath. On a heavy exhale, I open my eyes, and my head tilts to the right, scanning the large end post holding the pier in place. A tear falls, sliding down my cheek, and I can't help but reminisce when the carved-out heart comes into view.

D + S

4EVR

My fingers trace the hollowed-out letters engraved deep in the wood, and for the first time since my life fell apart, I allow myself to break down.

How did I get to this moment? When did my world shatter into a billion unrecognisable pieces I don't know how to fit back together? When did everyone around me become different versions of the people I knew?

My body trembles as a wave of untameable emotion leaks from my tear ducts. My shoulders shake, and my breath lodges in my throat, slipping past my lips as an unflattering wheeze. It's all too fucking much—the weight of this world, my new life, the deceit it's all wrapped in.

I've got so many questions, and I don't know where to begin.

Rohan King. Everything I knew changed the second he entered my life.

How could one person hold the power to tilt my world on its axis? Silly, naïve Saoirse. I thought his lies were delectable, but nothing, absolutely nothing, could have prepared me for the way he blew up my life with destructive truths.

Raising my hands, I bury my face in my palms, muffling the sound of my shattered soul as it heaves from my chest.

I want to return to a time when boring and normal were enough. When my mother was nothing more than an overprotective woman, and my father was a daydream I conjured in my mind. All I ever wanted was a stable life, somewhere I could call home forever. Instead, I'm caught in a web, tangled and trapped by every thread.

“Mind if I sit, doll?”

The hesitation in Lorcan's voice drags my palms away from my face, making my eyes drift towards him. Gone is the suit he wore back in Killybegs, and it's replaced by an old Dire Straits band tee and worn, distressed denim jeans. His tattooed arms are on full display, but his hands are deep in his pockets. His shoulders roll forward as he waits for my reply. He looks somewhat like the man I once knew, only less volatile. Hesitant, even.

Without words, I scoot over, making enough room for him to sink next to me as I stare out at the water. Silence floods the sky as I wait for him to say whatever he came out here to say. But after several deafeningly quiet moments, I break first. “Did you want something?” I turn my head towards him, watching his eyes roam over every detail on my face.

His gaze holds mine, and for the first time I recognise the eyes that are so similar to the ones that stare back at me in the mirror every day. As a child, I never noticed the similarities between us. And although I mostly resemble my mother, I can see a subtle touch of myself within Lorcan's features.

"I know you need answers."

"Then give them to me."

His Adam's apple bobs with a swallow. "My guilt eats me alive. I despise how much time I lost with you by protecting you and your mother. It may seem like I never cared because I wasn't around while you grew into the woman you've become, but I promise, doll, that couldn't be further from the truth."

Drawing in a sharp breath, I keep my reply strong and unwavering. "Why did you do it, then? What was more important than your family?"

"A child of two provinces is something that doesn't bode well within the syndicate. It's against every rule ever written, and if word ever got around about your lineage, the target on your back would expand to every corner of Ireland. I love you both too much to allow that to happen. It's always been beyond crucial to keep my role in your life a secret, Saoirse. That doesn't mean I didn't know every detail 'bout cha. We had the summers here, and when they had to end, your mother updated me on every facet of your life. I was there for every birthday, hiding in the shadows, watching you become a beautiful queen."

His words shock me silent. Sure, the days we'd all spent at this very lake were magical. Lorcan, Mam, Devin—Liam—and I were always together. Fishing, swimming, riding bikes along the dirt trail. He'd been attentive, taught me the basics of

how to enjoy the great outdoors. But that doesn't explain the secrecy. They should have told me he was more than just our cabin neighbour.

"We should have told you sooner." Lorcan voices my thoughts aloud. "I gave up everything to keep the two loves of my life safe. I walked away from all I'd ever known when I moved to Killybegs to ensure you stayed hidden. Whenever Gabriel came close to finding you and your ma, I helped her disappear again. Being a Ryan holds great power, doll. But God forbid Gabriel finds out you are a Reilly, too. He'd stop at nothing. That's why moving you around became essential. Your ma and I needed you safe until it came time for you to overrule his seat in the syndicate."

"What if I don't want to?" The petulant child within me rears her head. "Has it ever dawned on either of you to ask me what I need? It's barely been two weeks, and I've already faced death. I'm not cut out for this life, Lorcan."

"That's where you're wrong, doll." His eyes lock on mine, and I don't pull away when his palm covers my hand. "You are more than what you think you are. Forged by the blood of the founding fathers, you were born to be the queen. Respect can only be earned, and loyalty gained, but strength ... strength comes from the heart. Something you have in abundance."

My pulse spikes with adrenaline, giving life to my tired body. Could he be right? Am I strong enough to tackle whatever this world throws at me?

"I know you're scared, doll." A glint lights his sharp eyes as his mouth quips into a wide smile. "But you need to starve that fear. Hunger's a good sauce when power is the dish being served."

Suddenly, a yawn breaks free, and I bring my hand to my mouth to catch it. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. You’ve had a rough couple weeks. Why don’t you head back in and try to get some rest before you talk to your ma in the morning.”

As much as I hate to give in to his gentle demand, my body and mind scream at me for some reprieve from the madness. I rise from the dock with a nod, but as I turn to walk away, one question gnaws at me. “In the car ... what did Liam tell you to tell me?”

Lorcan’s lids pinch tight, and his lips clamp shut. With a drawn-out inhale, his nostrils flare as he slowly opens his eyes and peers at me over his brow. “That wasn’t Liam. It was Rohan.”

My feet carry me forward, concern rushing past my lips. “Oh my God. Is he okay? What happened? Where is he?”

Lorcan rolls his shoulders, and the material of his T-shirt stretches across his broad chest when he straightens his spine. “Rohan is a big boy, doll. Beibhinn and Liam are with him. He’s fine.”

Relief deflates my lungs. “Thank God he’s okay. I’ll call Beibhinn when I get back to my room.”

“Don’t!” Lorcan rises from his perch and steps forward, closing the space between us.

“Why not? I need to make sure he’s okay.” There is no way I’m getting into everything Rohan and I shared back at the manor—for obvious reasons—but Lorcan knows that Rohan and I have been spending time together, so it’s not a stretch for me to be concerned about him and his well-being.

His eyes dim with something I can't quite place, but when his lips tilt down, I recognise the disappointment. Not *in* me, but *for* me.

Anticipation titillates every nerve in my body, but I force myself to school my features, face void of any emotion. "What did he ask you to tell me?" Lorcan's gaze drifts towards his feet before travelling upward and capturing my gaze. "What did he say, Lorcan?"

"Every angel wants to redeem a demon, but some demons don't want to change. Bhí tú mo botún is mó."

Typical Rohan, cryptic as ever, using a near-forgotten language to punctuate his point. "What does that phrase even mean?"

Lorcan's throat bobs as he swallows the taste on his tongue. "It means 'you were my greatest mistake.'"

If heartbreak had a sound, it would be silence so fucking loud it consumes every inch of a person's soul until all they feel is the overwhelming sense of numbness strangling the breath from their lungs. My eyes prick with tears, a ferocious sting that burns the hair in my nose.

I say nothing as I turn and walk away.

"Saoirse, wait."

My teeth sink into my lower lip, and my defence mechanism kicks in. I glare over my shoulder. "It's too late to play the concerned father, Lorcan."

ELEVEN

LIAM

MY KNUCKLES TIGHTEN, TURNING WHITE AS MY GRIP FASTENS around the steering wheel. “Super Villain” by Stileto & Silent Child blasts through the speakers, dulling the roar of Beibhinn’s Defender and easing the uncertainty licking my skin.

I have lost my fucking mind, no doubt about it. There is no other logical reason I’d be driving sixty down a back road—with my sister in tow—on my way to a private lake nestled in the crevice of the Dublin/Wicklow mountains.

And at Rohan King’s request, nonetheless.

Anxiety coils in my gut, begging me to heed the warning brewing in the pit of my stomach. I ignore it, planting my foot against the peddle and increasing speed.

“Liam! Slow down before you kill us both.” Beibhinn’s hand tightens on the oh-Jesus handle above the passenger door. Her eyes widen as I navigate every bend. “I know you and Lorcan have your differences, but fucking hell, brother, I’d like to arrive alive.”

Briefly flicking my gaze her way, I raise my left brow and ease my foot off the throttle. “Relax. I could drive on these roads blindfolded.”

“That may be so, but you can’t predict the oncoming traffic, and I’d rather not meet my death by plummeting off the edge of a mountain in a ball of metal,” she squeaks. “What exactly happened between you two all those years ago?”

Lorcan gave me his trust. I betrayed it. My jaw clamps shut; teeth clenched tight. “Nothing.”

“Cut the bullshit.” Bev shifts in her seat. Twisting her slender frame to the side, she glares at me with her icy blues. “Spit it out.”

I’m no stranger to my sister’s persistence. Beibhinn won’t stop until she learns every detail of why Lorcan went from my mentor to a virtual stranger within a too-brief summer. It’s best to give her what she’s fishing for.

“My trips to the lake had conditions, Bev. Everything that happened at the lake was to stay at the lake.”

“Fight club rules. Really?”

“Something like that. Nobody was to know about what we did or who was there. Lorcan expressed the importance many times, but that last summer, things between Saoirse and I changed. Selfishly, I didn’t want to wait another year before I saw her again, so I told Dad about the girl at the lake. Little did I know she was a Ryan heir. After that, my relationship with Lorcan changed.”

“Did he ever tell you why you needed to keep her a secret?” Beibhinn frowns, and I know her mind is racing a mile a minute as she tries to piece the puzzle together.

I’ve spent many nights questioning Lorcan’s motives, wondering why, but I’ve always fallen a little short when it comes down to the details. But after what Rohan told us tonight, it’s all making a little more sense. “Not really, but I

know it was because of Darragh Ryan's death. After Darragh died, the three founding families thought it best to protect the secret Ryan heir."

"And who better to protect the syndicate's hidden princess than the primary enforcer!"

"Exactly."

Bev falls silent. Lost in her thoughts, she stares out the window, watching the blur of thick tree-line as we fly by, leaving me to mull over everything Rohan told us back at the house. It was Gabriel who'd killed Darragh Ryan, and if he has his way, Saoirse is next.

At first, I thought Rohan was taking the piss because why would the syndicate allow Gabriel to continue his reign if he killed a founding family member? Innocent until proven guilty, Rohan said.

I'm not one to blindly trust King's word, but honestly, Rohan's tale of events checks out. Gabriel took over the Leinster seat shortly after Éanna failed her trials, but his reign was supposed to be short-lived. Darragh was only a year younger than Éanna, but right before he turned eighteen, his girlfriend found him out in the woods, hanging from a tree. The syndicate ruled his death as a suicide, but from the stories Mam told, she never believed Darragh killed himself.

Rohan plans to take his dad down by revealing the truth of what happened in Killybegs all those years ago, but to do that, he needs to ensure Saoirse is safe and as far away from him as possible. I won't say I'm not happy about him stepping back in his pursuit of Saoirse, because that couldn't be further from the truth.

In seven days, Saoirse Ryan will start her journey to become the next Leinster queen, and if I have my way, I will be beside her when she claims her throne.

There is a war brewing, and somehow, I'm playing for both sides.

Within minutes, the earthy gravel crunches beneath my tires as I ease my car down the secluded driveway towards the lake. A purple haze breaks through the trees, illuminating the cabins to the left in the light of the new dawn. My eyes drift right towards the dock, narrowing on the lone figure standing at the pier's tip, looking out into the calm waters. We are too far up the drive for him to notice our arrival or for me to gauge his facial features, but his shadowed outline is one I'm familiar with.

As we descend, I watch Lorcan pace back and forth with his hands folded at the top of his head. His spine is ramrod straight, and the tension rolls off him in waves. Then, finally, my headlights capture his attention, and his feet abruptly halt. His arms drop with precision, one swiftly rounding his back before disappearing into the waistband of his jeans and producing his 9mm Glock, the same one he always carries. Within seconds, Lorcan has his firearm aimed right at us.

Pulling the car to a stop, I cut the engine.

There are a few ways this could go, but I'm hoping Rohan's phone call has paved the way for the less volatile option.

"Are you planning on exiting the car, or am I to sit here all night while you pretend you're not terrified of Lorcan Reilly?" Beibhinn inspects her long, perfectly manicured fingernails as if the baddest cunt in the entire syndicate hasn't got us marked with the bottom of his barrel.

“I’m not afraid of Lorcan.”

Her face tilts towards me, lips pursed, and brows raised. “Ha! Right, and I’m in a three-way relationship with Chris Hemsworth and Henry Cavill.”

Ignoring her sass, I pull the door handle and mutter, “Remind me why I thought it was a good idea to bring you along.”

Following my lead, Bev exits from the passenger side. Not one to give away the last word, she throws her response across the roof of my Mustang. “Because, dear brother, your godfather *actually* likes me. Therefore, he’s less likely to blow your head off in my presence.”

Her lips quip into a smile as she twists on the heel of her knee-high leather boot. My eyes roll as Beibhinn swings her arms out wide, greeting Lorcan with a Cheshire cat smile. “Well, if it isn’t my favourite enforcer.”

Lorcan keeps the handgun trained on me as his eyes dart toward my sister. “Nice to see you, Bevy. Shame I can’t say the same for your company.”

I step forward, and Lorcan moves on reflex, his cold eyes a warning. “One more fuckin’ step, Devereux, and I’ll take you to the ground with a bullet.”

I hold my hands up, trying to defuse the situation. “Rohan sent us.”

“Aye! I’m aware. Doesn’t mean you’re welcome.”

“Lachie,” Beibhinn edges closer. “Saoirse is my friend.” Her hand gestures towards me. “I promise you, Liam and I, we want to help her as much as you do.”

“Why should I believe a word you say, Beibhinn? The Devereux name isn’t exactly loyal. Protecting that girl”—Lorcan tips his chin toward the cabin—“is my only priority, and it has been since she was a wee baby. It’ll take more than a few choice words to get past those doors.”

I knew coming here was a terrible idea. Lorcan’s notions of me haven’t changed, and there is nothing Rohan or Beibhinn could say to change the past. It doesn’t matter that I was just a kid back then. Lorcan presented me with a test, a way to prove I could be loyal to the syndicate by keeping their best-kept secret, and I failed. Before that fateful summer, nobody but my mother, Lorcan, and Éanna knew of Saoirse Ryan’s existence. She was just an average girl living an average life. Then I blew it all up by telling my da about the pretty girl I fell in love with at the lake.

Lorcan’s glare bounces between Beibhinn and I as he waits for something more than Beibhinn’s promise. Deep down, I know I am the only one who can change his mind. I need to prove I’m worthy of his trust. It’s time to lay some cards on the table, but I need to be careful, especially when I’m playing for opposing sides.

My lungs expand with an inhale. “Look. You have an issue with me, I get it. But contrary to what you believe, I never meant to expose Saoirse all those years ago.” My eyes wander to the dock, and an onslaught of memories flash through my mind. “I was a kid. A stupid one, sure. But I care about Saoirse more than I probably should.” Lorcan lowers his weapon, but his stance remains rigid and ready, so I proceed. “Her first trial is in a week, Lorcan. Saoirse needs to be back in Killybegs, you know that as well as we do. She needs to train or Hannah will destroy her chance at initiating.”

Beibhinn steps forward, flanking my side. “I can help her train, Lachie.” Her eyes flick toward me, then back to him. “We both can.”

Lorcan is silent for a moment, and I can almost hear the thoughts racing around his head. Finally, after several prolonged seconds, his eyes narrow on me. “There is only one reason you’d be so hell-bent on helping the future queen of the Leinster Syndicate. What makes you think you deserve her?”

This time, I will give him the God’s honest truth. “I don’t. But I won’t let that stop me from trying to become what she needs.”

TWELVE

SAOIRSE

SINCE LEAVING LORCAN ALONE ON THE PIER, I'VE SPENT every second trying to unravel the plethora of thoughts clogging my brain. I was so wrapped up in my concern for Rohan and his well-being I never thought to question why he'd be calling from Liam's phone. Both have made it known there's no love lost between them, yet somehow, Rohan had Liam's phone. It makes no sense.

Not to mention the message Lorcan delivered. How can Rohan be so quick to discard me, especially after the night we shared at the manor? On the one hand, I feel like a fucking idiot for allowing myself to fall for Rohan's pretty words and sinful touch, only to be tossed aside like a forgotten toy. Maybe I should've heeded Liam's warning, but I was so caught up in the rush of danger that comes with falling for a guy like Rohan King that I forgot to take caution with something as fragile as my heart.

Then, on the other hand, I can't ignore how Rohan made me feel when we were together, and if I were to play back every moment, it would only confirm what I already knew ... He felt it, too. It was clear when he lowered his walls around me and in how he worshipped my body as if I were the air he needed to breathe.

I close my eyes tight, fighting through the confusion. Conflict ping-pongs between my head and my heart, and I don't know which one to listen to anymore. One thing is for certain, something isn't adding up, and just like every other part of my new life, the people around me have left me in the dark.

Honestly, I'm fucking sick of it at this point. I'm done being the clueless girl sinking into a quicksand of lies. No more waiting on truths to be revealed. It's time to find some answers, and I know exactly where to start.

My feet pound against the wooden floorboards as I trudge through the cabin, giving my foul mood its very own soundtrack titled "Times Up, Mother."

Is this what reaching my breaking point feels like? My body vibrates with undiluted anger—at my mam for shielding me from the inevitable, at Lorcan for bowing out of my life when I needed him to guide me, and at Rohan for chipping away at my heart and taking something from me when he had no intention of giving it the care he promised. I'm seconds away from blowing my top, and I don't give two shits about who gets caught in the aftermath.

Finally, I burst into the living room and find my mam with her back towards me, staring out the window, arms folded across her chest. My abrupt entrance causes her to peer over her shoulder, and I get a good look at her for the first time since the night I ran at her request. Her eyes are heavy, sunk-in, and surrounded by dark circles, and her cheeks appear hollower than before, making her high cheekbones stand out like sharp edges on her once-rounded face. Her long dark hair, identical to my own, could do with some taming—if the stray strands flying in every direction are anything to go by. She

looks a little worse for wear, and the part of me that loves her unconditionally aches to run to her, wrap my arms around her, and never let go. But then I remember all the deceit she's weaved, a well-constructed web I've become trapped in, and the sadness I feel at her stressed appearance fades.

"I'm done waiting for answers." I hold her gaze, keeping my shoulders squared and my chin high, leaving no room for argument.

As she turns to face me, her chest expands with an exhale. Defeat lingers in the slouch of her shoulders, but with a wave of her hand, she gestures towards the armchair next to the electric fireplace. My eyes home in on the empty seat, reluctant to do anything she asks, but my need for answers outweighs my stubborn streak.

Once I'm settled, my mam lowers onto the couch directly across from me, separated by only an old rustic coffee table. Silence pollutes the room, drawing out the tension between us, but I hold strong, unwilling to beg her for the answers I'm entitled to.

Her hands fidget, fingers tapping against her thighs. All the while, I keep my eyes trained on hers. Finally, she draws in an audible breath before expelling it with a heavy exhale. "I suppose I should start at the beginning."

"That's usually how stories unfold."

Her face tightens as she briefly draws her eyes closed. "I know you're angry, Saor. And you have every right to be, but please refrain from the sarcasm." Her gaze flicks towards the floor. "This isn't easy for me to share ... especially with my teenage daughter. Please, hold judgement until you hear what I say."

Slumping back into the chair, I cross my arms over my chest. “Fine. I’m listening.”

Her grey eyes capture mine, and in their depths, a storm brews. “When I was seventeen, I was engaged to Gabriel King.”

I dart forward, nearly falling off the chair as my eyes round into full-moon saucers. “You were what?” My jaw hangs open, and my nose scrunches with disgust. “How? Or, more importantly, why?”

“We were in love, or so I thought.” Stunned silent by the fact my mother had once been in a very serious relationship with Rohan’s dad, I blink in disbelief as bile simmers in my gut. Speaking from experience, that man is a fucking snake. Thank God, that relationship ended because ... just, no.

“So, what happened?”

“Well, right before my eighteenth birthday, I found out he’d been sleeping with one of my best friends behind my back. They’d been seeing each other for a few months, and I’d never suspected a thing.”

“No,” I gasp. “He slept with Fiadh?”

“No, Fiadh would never betray me like that, but I can’t afford the same sentiment to her twin sister, Elouise.”

Well, that statement has a lot to unpack, but it explains the distaste in Fiadh’s mouth when she showed me the group photo in her office the day I arrived. Elouise’s name slid off her tongue wrapped in poison, and the tension on her face when I asked about it was hard to ignore. I wonder if Fiadh’s hatred of her sister has anything to do with my mam’s backstory?

Before I can ask, my mam continues. “For weeks, Gabriel tried to deny everything. He showed up daily, begging me to take him back, saying it was all one big misunderstanding. And naïve me, I almost believed him. Until ...” She sighs, gulping back the emotion in her eyes.

“Until what?”

“Elouise showed up at my introduction party—I had won my fight against Gabriel the week before. And in true syndicate style, they held a party in my honour. That night, Elouise dragged me into the restroom and shoved a pregnancy test in my face, claiming Gabriel was the father.”

“Donnacha?” I ask, trying to piece the puzzle together.

“What?” Her brows furrow. “No, why would you think that? Donnacha is a Deegan, not a King.”

“Not according to him or Rohan,” I state. “I didn’t see it at first, but once Donnacha let it slip, the similarities were too obvious to ignore.” Shit! I probably shouldn’t have divulged that nugget of information so freely. But fuck it! At this point, I’m beyond caring. I need answers, and I’m willing to share what I know in order to get them.

“I haven’t seen Donnacha since he was a baby, but to be honest, it wouldn’t shock me. Gabriel’s not known for keeping it in his trousers.”

“So, if Donnacha isn’t Elouise’s son, who is?”

Mam shakes her head and rolls her eyes. “That boy told you nothing, huh?”

“Rohan?”

She nods. “Yes. Elouise is Rohan’s mother.”

This conversation is a complete mindfuck, but the news of Rohan and Liam's relation is the least of my worries. I'm still sitting on the edge of my seat, waiting with bated breath for the rest of my mam's story. "So, what happened after you found out about the baby?"

"Truth, I got drunk off my ass and hit on the first guy I saw."

"Lorcan?"

"Unfortunately, no." She releases a huffed laugh, almost as though she's reliving the memory again. "Let's just say I made a fool of myself, and your dad found me crying on the balcony. Classy, I know."

A smile escapes me, and even though I'm angry with her, I don't fight it because a part of me misses the easy-going relationship we once had.

"After that, your dad and I spent the night talking. Finally, when the night ended, he insisted on walking me home. Once he walked me to my door, he asked me on a date, and I politely declined."

I'm so wrapped up in how my mam met my dad, I don't hear Lorcan entering the room from behind me until he announces himself. "I showed up at her school every day for an entire week until I finally wore her down."

"The best decision I ever made," my mam counters, eyes locked on the man filling the doorway behind me. Peering over my shoulder, I watch as he pushes off the doorjamb and strides across the room, planting a chaste kiss on my mother's forehead.

Over the years, I've wondered why my mam never dated. She's thirty-six, stunning with her pale skin and piercing grey

eyes. But seeing her with Lorcan, I can see why she turned down every man who asked her out. It's obvious her heart already belonged to someone ... my dad.

"Where are Liam and Beibhinn?" my mam questions Lorcan, making my brows hike towards my hairline.

"The twins are here?"

"Aye." Lorcan nods, taking a seat beside my mam and drawing his attention to me. "I asked them to give us a wee while to talk. They're waiting over in the other cabin. I told them I'd send you over if and when you're ready."

"Okay, thank you." I bring my gaze back to my mam, needing more answers. "So, is your relationship the reason you ran?"

"Partly, but no. Lorcan and I had only been seeing each other for a few weeks when I found out about you, and we agreed to keep it a secret until after I finished my second trial. Only I never made it that far." Her face falls, a wayward look darkening her eyes. "How much do you know about the trials, Saoirse?"

THIRTEEN

SAOIRSE

MY MAM SCOOTS FORWARD, BARELY PERCHED ON THE EDGE OF the couch. Her hand reaches towards the table where a half-empty tumbler of water sits. Slowly, she raises it to her lips, then coats her tongue with a mouthful, waiting for my reply.

I think over her question, how much do I know about the trials?

“The trials are part of the syndicate initiation. All successors must partake once they reach eighteen. The first trial is to fight a syndicate member and win, right?”

With a slight nod, my mam sets her glass down. “Sort of. You can fight any member who has completed the first trial. Their place in the syndicate is not at risk, only the initiate on trial. Do you know anything else?”

“No, the rest of the trials remain a mystery. Honestly, if it weren’t for Beibhinn and Rohan, I wouldn’t even know as much as I do. Nobody’s explained how many there are or what’s involved.”

Lorcan leans forward, shifting closer to my mam’s side before he rests his elbows on his knees. “There are three trials,” he offers, “and although predecessors can prepare you for what’s coming, we can’t outright tell you what they

involve. Only those who complete the first round are privy to what happens after.”

The crease between my brows deepens. “Meaning?”

Mam’s grey eyes hold mine. “We can ensure you’re ready for each task without directly explaining what they involve. After you pass the first one, they’ll explain the next two. Unfortunately, you are the last of this generation to turn eighteen, which means you are at a disadvantage to the others.”

“How so?”

Mam sighs before looking towards my dad, silently encouraging him to continue. “The second task is a group trial for all initiates. Once the final initiate—you—completes the strength trial, the syndicate will move forward with the second, leaving you very little time to prepare.”

“Why is it called the strength trial, besides the obvious reason?”

“The syndicate has four values: strength, respect, loyalty, and the crown that binds them together. They designed the three trials to serve the fourth, and each one is loosely based on those characteristics.”

I swallow a breath. The nervous energy flicking through me makes my stomach queasy. My gaze falls to the floor as anxiety rattles my core. How the hell am I supposed to pass these trials? I barely made it through ten days in Killybegs—nearing death twice.

“Soar.” My mam’s concern echoes through the room. “Look at me, honey.”

My chin tilts, and I straighten my spine. I can do this. I am Saoirse Ryan. Killybegs belongs to my family. “How soon

after my birthday do my trials begin?”

“The following Monday,” Lorcan drops his eyes to the floor.

Panic creeps in. My birthday is this Thursday, meaning I have just over a week to prepare. The galloping in my chest quickens, thundering so loud it echoes in my eardrums, and my blood boils, prickling my skin. “How am I supposed to win this fight? All the other initiates have been training their whole lives for this moment. I, however, have not.”

At this, my mam pushes from the sofa and begins pacing back and forth while fidgeting with her hands and cracking her knuckles.

“You are more prepared than you think. You’ve spent your life fighting, Saoirse. Maybe not physically, but in here.” Lorcan taps his temple with his pointer finger. “Liam is the best fighter Killybegs has ever seen, yet once he stepped into that ring with Rohan, all bets were off. Wanna know why?”

It’s a rhetorical question, but I lean back and fold my arms across my chest. “Sure. Enlighten me.”

“The strength trial is a battle of wills. A mind game if you will. Sure, there are physical aspects, but if you can use your head, you can dominate your opponent. Fighting is more mental than most assume. If you let your mind lead, you can anticipate every move the opposition will make. One good manoeuvre could seal your win, but it needs perfect execution.”

Finally, after my parents share a silent conversation with nothing but their eyes, Lorcan averts his gaze towards me. “Liam and Beibhinn have offered to help you train. You’ve got nine days to learn everything you need about Hannah Crowe—

her strengths, weaknesses, hopes, and fears are all pieces you need to defeat her. From what I've seen, she's a good fighter, but she's not great. With the right moves, I've zero doubt you can take her. If you want to, that is."

Confusion weighs down my brow, crinkling my eyes into narrow slits. "What do you mean by 'if I want'? I thought the trials were compulsory."

"They are," Mam confirms, rounding the couch until she's standing behind my dad. "But your dad and I have talked, and if you don't want to be part of this life, we will make sure you aren't."

I see it in her eyes, the same look she had every time we moved to a new town without a second's notice.

"You mean I run?"

"Yes. Gabriel wants the throne and won't stop until he wipes every Ryan heir from existence. You either beat him at his own game, or hide and pray to God he doesn't find you."

"So, those are my only options? Either run for the rest of my life or reclaim the Ryan seat and remove Gabriel from the throne."

I prop my elbows on my knees, mirroring Lorcan. My heavy-lidded eyes tighten at the corners, knowing the decision I need to make.

A rush of adrenaline floods my veins, but the thoughts in my head give way to crippling fear. I want to do this, but what if I can't? If I don't complete these trials, then what? Will I condemn myself to a life like my mother's, always running and never allowing myself to live or be truly happy?

Before I make my decision, I need to know everything—the real reason Éanna Ryan ran and, more importantly, why

she stayed away. “Why didn’t you complete your trials?”

Her jaw clamps tight, and she rounds the couch before dropping to her hunkers before me. “I had to wait for the other initiates to turn eighteen, so I was almost four months pregnant by the time my second trial came around. Nobody knew about you, and I had planned to keep it that way until your dad and I could find a solution to us being together without the syndicate interfering. We are both original families, and any relationship between us would be forbidden. Anyway”—she swallows, eyes closing briefly as she finds the right words—“that evening, about an hour before the start time, Gabriel and his cronies cornered me as I got to my car.”

My heart rattles against my rib cage as I watch a tear slip from her eye. Finally, she pushes to her feet, rounding the coffee table and taking a seat next to Lorcan. His arm circles around her waist, pulling her into his side. His mouth drops to her ear, but his words are low, too quiet for me to decipher.

It’s a strange feeling to see them together, my mam a vulnerable mess, finding safety in his arms. The love between them is clear with the breath my mam releases before gazing up at him with tear-stained cheeks and a woeful smile. He’s her calm, the safe place she needs to land.

A few seconds pass, and then she continues, “Gabriel stuck his hand up my skirt, and it wasn’t until I felt the cold metal of the barrel through my underwear that I realised he had a gun. I was so scared, for me, but most of all, for the little life I had growing inside me. He threatened to shoot me ...” Her voice trails off, cracking with emotion. “He told me to get in his car, or he’d blow a hole right through my—”

Lorcan pulls her closer, cupping the back of her head with his tattooed hands. “I have you, dove. Nothing’s gonna hurt

you.”

Tears cloud my vision, burning as they cascade down my cheeks. I feel like an intruder, witnessing a private moment between the two.

Finally, my mam pulls back, placing her hand on Lorcan’s chest. “It’s okay,” she tells him. “She deserves to know.”

“Mam, you don’t have to—”

“I need to, honey.”

Wiping the tears from my cheeks with my index finger, I nod.

“I was so scared, Saor. So, I did what he asked of me. Blindly, I got in the car, and he drove me deep into the mountains. After a few miles, he stopped at the end of a steep walking trail and forced me to hike to the top where the old Hellfire Club ruins look over Dublin.”

Leaning forward, she takes another sip from her water before she pushes through with the rest of the story. “I remember it being a dark December evening, and it was raining so heavily that my school uniform soaked through. Funny, I knew how much danger I’d put myself in, but all I could think about was how bone cold I was. It was as though somehow my mind had neutralised the fear by latching onto something so trivial.” She tilts her chin, giving her attention to the wooden beams running along the ceiling. “After we got to the top, Gabriel and his friends made me strip out of my clothes while they all watched and laughed, and when I was completely naked, they took turns violating every piece of me.”

I’m shaking now, an icy chill freezing the beating in my chest. The pain in her words shackles my breaths, and when I

look towards Lorcan, he is vibrating—his face flushed red with anger, but he contains himself for her. I've never wanted to harm a human being as much as want to gut Gabriel King. Not even Donnacha jilted me as much as watching my mother wrestle with her memories.

“They left me there, Saoirse. Naked, battered, and covered in their twisted pleasure. For over eight hours, I laid there praying that the life inside me survived. I wished on every fucking star they hadn't killed the one thing that kept me fighting through the most horrific experience of my life. The next morning, as the sun rose, a man and wife who were out for a morning hike found me. They drove me to the nearest hospital, where I spent six weeks recovering. I never went back to Killybegs after that night. I couldn't.”

I understand her reasoning, and for the first time in a while, I can say I wouldn't have handled it differently.

“I had planned to come back,” she offers. “But after I failed my initiation by not completing my trials, they rewarded my *fiancé*—at least in the eyes of the syndicate—my spot on the council, but only until my brother came of age. So, I made myself a promise. Once Darragh removed Gabriel from power, I'd return home. Only, that never happened.”

“Fiadh mentioned Darragh the day I arrived in Killybegs. She told me he died on my birthday.”

“Darragh didn't die, honey. Gabriel killed him before his eighteenth birthday when he became eligible to remove him from the Ryan throne. Of course, nobody could prove otherwise. But I knew my little brother was the farthest thing from suicidal. He had called me that morning, and he was happy and in love, and he couldn't wait to meet his niece or nephew. He made me a promise that day, he swore blind he'd

do everything he could to bring me home again.” Eyes rimmed red, she lets her tears fall freely, choking on every word that leaves her mouth. “Those ... those were ... the last words we shared.”

Pushing from my chair, I close the distance between us, and envelop her in a hug. “I’m sorry, Mam.”

Finally, after her emotions soak through my hoodie, I lift my head to find my father watching with a thunderous expression clenching his face. “Aren’t you supposed to be some bad arse?” I raise a brow, staring him down. “Why didn’t you kill that fucker and be done with it?”

“Trust me, doll. Killing Gabriel King has been atop the list of my priorities for a long time. But there are rules within the syndicate that don’t allow me—Ulster’s king—to act without repercussions. He’d be eating dirt if it were just your ma and me, but it’s not. We had you to consider. Dealing with the backlash of the entire syndicate army would never be worth putting your life in danger. Not to worry, doll. Once we remove Gabriel from his position as Leinster’s king, he’s no longer untouchable. I’ve waited almost nineteen years to kill that cunt once and for all. Have no fear ... the day Gabriel King meets his maker, my fucking face will be the last thing that bastard sees.”

I release a breath I didn’t know I was holding, relieving some of the tension that has settled across the back of my shoulders. “I don’t want to run. Gabriel has already taken far too much from our family. I want to take part in the trials.”

“Saoirse. You need to be sure.” My mam bursts the proverbial bubble. “The third trial can change the rest of your life.”

I push to my feet, determination fuelling me. “I can’t hide from this, Mam. And I don’t want to, either. Gabriel doesn’t deserve to play a king in our kingdom. If I don’t do this, he wins.”

“You can’t do this for me, honey. If—and it’s a big if—you decide to partake in these trials, you need to do it for yourself.” Her eyes are heavy, glazed by a glassy finish as she pulls her lips tight, deepening the few wrinkles at the edges of her mouth. “Whatever you decide to do, make sure it’s a choice you can live with.”

LIAM

“YOU KNOW,” BEIBHINN PAUSES MID-THOUGHT. FROM THE corner of my eye, I spy her pointer finger tapping against her pouting lips as she mulls over her words before speaking them aloud. “Never mind.” She smirks, punctuating her sass with a raised brow. “Pacing the floor is working spectacularly for you, brother.”

“Your sarcasm’s noted, Bev.” I bring my attention back to the full-length window, and my gaze roots to the cabin next to ours. Folding my arms across my chest, I steal my posture and try my fucking damndest to burn a hole into the neighbouring cabin’s exterior, hoping to capture a tiny glimpse of Saoirse. Impossible, but I need some reassurance she’s okay and unharmed. Preferably with my own fucking eyes.

Since Lorcan divulged what happened at the Ryan manor, my blood has coursed through my veins with a boiling fury, and no amount of pacing has eased the murderous tendencies tearing at my insides. I’m seconds away from storming over there and busting the door in. This further fuels Beibhinn’s amusement, but I couldn’t care less. After she and I spoke with Rohan, there was no doubt Gabriel was up to his dirty tricks. But my imagination could never have prepared me for the harsh reality Lorcan shared. My protective instincts are on high alert, threatening to break free and string Donnacha

Deegan up by his bollocks. He signed his death warrant the second he placed his hands on the only Ryan heir.

Saoirse may be new to this lifestyle, but her army has trained for years while awaiting her arrival. It's in our veins, passed down through generations—strength, respect, and loyalty for the crown that binds them together. Like it or not, that crown belongs to the Ryan family, and regardless of our stance, we—the future of the syndicate—must protect our future leader.

With every second that passes, my patience wears like a snagged thread on a cheap garment. My teeth gnaw on the inside of my cheek, and a coppery tang taints my tongue when I pierce through the fleshy meat. “Fuck this shite! They’ve been in there for hours. Surely Lorcan has said all he needs to say.”

“Cool your jets, Rambo.” Beibhinn appears beside me and places her hand on my shoulder. “She’s with her mam, not held captive by a ruthless overlord.”

“How are you so calm? Donnacha could have killed her.”

Her left shoulder hikes as if to say *Yeah, maybe. But he didn't*. “I’m no waitress, Liam. But you can bet I’ll serve that dickless cunt a dish ... One I like to call revenge.” She inspects her nails, and a frown worms across her face when she notices a chip on her painted pointer tip. Finally, she flicks her gaze toward the cabin across the way, and a woeful smile tucks at the corner of her mouth. “Believe it or not, Saoirse is my friend, probably the only one I have, and although family comes first, loyal friends are a close second. I get you are worried about her; I am too. But she’s safe here. We need to wait until she’s ready.”

“You’re right.”

Her smile widens as she peers up at me. “Can I get that in writing?”

Suddenly, the front door of Saoirse’s cabin swings open, gaining all my attention, and Saoirse steps into view. The morning sun greets her face, highlighting the delicate curve of her jawline as she closes her eyes and tilts her face towards the sky. My lungs contract as the breath I drew halts.

Saoirse Ryan has been stunning for as long as I can remember. Even when we were budding teens, she blinded me with her natural beauty. But not a goddamn thing could have prepared me for the young woman she’s blossomed into. In her absence, Saoirse has grown into something words could never describe. Her long hair hangs down her back in waves of dark silk, accentuating her olive skin and framing her round whiskey eyes and button nose. She’s pint-sized perfection, barely a hair over five feet and a few inches.

The moment I found her lazing in the lounge seat in our back garden after years had passed and all I had were distant memories, I knew what I needed to do. Divine timing placed her right in front of me, the answer to all my fucking problems wrapped in a sexy bow.

Much to my father’s delight, it didn’t take any convincing for me to pursue the Ryan heir ... because I’d wanted Saoirse to be mine since we were kids playing in these very cabins. I always knew Saoirse’s lineage destined her for the throne. More so, I knew I was the man who needed to stand beside her.

When I told my father of Saoirse’s existence, I stupidly thought it would bring us together and give me a chance to claim her, not push her further away. Back then, I was unaware of the danger she faced, and I allowed my selfish needs to

overshadow the command Lorcan gave me. In doing so, I lost the girl and my chance to prove my worth.

My father has a plan, though. And although I'm not one hundred percent on board with his method, I can't deny that the outcome appeals to me. If following his orders guarantees my place next to her, then that is a price I will happily pay.

"Should we tell Rohan what happened to her?" Beibhinn prompts, forcing me from my thoughts. Peering over my left shoulder, my brow hikes towards my hairline, shooting her a wordless response. The moment I saw Saoirse and Rohan together for the first time, I knew he'd become a problem. The chemistry between could ignite a forest skyline. Telling Rohan isn't an option. Not right now, at least. He has feelings for Saoirse, even if he won't admit it. For my plan to work, I need to keep him as far away from her as possible—at least until I can remind her of how we used to be.

"He deserves to know, don't you think?"

Silence fills the cabin, neither of us willing to break the heavy tension weighing down my shoulders. Stubborn to a fault, Beibhinn narrows her eyes, surveying me from tip to toe, then back again, assessing my body language with her all-knowing death glare. Sometimes the twin thing works in my favour, but other times, I wish my sister couldn't read me as easily as she does those tortured heroes in one of her twisted romance books.

"No, I don't," I argue. "He said it himself ... it's best for everyone if he stays far the fuck away from her. Telling him would have him rushing to her side like some hero on a white horse, but we both know that is not the case. Everyone has a motive, Bev. Including Rohan."

“What’s yours?” she bites out through gritted teeth. “Let me guess ... you want to use her for the final trial, don’t you?”

“What I want and need are two very different things.” But it just so happens I can have both with Saoirse by my side.

“I’m not okay with this, Liam. The third trial should be her choice, not some dick-swinging contest between you and Rohan. Besides, whether we tell him or not, he’s bound to find out. Lorcan said Aodhán found her at Ryan manor, so it’s only a matter of time before word gets back. You know as well as I do Aodhán keeps nothing from Rohan.”

She’s not wrong. Aodhán can’t hold his fucking piss where Rohan is concerned. But, regardless of what Rohan shared with Beibhinn and me back at the house, I got the feeling he didn’t give us all the details. He’s withholding something, and I don’t know what.

Rohan isn’t one to back down, so if he’s staying away from Saoirse, you can bet he has a valid reason. Do I think he’ll stay away? No, I don’t. But I’m hoping whatever he’s plotting allows me enough time to remind her I was who she wanted once upon a time.

“Exactly. Time’s ticking, Bev.” I square my shoulders, stretch my backbone to full length, and allow my feet to carry me to the front door.

“Wait,” Beibhinn calls out, halting my footsteps. “What are you doing?”

My father’s words echo through my mind, the command loud and fucking clear. Drawing my determined gaze over my shoulder, my eyes latch onto Beibhinn’s curious stare.

“I’m going to show her why a Devereux is the better option.”

FIFTEEN

SAOIRSE

MY THOUGHTS HOLD MY MIND CAPTIVE AS I WANDER TOWARDS the shoreline with my head tilted towards the sun. After everything my mother shared—the horrid glimpses of her past and how she ran to keep me protected—my heart struggles to maintain a steady beat.

I want to hate her for so many reasons, but that's a tall order when all she's ever done was keep me hidden from the monsters of her past. What she lived through should have broken her, but it hadn't. No matter how I twist it, I can't deny she was always there for me, even when I thought she wasn't.

My mind is a minefield, and with every step I take, a new wave of anxiety washes through me. Do I really believe I'm strong enough to go back and face my mother's past in hopes of re-writing my future? Can I overcome every obstacle the syndicate throws at me when I don't have the years of training my peers received? My gut trembles at the thought, and fear skirts up my oesophagus until it lodges in the base of my throat, blocking my airway.

Sealing my eyes shut, I force myself to gulp a soothing breath while replaying the words that have become my mantra until they finally sink in and calm my racing pulse. *Never feed your fears. Never feed your fears. Never feed your fears.*

I'm lost in my meditative state when a hand lands on my shoulders, scaring the life out of me. My hand flies to my chest as a familiar chuckle flitters through the breeze.

Spinning on my heels, I twist to face the silent ninja who made me jump out of my skin. "Jesus, Liam. You almost gave me a heart attack."

His steel-grey eyes crinkle with amusement as a slow and lazy smile tugs at the edges of his mouth. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. I was calling you. You didn't hear me?"

"No. Sorry, I was in a world of my own."

His eyes hold mine, and for a beat, we stand lost in the moment while nothing but the soundtrack of a soft breeze and early-morning bird chirps fill the silence. It's only then I realise I haven't seen Liam since I abandoned him at the introduction party to dance with Rohan.

Guilt tugs at my heartstrings. Liam has been nothing but attentive since I arrived in Killybegs, and all I've done is throw his hospitality in his face, yet here he is, showing up to help me, even after the way I treated him. He deserves an apology for how I've behaved. He asked me not to choose Rohan, and time and time again, I did. Even when I knew it would break me.

"Look Liam," I fidget with my hands, searching for the right words. "About the other night—"

His eyes focus over my shoulder, like something in the distance has caught his attention. Finally, he brings his mischievous gaze back to me. "Hold that thought."

Reaching forward, he takes my hand in his. "Come with me." He tugs gently, and a wide smile lights his face.

Confused yet thankful for the distraction, I follow behind him, running along the shoreline until we come to an abrupt stop in front of a large sycamore tree. Off to the side, an old tire hangs from a Tiffany-blue rope secured to one of the many branches. “Oh my God.” My voice quivers with disbelief. “It’s still here.”

Liam drops my hand and heads for the old swing. I stand back as he tosses the tire up and over the branch, unravelling the rope and bringing it closer to the ground. Once it’s at the right height, he takes hold of the tire and gestures toward it with a tip of his chin. “Hop on, Free Bird. It’s time to fly.”

My eyes dart between him and the swing, and even though I have a billion things on my mind, the carefree look he’s directing at me wins, crumbling my resolve. “Fine. For old times’ sake.”

One push turns into countless, and for a moment in time, I forget about the weight pressing down on my shoulders. For the first time in weeks, I feel at ease. But like all moments, they pass, and the reality of what I need to do barrels back to the forefront, stealing the sliver of happiness I’d allowed myself to indulge in. A heavy breath huffs past my lips as I drop my feet to the ground, halting mid-flight. My emotions tumble over, and before I can stop myself, tears are cascading down my cheeks.

Liam steps in behind me. Grasping my shoulders with a gentle touch, he moulds my back to his chest. “Hey, hey. It’s okay, Saoirse.” His arms circle my waist, then with little to no effort, he extracts me from the tire, rotates me and draws me into the safety of his arms. My face burrows in his hoodie, and we stay like that for what feels like hours—him holding me

together while I so desperately try not to break apart in his arms and drown his sweatshirt with my tears.

“I’m sorry,” I grumble against his chest as he caresses my hair with feather-light strokes.

“You don’t have to apologise for anything, Free Bird.”

That’s where he’s wrong.

“No, I do. I’ve treated you poorly, and you’re still trying to make me smile. Why, Liam? Why would you waste your time when all I’ve done is treat you like shite?”

His hand cups my face as his eyes portray a million things, some of which I don’t have the energy to dissect. “Listen carefully, darlin’. Do you remember what I said to you in the hallway when I asked you to be my date to the dance?”

That conversation seems like a lifetime ago, not days, but still, his words ring through the white noise filtering through my ears. “You asked me not to count you out, and if there was a slight chance I’d pick you at the finish line, you wanted in.”

His lips tug into a smile. “I also said I would fight for you, and I meant it. Was my ego bruised when I heard you left with Rohan? Sure. But then Lorcan filled me in on why you left. A part of me hates it was Rohan who comforted you when you needed it, but I still meant what I said that day. I was born to be a fighter, Saoirse, and I sure as shit don’t back down from a little competition.”

His words spark something dormant inside me, but I can’t help but wonder if he’d change his mind if he knew everything Rohan and I shared.

Not that it matters now.

If what Lorcan said is true, Rohan got everything he came for, and now he's done. Once again, I was a priceless pawn in one of his sick games. It's hard to believe I ever meant anything to him. Well, nothing more than a quick fuck to pass the time.

With Liam, it's different. He'd never use me the way Rohan has. And he'd certainly never disregard me as though I were nothing more than a discarded condom wrapper. The history Liam and I share connects us beyond the physical. That's not to say I'm not attracted to him, because who wouldn't be. With a canvas of tattoos decorating a mass of muscle, searing grey eyes, and a jawline that disintegrates panties, Liam Devereux is a sight most women melt for.

Beyond his bad-boy exterior, he brings me comfort. His larger-than-life presence wraps around me like a safety blanket, providing me shelter from the battles I know I need to face. Something about his protective demeanour allows me to show him all the vulnerable shades in the palette of my life, and that's what attracts me to him most—the safety I feel when I am in his arms, as though nothing in the world could ever bring me harm.

“Talk to me, Free Bird.” His forehead falls forward, resting against mine as he peers into the windows of my soul. “I’ve got you. Promise.” The intensity of his gaze mixed with his gentle touch forces me to step back, creating a sliver of space between us—just enough distance to enable me to think clearly without drowning in the scent of Liam wrapped in leather and pine.

“I’m scared.” I whisper my confession. “I don’t know the first thing about running an organisation, Liam. Never mind one that is steeped in crime. Everyone expects me to slide into

this world and take it in stride. But I'm falling head first, gaining more than a few bumps and bruises on my way down. I'm not cut out for this lifestyle. As much as I want to be the queen everyone believes I am, I don't belong on this chessboard."

"That's a load of bollocks, and you know it." He steps forward, reclaiming the space I put between us. His hand settles beneath my chin, tilting my head back until my eyes lock on his. The intensity burning in the depths hypnotises me. "You belong here. You know it. Your mam knows it. Hell, even the whole syndicate knows how important you are. Why else would your presence here have grown men running scared, scrambling to keep you away from what is rightfully yours?"

"Do you really think I can beat Gabriel King and take back the Ryan seat?"

"It doesn't matter what I think, Free Bird. Only you know your limits." My brow furrows as his words sink in. With his free hand, he swipes his thumb along my cheekbone as he lowers his mouth to my ear. "But for what it's worth, everyone knows the king is the most vulnerable player on the board." His breath travels along my jawline, and a shiver shoots down my spine. Once his lips are parallel to mine, he whispers against them. "Any guesses on which piece is the most powerful?"

I glance from his lips to his eyes and back again, my words trapped in the base of my throat. I should walk away now, remove myself from his spell, but I can't. I'm paralysed by every word, lost to every caress, and dulcified by every shared breath. Then he closes in, capturing my lips in a sweet, delicate kiss. All too quick, before I have time to react, he

steps back, flashing me a movie-worthy wink and a teasing smile. He slides his hands into his pockets and retreats backward toward the cabins, keeping his eyes on me the entire time. “The queen, Free Bird. The most powerful player is the queen.”

Finally, he turns away, leaving me staring after him with a mind full of racing thoughts.

No more second-guessing myself. I am Saoirse Ryan. And Killybegs belongs to me.

SIXTEEN

LIAM

ARMS FOLDED ACROSS MY CHEST, I LEAN AGAINST THE FRONT grill of Beibhinn's Defender and watch as Saoirse says goodbye to her mother. Éanna's arms engulf her daughter in a tight hug, and Saoirse nestles her head into the crook of her mam's shoulder. "Are you sure about this, Saor?" Éanna steps back, holding Saoirse steady by gripping her shoulders. "You need to be sure."

"I am." A slow smile settles on Saoirse's lips. "I need to do this."

Éanna nods and pulls Saoirse closer, pressing a kiss against her forehead.

Behind them, Lorcan appears in the doorway. His eyes linger on the two Ryan women, but before I can dissect the anguish on his face, he turns away and tosses a bag at me. "Don't just stand there, Devin. Be a good wee'an and load her bags."

"Yeah, Devin," Beibhinn mocks, "be a good little boy and load the bags."

"You're enjoying this far too much, aren't you?" I raise my brow.

"Immensely."

Rounding the vehicle, I pull the keys from my pocket and open the boot. Silently, I toss Saoirse's duffel into the back, but before I can turn away, Lorcan halts me by placing a firm hand on my forearm. "Listen, boy." His eyes pierce into mine. "You can't tell anyone you saw me 'ere. Gabriel King has no clue the syndicate has me watchin' out for the Ryan heir, and it needs to stay that way. Understood?" I tip my chin. "You were a wee kid the last time. But now, prove you are man enough to keep your mouth shut. If anyone asks, you, Beibhinn, and Saoirse weren't here. For that matter, you never saw Éanna or me, either."

"Understood." The muscle in my jaw clenches, hating the condescension that licks his tone.

"Good." He retracts his hand, then crosses his arms across his chest. "Rohan is adamant I can trust you with keeping the Ryan heir safe. And that means keeping this brief trip down memory lane to yourself. Gabriel can't know Éanna is alive. The future of the syndicate is at stake, and to outsmart someone like Gabriel King, we need to remain several steps ahead. I'm placing my trust in you and your sister. Don't shatter it a second time, Devereux."

My teeth bite into my tongue, guarding the anger that wants to slide off my tongue. Instead, I hold back, knowing if I lash out, it won't do me any good where Lorcan is concerned. But there is one thing I need to know. "I don't get it. You've been loyal to Gabriel, doing his dirty work for years. Was it all a ruse?"

"Sometimes we do what we need to in order to get to where we want to be. But don't be mistaken, pup. My loyalty lies with those who never made me question theirs. Gabriel

will get what he deserves. The syndicate has spoken. And like it or not, his day will come.”

The muscles of his jaw tighten, popping in the hollow of his cheeks as a wild spark ignites his eyes. “Time to choose a side, Liam. Everyone has a motive, and there are many teams at play. Choose wisely, because when the last move strikes, there will only be one side left standing.” He steps closer, lowering his mouth to my ear. His baritone deepens, making my skin crawl. “Make no mistake, Devereux, the last ones standing will be loyal to her.”

I dip my head in concession, and slam the boot shut. My gaze follows his, landing on Saoirse as she climbs into the passenger seat and pulls the door closed behind her. Conflicted by my thoughts, I give him a curt nod, ignoring the way my heart flutters to a frantic rhythm. I want to choose her, I do. But if I defy my father’s orders, there’s no guarantee Saoirse Ryan will choose me. Am I willing to risk her safety to ensure my place by her side?

With one last warning glance, he turns on his heel and strides towards the passenger side window. As I hike myself into the driver’s seat, Lorcan raps his knuckles against the glass, gaining Saoirse’s attention. I depress the push-button start to fire up the ignition, giving her window power, and she presses the button, sliding the window down.

“Stay safe, doll.” Lorcan’s eyes soften. “I’ll be in touch.” In the next breath, he’s gone.

“Jesus. That man could melt the knickers off a nun. So fuckin’ hot.”

I peer into the back seat, and spy Beibhinn dramatically fanning her face with her hand.

“Ew.” Saoirse’s head falls back against the headrest. “He’s the same age as your dad.” Her body shudders and her nose crinkles.

“Even better,” Bev laughs. “I’d call him daddy and promise to be his good little girl.”

“Too much information, Bev. Way too much.” Twisting the radio dial, I turn up the music, trying to drown out my sister’s antics as I pull out of the driveway.



AS I WEAVE UP THE WINDING ROADS TOWARDS KILLYBEGS, I find it hard to keep my eyes on the road and off the girl in the passenger seat next to me.

Every couple of seconds, I glance her way, stealing a quick glimpse. Her elbow rests on the small door sill, and her cheek presses against her knuckles as she stares out the window, watching the world flash by in a blur.

Music blares from the speakers, bleeding into the cab, yet somehow, the sound of Saoirse’s thoughts overshadow the lyrics. Nudging the volume dial on the steering wheel, I turn down the song. “You doing okay over there, Free Bird?”

Startled by my question, she shakes away whatever thought was consuming her, and twists in the seat to face me. She tucks her left leg beneath her right, then her eyes flick between me and Beibhinn in the back seat. “Yeah, I was just thinking, and I don’t want to go back to your gate-lodge.”

My brows crease. “What do you mean?”

Her shoulders rise, and she draws in a deep breath before releasing it with a heavy sigh. “I want to go home. Back to the

Ryan manor.”

Beibhinn’s face appears between the seats. “Huh? Why would you want to go back there after everything? It’s not safe.”

“Nowhere is,” Saoirse bites. “But I’m done hiding. Unbeknownst to me, I’ve spent my whole life running away from my mother’s past. It ends now. The Ryan manor is my home, Bev. Mine. I’m not letting some power-hungry arseholes take it away from me.”

Beibhinn flops back into her seat. “You win.”

“Beibhinn!” I argue. “She can’t go back there. We promised Lorcan we’d keep her safe. Now you want to drop her off, miles away from anything?” Taking my eyes off the road, I glance towards Saoirse. “Sorry, Free Bird, but you need to stay where we can protect you. Donnacha tried to fucking drown you. There is no way you’re going back to that house alone.”

If looks could kill, I’d be six feet below ground. Saoirse’s rage spears from her eyes and burns my skin. “Who said I’d be alone? Beibhinn is coming. Isn’t that right, Bev?”

My sister’s hyena laugh floods the cab, and then once again, she’s peeking through the two front seats. Her fingers pinch my cheek. “Yes, dear brother. She’s totally right.” Bev turns and winks at Saoirse before sliding her attention back to me. “She won’t be alone. Besides, you and I both know, out of the two of us, I’ve got the better shot.”

I mean, she’s not wrong, but that doesn’t make it any easier to swallow. “You two will be the death of me.”

The girls share a look, one I don’t have the vagina to decipher. Finally, Beibhinn claps her hands together. “Ryan

manor, here we come. But first, let's drop the testosterone home so I can grab Tommy and the gang."

"Who?" Saoirse cranes her neck to peer back at Beibhinn, the crease marring her brow with confusion is comical.

"The Shelby brothers," Beibhinn adds. "Aka, my guns."

"Ignore her. My sister has a sick obsession with *Peaky Blinders*."

Saoirse flips back into her seat, and her head thumps off the headrest as a sweet, sensual laugh floods the cab. Fuck me, I could survive off that sound alone, which makes keeping her an arm's length from my heart even more difficult.

A few minutes pass, and finally we pull up to the gate-lodge. My stomach coils with hesitation. I don't want Saoirse to go back to that house, but I know it's something she needs to do. Ever since she arrived in Killybegs, I've tried to give her the space she needs to come to terms with the life she was born into. Unlike Rohan, I haven't pushed or pulled; instead, I've stood back and let her sift through the heavy shit. Maybe that's the wrong approach, but there is something niggling inside me, telling me it's what she needs to grow into who she will inevitably become.

After putting Beibhinn's Defender in park, I grip the steering wheel as hesitation digs its ugly teeth into my skin, keeping me in place.

The back door opens, and Beibhinn hops out. "I'll be right back. Let me pack a few bits." As she passes Saoirse's window, she shouts. "S, I'll grab you a few things, too. You must be running out of shit to wear."

"Thanks. I appreciate it," Saoirse offers with a soft, almost sad smile.

Once Beibhinn is out of sight, I click off my seat belt and turn to face Saoirse. For a second, I say nothing as I take in every curve on her face. Her amber eyes stay locked on mine, and like it or not, I lose a part of myself in their depths. I reach for her, my hand settling beneath her chin. Soft and gentle, I trace her jawline with my thumb as I tease my tongue bar between my teeth.

Her breath hitches when my cool digit caresses her bottom lip. “Are you sure this is what you want, Free Bird?”

With a slight tip of her chin, she nods. “It’s what I need. Leaning on you would make me weak. I need to learn to be strong.”

“I don’t like it, but I get it.”

Her palm covers my hand as she leans into my touch. “Thank you, Liam.”

“For what?”

“For believing in me enough to give me the space I need to navigate these waters.”

Keeping my eyes locked on hers, I allow her to see something I don’t share with anyone else. Something vulnerable, raw, and real. The old me—Devin, not Liam. Before she can crawl too deep, I barricade the walls around that dumb kid’s heart. “Strength. Loyalty. Respect.” Three words to remind myself of the task I need to stay focused on.

With a slight tilt of my head, I claim her with a kiss, moulding her mouth to mine. For a second, she hesitates, but when I brush the tip of my tongue along the seam of her lips, all the tension floats away and she leans into me, taking as much as I give. Each stroke unlocks something within me, a need to hide her away and keep her from all the madness this

town thrives on. Each brush solidifies the reasoning behind all my actions ... her.

I pull back, unsatisfied and craving more. A gentle whisper against her lips. “And the crown they do it for.”

Finally, I do the last thing I want to do. Reaching for the door handle, I exit the car and place all my trust in my sister, hoping like fuck she’ll keep the girl clawing at my chest safe. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Free Bird. If you need me, I’m only a phone call away.”

“Good night, Liam.”

“Night, darlin’.”

Without tearing my eyes from her, I back up towards the house. Behind me, my sister places her hand on my shoulder. “Be careful, brother. Delicate hearts are easily broken.”

Ignoring her warning, I deflect the conversation. “I’ll see you in the morning, Bev. Keep her—”

“She’s not a glass doll, Liam. She’s not gonna break.”

ROHAN

EVERYTHING HURTS.

My head throbs.

My ribs ache.

Not to mention, over the past few nights, every time I closed my fucking eyes, her face appeared, stealing any chance of sleep. Fuck. I'm strangled by the foolish decision to let her go. Exhausted by my self-depreciation. But most of all, I'm burning with regret.

It's for her own good. I can't be what she needs, especially when my dad has a tight grip on the noose around my neck. Determined to make me one of his lap dogs, Gabriel will try anything to keep me on a short leash, using the only people I care about—besides Saoirse—to keep me in check.

That ball-less cunt knows I'd do anything for my mam and little sister. If it means they are safe, far away from him and his calculated schemes, I will play by his rules. Somewhat, at least.

When you spend enough time in hell, you learn how to dance among the flames.

Gabriel has a plan, one that involves breaking Saoirse Ryan. He gave me a strict set of instructions before he tossed

me on the Devereux's doorstep. Little does he know, I have a game plan of my own, one that will see both my family and Saoirse are safe.

Keep her close, he'd said. Make her choose you. Don't fuck this up, Rohan, because if you do, I will rip the last breath from her lungs while I make you watch.

Unfortunately for him, the second he told me to keep Saoirse was when I knew I had to let her go. Normally, I am a selfish son of a bastard, but when it comes to her, everything I ever knew about myself goes out the window. For my ploy to work, I need to convince Gabriel I am following his playbook. Even if that's the last thing I'd ever do.

Unfortunately, Gabriel is a calculated, narcissistic bastard. But nobody knows the devil as well as his spawn. What he sees as his strengths, I'll use against him. He wants to move me around the board, a measly pawn in his game, but he's forgetting a crucial detail—he created the monster in me, and that fucker is rearing to break free.

My dad wants me to set Saoirse's world on fire, fine. Little does he know, while her building is burning, I'll shelter her from the flames. First things first, I need to remove myself from her life and keep my fucking distance. That's where Liam comes in. He was the only way out of this mess—my only option. Sure, the lesser of two evils is still evil, but at least this way, Saoirse is safe from whatever sick, twisted game my sperm donor is weaving.

She is love.

I am hate.

Today I will break her heart, but I will pick up every piece, keep them safe, and guard them with my life. As her king

should.

My pen glides through my fingers like a baton as I lean back on the rear legs of my chair, unfazed by the other students milling into our English classroom. School is the last fucking place I want to be, but graduating is a syndicate requirement. Not to mention, I wouldn't give my father the satisfaction of hiding behind the bruises he left.

If I've learned anything these past weeks, nothing ever comes from running away from your problems. Which is why when Liam and Beibhinn left for the cabins, I gathered my shit and dragged myself back to the pool house—with the reluctant help of Aodhán. Like it or not, if I am to watch Gabriel's every move, I need to stay close, and living on the King property allows me to survey his every step. A small price to pay to ensure Saoirse's safety.

Suddenly, as if conjured from my thoughts, Saoirse appears in the doorway looking as fucking breathtaking as ever. Her hair flows over her shoulder in tempting dark waves, framing her delicate features to perfection. Eager to commit every curve to memory, my eyes rake over her black-and-purple uniform, lingering on the hem of her skirt.

Fuck! What I wouldn't give to hike her skirt around her waist and feast on her sweet little cunt.

My throat dries as a lump lodges my airway, but that doesn't stop my mouth from watering at her tan, toned legs that somehow seem as though they go on for days—even though she's barely a hair's breadth over five foot.

Motherfucking Christ! Keeping my hands off her is going to be way harder than I thought.

“You're doing a stellar job at hiding your attraction, mate.”

Tearing my eyes away from Saoirse, my glare lands on Aodhán seated at the desk in front of mine. He's twisted in his seat, peering back at me with a smug smile teasing his big fucking mouth.

"Fuck off."

His teeth sink into his bottom lip, and he eyes me with a furrowed brow. "Have I mentioned I think your plan is ridiculously stupid?"

Averting my attention back towards the temptress making her way down the aisle between the desk rows, I mutter, "Only once or twice a minute."

Aodhán's stare burns a hole in the side of my face. "Yeah well, let me say it again. You're an idiot if you think you can push her into Devereux's arms and not blow a fuse."

My teeth clench, grinding at the visual he painted. Murderous thoughts tunnel my vision as images of Liam with his hands all over something that belongs to me invade my headspace. I shake the burning sensation away, and utter a clipped and curt, "Noted."

Head down, focusing on the floor, Saoirse slips through the other students as she makes her way to the back of the class to her assigned seat.

Féach suas, mo bhanríon. Is breá liom do shúile ar dom.
Look up, my queen. I love your eyes on me.

Drawing her hand to her face, she teases the stray strands covering her eyes with the tips of her fingers. Finally, she pushes them behind her ear and tilts her chin slightly. Like opposite ends of a magnet, our eyes connect, neither one of us able to pull away. Her footsteps falter, coming to a stop, mirroring the pounding in my chest.

Aodhán's voice fades to a mutter. "This is not gonna end well, Rí. You've let her get under your skin, and you my friend, are thoroughly fucked." With that useless wealth of information, he faces forward. "Good morning, Saoirse. Welcome back."

The smile she gives him awakens the green-eyed monster residing in the pit of my core. Aodhán is my best friend, but at this present moment, I want to rip every limb from his body and shove them directly up his arse.

Saoirse's eyes bounce between Aodhán, the empty chair next to me, back to Aodhán, then finally on me. Slipping my mask in place, I lean back on the chair, seemingly unfazed by her presence. I say nothing as her eyes widen at the dark purple bruise around my left eye and the healing gash on my lower lip. Instead, I slide my tongue over the raised welt, refusing to break eye contact.

My chair falls forward, and I drop my elbows onto the desk, waiting—no, wishing—for any kind of reaction.

Imigh leat, mo ghrá. Taispeáin dom an troid sin. Come on, my love. Show me that fight.

Three more steps and she's right next to me, eyes burning with questions, lips pursed in anger, and shoulders slumped with sadness. So many emotions coiled together, each one more poignant than the last. Once again, her eyes drop to the seat at my side, the one Mr Lynch assigned her on her first day, and judging by the hesitation halting her movements, she'd rather sit on a bed of rusty nails than occupy the space next to me.

Asshole that I am, I poke at her resolve. "Take a seat, love. I never bite the same bitch twice."

If this were a cartoon, now would be the time where steam would expel from her ears. Her glare hardens, and beneath all that glorious hair—that I long to wrap around my fist as I plough into her from behind—I imagine a deep rouge travelling along the column of her neck and settling at the tips of her ears.

She remains silent, leaving me to wonder what thoughts are racing through her mind. Her chest expands with a breath as she rolls her shoulders back, straightening her spine. Finally, she drops her bag to the floor and takes a seat, posture perfect and poised. Unfortunately for her, the unfazed act she's portraying is transparent to my eyes. She's pissed, and rightly fucking so. But I want her—no need for her—to hate me. It's the only way this plan is going to work.

Fuck knows I'm toeing a thin line, one slip away from saying *fuck this for a bag of dicks* and dropping to my knees and worshipping at her alter, preferably with my tongue. I'm not strong enough to resist the pull between us, so I need to shatter it. Destroy any fantasy where she and I are destined for a blissful end.

Teastaíonn uaim go bhfuil fuath agat dom ar an mbealach is measa. I need you to hate me in the worst way.

Flashing her a devious smile, I then push the knife in further. "Look at that. Still such a good girl."

Her jaw ticks, but if I wasn't staring a hole into the side of her face, I would have missed it. Without warning, her neck cranes, and her eyes light with a fire that could burn down cities. My heart rattles in my chest, racing to my thready pulse.

Her next word cut through my exterior, maiming me more than my father's fists ever could. "Bhí tú mo botún is mó." The very words I uttered to her dad on Saturday evening when

I knew I had to let her go, no matter how fucking much I didn't want that fate.

You were my greatest mistake.

Checkmate, mo bhanríon.

EIGHTEEN

SAOIRSE

I CLAMP MY JAW SHUT AS ROHAN'S MUSKY SCENT SURROUNDS me, invading my senses. Every part of me wants to lash out and wipe the sadistic smile off his face, but I fight against it.

Fuck him. He doesn't deserve the satisfaction of knowing he's getting under my skin.

On the exterior, I remain poised: shoulders back, spine straight, with a perfect smile concealing the hurt beyond the surface. But on the inside, I'm fucking seething, organs vibrating with every emotion.

In the distance, Mr Lynch drones on about preparing for the poetry section of our Leaving Certificate exams, but it's hard to focus on anything other than the storm cloud seated next to me. A haze of darkness surrounds Rohan, polluting the space with his toxic indifference. My eyes betray me, stealing glances at his swollen face, and I hate myself for showing weakness.

He doesn't deserve my concern. My foot taps against the floor, and the nervous energy flooding my veins shakes my entire body. From the corner of my eye, I spy Rohan as he reclines in his chair, his hardened glare focused on me. My gaze falls to the pen clutched between his teeth, and my pussy tightens, remembering the last time we shared this class—it

seems she's not on the same page as my head. No more fantasies about Rohan. *Ever.*

Saturday morning seems like a lifetime ago, but it's only been two days since I gave a part of myself to this asshole, only to have him obliterate it into unfixable pieces. I should never have trusted him, but he blinded me with delusional promises, only to disappear, leaving me to sift through the aftermath.

"Fuck him and the horse he rode in on," I mutter a little too loudly.

Rohan closes the distance between us, bringing his mouth to my ear. "I don't ride horses, love. Only pussy."

I know what he's doing. He's trying to get a rise out of me. "Fuck off, Rohan."

"That's not what you were screaming on Friday, or Saturday morning, for that matter. What was it you cried out? 'Fuck me, mo Rí.'" His voice raises an octave, mocking me. "I'm pretty sure you even said please."

Blood boiling with anger, my nostrils flare as I bite down on my gritted teeth. He's burrowing under my skin and clawing at my resolve. With my mask firmly in place, I twist in my seat and spear him with an unflinching look. "You meant nothing to me." Frustration and disdain wrap around my insult. "Just a guy with the right equipment to scratch an itch."

"Keep telling yourself that, love." A hushed tone wedges between each word. "But we both know the truth."

"Do we?" I angle my head and raise a brow. "From where I'm sitting, all you ever do is lie." The infinitesimal twitch of his lip tells me I hit my mark, but the end-of-class bell interrupts before he can fire back.

Within seconds, I grab my books and head for the door. My legs propel me forward as I rush to make a quick and painless exit, but right before I cross the threshold, my name slithers off his tongue. “Saoirse.”

My lids squeeze shut, preparing for the shots he’s about to fire. With a strengthening inhale, I open my eyes and toss a glance over my shoulder, fighting the tears. Thankfully, I hold myself together, ignoring how my heart fights for space in my chest as the air freezes in my lungs.

Arm slung over Hannah’s shoulder, Rohan draws her into his chest and plants a chaste kiss on her forehead. “If you’re looking for someone to scratch that itch, I hear Donnacha is desperate for my sloppy seconds. Besides, if you squint *really hard*, he looks just like me, don’t you think?”

All the blood rushes to my ears, muffling the sound of my heart hitting the floor. His words wound deeper than any weapon could. How I keep the tears from streaming down my face, I’ll never know.

Suddenly, Aodhán is at my side, sweeping me away before I break. With a crane of his neck, he peers over his shoulder and shakes his head. “That was low, man. Even for you.”



THANK CHRIST, THAT DAY IS OVER.

Unfortunately, the little showdown with Rohan stayed with me throughout all my classes, stealing every ounce of my concentration. No matter how hard I tried to put him and his hateful words to the back of my mind, I couldn’t. They

lingered, following me from class to class, until the last bell rang, signalling the end of the day.

Since I'd been feeling sorry for myself, I'd avoided Beibhinn and Liam all day, opting to spend my lunch alone, then faking an upset stomach before our shared art class so I could hide out at the back of the library. It's terrible enough Aodhán bore witness to my minor—okay, slightly major—meltdown after class. The last thing I needed was more pitiful looks from Bev and Liam.

Pushing my pity aside, I unzip my school bag and offload the books I don't need into my locker and replace them with the ones I'll need for homework.

"Hey!" Bev slides in next to me. "Missed you in art."

Casting a glance at Beibhinn, I shrug my shoulder before focusing on my locker. "Yeah, sorry. I wasn't feeling well."

Bev rocks back and forth on her heel, her eyes lowering to her feet, then springing back to my face. "Aodhán told me what happened."

I huff out a breath as her eyes fill with concern.

I slam my locker shut, then zip up my bag before slinging it over my shoulder. "Please, don't look at me like that. I just want to move on and forget Rohan King ever existed." Easier said than done—especially when I turn on my heel and see him caging Hannah against his locker.

Then, as though he could feel my death glare, he tosses a look over his shoulder, and flashes me his wicked smile.

My footsteps falter, and a splinter of hurt wedges in my chest cavity, hitching my breath. Fuck him for affecting me so much.

Beibhinn leans closer and whispers, “He’s doing everything he can to get under your skin. There’s only one way to beat the game-master, S.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and keep my voice low so only she can hear me. “How?”

A slow and devious smile hitches at the corner of her lips as her eyes travel down the hallway.

Following her line of sight, my gaze lands on her brother as he parts the crowd.

“You want me to use Liam to piss Rohan off?”

Tossing her arm over my shoulder, she guides me towards Liam. “Use him, no. Give into whatever that weird sexual tension is between you, one hundred percent.”

“There’s no weird—”

“Don’t even go there. I’m not blind, and you’re not stupid.”

Before I can protest, Liam is next to us, shooting me a killer smile that highlights his delicious dimple. My stomach somersaults when he reaches forward to brush the fallen hair strands from my face. “Hey, you.”

Beibhinn takes her opportunity and nudges me forward. The swift movement causes me to trip right into her brother’s arms, making her cackle.

Without missing a beat, Liam steadies me by drawing his arm around my waist until my body moulds against his chest. “Falling for me already, Free Bird?” His lips press against my forehead, and a blush heats my cheeks.

The slamming of metal ricochets through the hallway, cutting off my ability to form a sentence. All eyes fall on

Rohan, who is shaking out his fist as he glares in our direction.

Beibhinn presses her hand to her mouth, stifling her laughter. “See, worked like a fucking charm.”

Rohan’s darkened eyes are murderous, but I can’t find the sympathy to care. He’s the one who blew me off, not sparing a single fucking thought after everything that transpired over the weekend. And with the comment he made this morning, it’s evident Aodhán filled him in on what happened after he disappeared. He doesn’t give a flying shite about me. He never did. The sooner that sinks in, the better off we will all be.

Pulling my eyes away from Rohan, I peer up at the guy next to me. Liam is everything Rohan isn’t, and if I decide to see where things go between us, Rohan only has himself to blame.

“Do I want to know what that’s about?” Liam pulls me closer, tucking me beneath his arm as we stride past Rohan and Hannah towards the main entrance.

I toss one last look over my shoulder, and my eyes connect with Rí’s. My arm circles Liam’s waist, and I lean further into his solid frame. “It’s nothing.” *Just an arsehole getting served a large dose of his own medicine.*

LIAM

BENT AT THE WAIST, SAOIRSE STANDS IN THE CENTRE OF THE octagon with her palms resting on her knees. With every heaved breath, her chest rises and falls. Fuck me. I can't tear my eyes away from the swell of her breasts peeking over the lip of her sports bra.

Beads of sweat kiss her skin, glistening against her exposed torso, and it takes everything I have to contain the groan lodged at the base of my throat.

We've been at the gym for hours, and with Beibhinn working the front desk, I'm tasked with training Saoirse for her fight against Hannah in a week. Not that I'm complaining. Hot and sweaty is precisely how I want Saoirse to be when she's with me—preferably with fewer fuckin' clothes on.

For the past hour, I've fought against the visions invading my mind—of me tearing those tiny black gym shorts that taunt me from her body. Unaware of how much she's affecting me, Saoirse stands to her full height and lifts her arms above her head, stretching her muscles. Her long, dark tresses fall over her shoulders in two matching braids, the tips brushing against her peaked nipples. The sight of her standing there, breathless and flushed, has my dick twitching in my shorts. Then, when I think the visual couldn't get any sweeter, she reaches for her

water bottle and draws it to her lips. Her head tips back as she pops open the cap with her teeth, and I stand there, mesmerised, following the slender curve of her neck as she gulps back her water like someone trapped her in the desert and she's about to die of thirst.

Christ! What I wouldn't give to be that water bottle. Thankfully, my hands are already sitting beneath the band of my shorts, so it's not apparent when I need to readjust myself before poking her fucking eye out.

Before I can do something reckless, like take her right here in the middle of the mat, prying eyes be damned, my sister peeks past the reception door, announcing that the gym is closing for the night.

People around us wrap up their reps and begin packing up their stuff, and before long, it's just the two of us in the ring. Saoirse remains rooted to the mat. "Do we have to head out, too?" she questions, her voice breathless and panting.. "I've only a week to learn a lifetime of shit. I'm running out of time, Liam."

She's right. Seven days is not nearly long enough to prepare her for the first initiation trial. And even though she's determined and focused, it's a lot to take in a small amount of time.

Closing the space between us, I halt mere inches from her face. Her chin tips back as she peers up at me over her lashes.

"Don't worry, darlin'. You're doing great." My fingers itch to touch her, to drag her close and kiss the uncertainty from her lips. "We've got the rest of the week to review everything we did today. You'll get the hang of it."

Lost in the moment, we stand unmoving, eyes locked together. Warmth spreads across my chest, my heart hammering against my rib cage. Scarlett-coloured heat warms Saoirse's cheeks as her eyes drop to the canvas before drifting upwards, surveying my bare, tattooed chest. Beneath her gaze, my skin pricks with molten desire. I want her. *Right the fuck now.*

I inch closer, leaving only millimetres between us. Our breaths intertwine.

Suddenly, Saoirse's palm lands against my chest, but she doesn't push me away. Instead, she glides her hand down my rib cage, fingertips dancing delicately over my tattoos.

Her eyes never leave mine, intensifying the moment.

"Saoirse." Her name falls past my lips in a low, gruff warning. "Don't play with fire."

"What if I *need* to get lost in the flames?"

Desire burns a hot spot in the pit of my stomach, and then her lips quirk into a sultry grin, making every ounce of my resolve go out the fucking window.

I lift her off her feet and slam my lips against hers. Instantly, her arms cling to my shoulders as her legs wrap around my waist. This kiss is nothing like any of the ones before. Done treating Saoirse with gentle caresses and soft touches, I release all the pent-up sexual tension I've been holding back. I'm a man starving, and Saoirse Ryan is the only thing I want to fucking eat.

Two steps forward, and Saoirse's back hits the plastic-coated fence, making her body arch into the hard planes of my chest. Needing to steady her, my hands glide down her exposed ribs before settling on her perfect arse with a firm

grip. “Fuck!” I grind against her pussy, needing the friction to ease the throbbing ache in my cock. Her fingernails dig into the back of my neck, clawing at my skin and demanding more.

Prying my lips from hers, I sink my teeth into her neck, biting down as I suck on her skin. A greedy moan falls from her mouth as her body bows, silently begging me for more.

“Liam.” My name is an eager whisper, spurring me on as I glide my tongue across the mark I left.

I can’t get enough. My mouth is everywhere, travelling down the column of her neck, over the spandex material of her sports bra, until finally, I rim the peak of her nipple with the tip of my tongue. The need to strip her bare overpowers every fucking thought I have.

With a slight shift, I place my knee between us, holding her up as my hands travel along her waist until they reach the band of her bra. “Need this gone, Free Bird.”

She doesn’t miss a beat and raises her hands above her head while I peel the soft purple material over her head before tossing it to the canvas.

Wasting no time, I drop my head to her exposed chest and tease her nipple with my teeth.

It’s not enough. I need more.

“Hold tight.” I draw her in closer, and she clings to my torso as I manoeuvre us out of the octagon and over to the nearest weight bench. As soon as her back hits the leather, my mouth is on hers, my hands exploring every curve.

“Liam. Please,” she moans between kisses.

“Tell me what you need, darlin’.” I flatten my tongue against her skin and drag it along her sternum, trailing the ball

of my piercing across her flesh.

Her body bows, bending with pleasure. “Use your words, Free Bird. Let me give you what you need.”

“Make me come.”

“Tell me how.” My hand slides up her thigh, teasing the hem of her gym shorts. “With my fingers?”

“Yes.” Her breath escapes, a sinful sound that rushes down my spine, making my dick harden.

“How about with my mouth?” I slide my piercing across her nipple as I grip the waistband of her shorts, pulling the material past her hips and exposing her black lace hot pants. Surrendering to the sweet-as-fuck sounds she’s making, I drop to the floor, kneeling at the base of the weight bench. My tongue dampens my lower lip, and the anticipation builds.

Fuck! I need to taste her.

“Put your hands on the weight bar,” I command. Following my order, Saoirse raises her hands behind her head and grips the bar. “Whatever you do, darlin’, don’t let go. Understood?”

“Hmm.”

Undiluted need claws at my skin as I grip the front of her hot pants with both hands and tug. The flimsy material shreds down the centre, giving me a glorious view of her dripping cunt.

“Jesus. You’re fucking drenched, Free Bird.”

“Please, Liam. Please touch me.” Her hips twitch, and she draws her knees together, clenching her thighs.

“Bring your legs to your chest.”

She does what she's told, and I clamp my hand around the backs of her knees, pressing her thighs against her exposed breasts. With my other hand, I bring my fingers to her pretty pink slit and slowly swipe them through her folds. She's dripping for me, soaked at my touch. Taking my time, I smear her juices around her clit, teasing her sensitive nub with just the right amount of pressure.

"Liam. Stop. Please, stop torturing me." Her hips buck against my hand, begging for more. "Please."

A teasing grin splits my face, and I push my thumb past her opening, rubbing the rough pad of my fingertip against her walls. Her body instantly reacts, clenching down on my digit as a ripples rush through her core.

Her mouth falls open, forming an O shape. "Ah."

With two fingers, I continue to rub slow, lazy circles across her clit, while drawing my thumb in and out of her tight cunt. Her hips dance to the rhythm of my hand, chasing the high I'm offering.

"That's it, darling'. Grind that pussy against my hand. Take what you need."

Her breath quickens, becoming more audible with each inhale. "More, Liam. I need more." Not denying her, I lower my head and replace my fingers with my tongue. "Oh, God! Yes."

One slow teasing lap after another, her body caves to every stroke and her hips thrash as I assault her opening. Then, releasing my hold on her knees, her legs fall over my shoulders, and my hands move to her hips. One quick tug draws her closer, and I bury the tip of my tongue inside her, fucking her pussy with my mouth. Needing more, she grinds

against my face, her swollen clit rubbing against my nose as I continue fucking her entrance with my tongue.

“Liam.” Her breath quickens, flooding the gym with her needy cries. “Oh, fuck.”

Her juices drench my face, dripping off my lips and soaking my chin. I’m so fucking turned-on I’m ravishing her, I lap up every drop. “Come for me, darlin’,” I whisper against her sensitive flesh before sucking her clit into my mouth and pushing two fingers inside her. My fingers curl forward, hitting her G-spot, and her pussy clenches like a vice grip. Her cries fill the open space as her body breaks into a satisfied spasm, pulsating against my digits. Her heels dig into my shoulder blades as she climbs towards her high.

“That’s it, Free Bird. Give it to me.” I blow a hot breath against her clit before drawing it between my teeth.

“Holy shit.”

She falls apart, hips rocking against my face as her body bends to her release.

And it’s fucking glorious.

TWENTY

SAOIRSE

I'M A BONELESS MESS OF SHAKY LIMBS AS MY CLIMAX WHIRLS through my body, stripping me of all logical thought. This is not how I saw today's workout session going, but I'm sure as shite not complaining, either.

Honestly, I could die right now with Liam's face buried in my pussy, and I'd thank the devil as I walk through the gates of hell. Head still nestled between my thighs, Liam's storm-cloud-colored eyes peer up at me over his lashes as a satisfied smile hitches at the edges of his mouth. "Fuck me, Free Bird. I've waited a long time to have you on my tongue, and now that I know how goddamn sweet you taste, I'm having you for every meal."

Unable to form a coherent sentence, I hum an unintelligible response as I pry my hands from the weight bar, utterly sedated. "Um-hmm." My hand falls to his head, and I bury my fingers in his damp-from-our-workout hair. Using my other arm as leverage, I lean on my elbow and pull my shoulders off the bench.

Suddenly, Liam's tattooed hand halts me. "Not so fast, darlin'. I'm nowhere near finished with you yet." My brows hike towards my hairline, and Liam's low chuckle follows.

“Didn’t you hear what I just said? Every fuckin’ meal, Saoirse. As it just so happens, this one is three-course.”

Without warning, he tilts his head to the left and sinks his teeth into the inside of my upper leg—right along the crevice where my thigh meets my pussy. My body reacts instantly, head falling back against the bench as my back arches. “Oh my God.”

His laughter is muffled as he sucks the taut flesh into his mouth, applying the right amount of pressure to make my head spin and my fingers dive further into his unruly hair.

Fuck ... that’s gonna be one hell of a love bite.

Before I know what’s happening, he’s diving back in, lapping up the evidence of my last orgasm, and paying special attention to my clit. Each stroke of his tongue sends a new shockwave through me. I’m still so sensitive from the first rush. Squirming beneath his touch, he presses his hand against my stomach, holding me in place and steadying me for the fall I can already feel coming. My breathing turns to panting, mirroring the rise and fall of my chest.

“Are you ready for the second course, darlin’?” Liam’s wicked tone rushes across my skin, adding fuel to the fire he’s lit.

“Yes, yes.” He thrusts two fingers inside me, mercilessly, then curls them forward, drumming against the spot that makes me explode. “Oh my. Fuck.”

He doesn’t relent. The pressure builds, intensifying every nerve ending until I’m barrelling off the cliff without a parachute. I come so hard I see stars dancing behind my eyes. Dazed by the glorious ache of satisfaction as it ripples through every cell in my body. But he’s not done. Liam takes his time,

drinking up every drop and forcing my hips to buck with every brush of his tongue.

“Oh, God. I can’t.”

Liam pulls back, levelling me with a cat-got-the-cream grin. “Don’t quit on me yet, Free Bird. I still have one course to go.”

Goose bumps coat my bare skin as he reaches for my hand. “Up.” He pulls me forward, and when my feet hit the floor, my legs almost buckle beneath me. Liam clamps his arm around my waist, drawing me into his chest. His head dips, bringing our mouths closer until we share the same breath. “I’m gonna fuck you now, just like I’ve wanted to since the day I found you again, sitting on my lounge looking every bit as fuckin’ stunning as you always have.” He inches closer, rubbing the arc of my hip bone with his thumb. Then, tightening his hold, he sweeps me off my feet, carrying all my weight with one hand placed beneath my arse. My arms fasten around his neck as he stalks across the gym. Suddenly, he swoops down and collects his gym bag off the floor, his hold on me never faltering. Finally, he strides towards the row of free-weight benches in front of the wall-to-wall mirrors and deposits me onto the cool leather.

He towers over me, damp hair falling onto his forehead, his bare tattooed chest on full display. My greedy eyes soak up the view, lingering on the crowned skull tattoo that teases the edge of his gym shorts. Looking at Liam Devereux is like walking into a museum with the finest art. He’s a canvas, every inch of his skin adorned with ink. And forgive me, Jesus, but I ache to run my tongue across every design.

Reaching forward, I grip the drawstrings of his shorts and pull him closer. Finally, my hands slide under the waistband,

and I ease them down. A cursed hiss escapes him when his cock springs free, standing at attention.

The first thing I notice is the three metal barbells decorating the ridged head of his cock, and my mouth waters at the sight.

Liam must notice the greedy glint in my eyes because his hand flies to the back of my head, and he takes a hold of my braids in a tight grip. Tugging my hair back, my neck elongates as my eyes latch onto his. “Holy shit! You’re pierced.”

“Does that surprise you?” He tips my chin with his free hand. “I’m an art student covered in tattoos, Free Bird. I spend most of my free time either at the gym or in the tattoo parlour. Besides, every king needs a crown.”

My eyes fall back to the metal, and my tongue swipes out, moistening my bottom lip. “Can I ... um?”

A wicked smirk dances across his lips. “As badly as I want my dick buried in the base of your throat, I want your pussy strangling it more.”

Anticipation claws at my skin, and my pussy clenches at the filthy picture his words paint. He doesn’t take his eyes off me as he reaches into his gym bag and pulls out his wallet. Flipping it open, he retrieves a condom from the casing, then tosses the wallet onto the floor next to our feet. Eyes on him, I watch as he brings the foil packet to his mouth before tearing it open with his teeth. My gaze drops to his throbbing cock as he rolls the rubber along his length.

I swallow the lump forming at the base of my throat. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t think that’s gonna fit.”

The chuckle that shuffles his shoulders eases the tension building in my gut. He's fucking huge, and judging by the gleam in his eyes, he knows it. "Don't worry, my good little queen. God made your cunt for me, and in about two seconds, I'll prove it to you."

I stand up, closing the gap between us. "I'm hearing a lot of talking, Dev. But not much act—"

Suddenly, I'm pressed against the mirror, the ballet bar digging into my stomach. His hand threads around my braids, and he yanks them back. My nipples tease the cold aluminium glass, shooting a strange yet welcome sensation down my spine. Our reflections stare back at us, and desire burns in his icy-grey eyes. His teeth sink into his bottom lip, and that look alone almost undoes me. Lowering his lips to my exposed neck, he hovers over my throbbing pulse, his breath sending shivers down my spine.

"Look at us, darlin'. Look in the mirror and tell me who your moans belong to."

"You, Liam. They belong to you."

"That's right, Free Bird. You're mine."

"Touch me."

Without hesitation, his fingers pinch my nipples, and my body instantly responds.

"I'm going to do more than touch you. I'm going to fuck you. Hard and fast, until the only name falling past your lips is mine."

"Please."

"I'll bury my cock inside your tight little cunt, and you'll watch your sweet tits bounce with every thrust. Can you do

that, darlin’? Can you stare at our reflection while I make you come so hard you’ll never forget who it is you belong to?” I nod my head, far too turned on to form words. “I need your words, Saoirse. Tell me ... what do you want?”

“Fuck me, Dev. Please, I want you to fuck me.”

“That’s my good little queen.”

His hand splays across the base of my back, bending me at the waist and forcing me to lean against the ballet barre. Next, he lines his sheathed cock at my entrance and, with one forceful thrust, imbeds himself inside me.

“Oh, God.” I feel him everywhere. My pussy clenches around him, moulding to his cock as he slides in and out, torturing me with the delicious piercings that line his crown. “Fuck, that feels amazing.”

“Jesus, Saoirse. You’re so fucking tight.”

I fall forward, my back arching as he pumps in and out of me with reckless abandon. My legs shake uncontrollably, begging for a third explosive release. A sheen of sweat covers my burning-with-need skin. “Yes. Oh my God! Yes.”

Reaching back with my right arm, I hook it around his neck and flatten my back against his chest.

Suddenly, Liam’s hand slides down my stomach and dips between my legs. He circles my clit once, twice, three times until my pussy tightens around him, gripping his hard length. My release starts in my core, travelling down my legs before bursting through me like a fireworks display.

“That’s it, darlin’. Come with me, baby. Come all over my dick.”

Together we tip over the edge, giving in to our release.

“Oh my God!” Beibhinn’s screech fills the space around us, and as if things can’t get any more embarrassing, our eyes connect in the mirror’s reflection before she swiftly lifts her arm to cover her face. “My eyes! I need to sanitise my eyes.”

“Beibhinn!” Liam barks. “Get the fuck outta here, now!”

“Eh, yeah. Erm, Saoirse. I’ll just, eh, em ... wait. In the car.”

“Now!”

“I’m going, I’m going.” She rushes towards the door, but not before leaving us with something only Beibhinn would say. “Happy dicking!”

The cackle that follows the bang of the door closing behind her makes Liam and I erupt into laughter. Slowly, he eases out of me, placing a soft and gentle kiss on my shoulder. “Well, at least we won’t ever forget our first time.”

Twisting in his arms, I nestle my scarlet-covered face into his chest. “You can say that again.”

TWENTY-ONE

SAOIRSE

“RISE AND SHINE!” BEIBHINN PULLS BACK THE HEAVY curtains, and I toss my forearm across my eyes, shielding myself from the sun’s audacity.

My lids squeeze tight, and a groan vibrates from the base of my throat. “My eyes are burning.”

“Good,” Beibhinn chuckles as she dives onto the foot of the bed and tears my arms from my face, “now you know how I felt when I walked into the weight room and found you and my brother going at it, balls to the wall.”

“Oh. My. God!” I flop back and reach behind me, then tug the pillow from under my head and use it to cover my face. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“Never be embarrassed about getting some O’s.” Beibhinn’s laughter cuts through my muffled words. “Girl, trust me, if it were *anyone* other than the penis I shared a womb with, I’d be jealous as fuck. It’s been too long since I’ve gotten thoroughly fucked.” Her brows wiggle as she makes a stupid face that is supposed to be seductive. “Sucks for me, but I’m related to most of the guys in this town, so my penis-picking options are unfortunately *minimal*.”

Slowly, I ease the pillow from my face and peek at her over the edge. “So, you don’t hate me for sleeping with your

brother?”

“Not in the slightest. Sure, wasn’t I the one who told you to submit to the sexual tension?” Her brow hitches towards her hairline. “If anything, I’m thrilled he finally pulled the stick out of his arse and made a move. For a second, I thought he’d lost you to a King without putting up a fight.” Beibhinn rests on her elbow and props her chin in her palm. “Honestly, I’m glad he didn’t wait any longer. You deserve options. That way, when the time comes for you to choose, you can make an informed decision.”

Pushing myself into a seated position, I scoot back and rest my spine against the headboard. “There will be no choosing, trust me! Whatever that was with Rohan is now well and truly over. Yesterday, he not only put a nail in the coffin, but he also hammered that fucker home.”

Beibhinn pushes herself into a Buddha pose, criss-crossing her legs and resting her elbows on her knees. Her eyes narrow as her gaze turns pensive. “Hmm.” There’s a look on her face I can’t quite place, and I don’t like it. Beibhinn is normally a no filter, open book kind of girl. But something tells me she’s hiding information.

“What?” I mirror her stare. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Do you honestly believe Rohan King will bow down like some lowly peasant? He’s a syndicate heir, Saoirse. Yesterday, you laid down a challenge. And, like it or not, my cousin loves nothing more.”

She’s right. I know she is. The little I know of Rohan cements her statement, but that doesn’t mean I have to partake in his deranged mind games. I have enough going on without adding his complications to my life.

“Rohan is like a bull in a china shop,” she adds. “And you, my friend, have waved my brother in his face like a giant red flag.”

“Oh.” I push the duvet back and haul my arse out of the bed. “But the quality of the fabric is *soooo* good.”

“Too soon, bish! Too fucking soon.”

Suddenly, my pillow comes flying across the room, narrowly missing me as I grab my gym gear and rush to the ensuite to get changed for our morning run. “For that, I’m making you do two extra miles.”



IT’S OFFICIAL, PEOPLE WHO EXERCISE AT THE BEGINNING OF the day are psychotic. It’s barely eight o’clock, and I am wrecked. Honestly, I could crawl back into bed and sleep for a week, especially after Beibhinn ran all the air from my lungs and the mobility from each of my limbs.

Like it or not, classes start in fifteen minutes, so even if I could’ve convinced her to bring me home before school, a power nap was out of the question. If I want to pass my trials, I need to graduate in a few weeks, which means attending school as much as possible.

Much to my dismay, Beibhinn indicates into the school car park, and all the tension I’ve been hiding rises to the surface, escaping through my bouncing leg and jittery fingertips.

“What’s got you so on edge?” She quickly tilts her face toward me as she pulls into a free space.

My eyes roam across the picnic area, settling on the KOK table—Aodhán, Hannah, and a few other faces I don’t know

too well are all sitting along the benches. But they're not who my attention catches on. Off to the side, Rohan leans against the edge of the table, arse perched against the wood with his feet crossed at the ankles with a joint dangling from his lips, and his eyes laser-focused on me.

He has one side of his shirt tucked while the other hangs over the waistband of his school trousers, looking every inch the part of a villainous arsehole. Around his neck, his tie hangs loose and undone, resting over his shoulders like a scarf. Tossed black hair frames his still-bruised face, but even though he looks like a dishevelled mess ... there's something wild and beautiful about him that claws at my chest. And I hate it.

Rohan King is untamed chaos, like a raging sea threatening to drag me under.

"What was that you said earlier?" Bev sasses. "Oh, I remember ... 'Whatever that was with Rohan is now well and truly over.'" Her lips purse in an all-knowing way.

Reaching across the console, I slap at her arm. "Shut up."

Suddenly, she's shifting in her seat, turning to give me her undivided attention. "Truth time ... and I want full blatant honesty, got it?"

"Hit me."

"Right now—today—if you had to choose between Rohan and Liam, who would it be?"

My heart raps against my rib cage, pounding so hard it echoes in my eardrums. A knot coils tight in the pit of my gut, and my mouth dries up. Dampening my lips with a swipe of my tongue, I mull over her question. It should be a simple answer, but for whatever reason, I hesitate. My eyes flick

toward the table. And then, as if summoned by Beibhinn's question, Liam appears, striding across the pathway with an air of confidence only he could possess. He's a man on a mission, and his mission is me.

Everything from his clothes to his hair is meticulous. He's an enigma, a bad boy canvas wrapped in a classic clean-cut bow. There is something so delicious about the tease of tattoos and piercings that peek out from behind his perfectly put-together exterior. Butterflies take flight in my stomach as flashes of last night invade my mind. With him, I can let my guard down, and if I jumped, I know he'd be right there, waiting to catch me.

Liam Devereux is my lighthouse, shining his calming beacon and guiding me back to shore.

"Liam." I tilt my gaze towards Beibhinn, catching the slight tilt of her smile. "I'd choose Liam."

"Go get him, then." Beibhinn slaps at my thigh, urging me to get out of the car.

When my eyes flick back out the windscreen, Liam is leaning against a nearby pillar, arms folded across his chest and his bottom lip caught between his teeth, waiting for me to make the first move.

Pushing Rohan to the back of my head, I exit the car and make my way towards Liam.

"Good mornin', darlin'. How'd you sleep?" Liam leans back, a slow and lazy smile on his face. Without hesitation, I close the distance between us. His arms wrap around my waist, and he effortlessly lifts me off my feet and moulds his mouth to mine.

The world is watching, but I don't care.

*Only love a king when he deserves it. That's when he'll
need it most.*

TWENTY-TWO

ROHAN

I'M SECONDS AWAY FROM CROSSING THE COURTYARD AND forcefully removing Devereux's arms from his fucking body. I'm walking a delicate tightrope, one frayed thread away from snapping and saying fuck it.

My fingers grasp the edge of the picnic bench, the force turning my knuckles white as my teeth grind, biting through the anger clawing through my veins. I only have myself to blame. This is what I wanted. Saoirse, as far away from me as possible—safe and protected from my father's plans.

Two more days until she turns eighteen, two more fucking days, and she steps into a role my father aches to keep. But his time is running out, and he and I both know the syndicate will descend on her, testing her strength and searching for her weakness.

Saoirse has no idea what the syndicate will take from her, and she won't until she passes her first trial. Gabriel's plan isn't far from my desires, but no matter how much I want her, I can't let her choose me. Not when my father will use it to benefit himself.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

Those four letters play over and over in my mind, but I fight against them and remind myself to stay fucking calm, to hold in the boiling rage bubbling to break free.

Tilting my head to the sky, I draw my joint to my lips and inhale, allowing the smoke to fill my lungs and ease the ache in my chest. Nothing can erase how she's looks at him as though he hung the moon in her darkened sky. But without me stealing her light, he'd never shine.

Needing a reminder, I rob another glance, torturing myself when I see Liam's hand dance along the hem of her school skirt.

My stomach clenches, and I know if I am to make it through the day without committing murder, I need to get far the fuck away from Devereux and the show he's putting on.

We're both liars, love. Ligeann sé aire. Ligean orm nach bhfuil. He pretends to care. I pretend I don't.



AVOIDING SAOIRSE IS PROVING TO BE RATHER TRICKY, especially when we share most of our classes, given we're both honour students. But, unlike in English, she sits on the opposite side of our music class next to Beibhinn, as far away from me as she can get, eyes focused straight ahead, successfully ignoring my existence.

At the top of the class, Mr O'Dowd gains everybody's attention. "Good morning, class. Close all books. Today we are covering the importance of"—he picks up his whiteboard

marker and scrawls today's lesson across the board —“expressing emotions through music.”

It may come as a surprise to most, but music is one of my favourite subjects. At an early age, my mother taught me how to channel my emotions through the keys on the grand piano in my pool house. Long after she left, that piano was, and still is, the only thing that makes me feel safe enough to speak my heart aloud.

Leaning back in my chair, I fold my arms across my chest and listen as Mr O'Dowd continues. “Sound is a potent source, and depending on how you use and combine it, you can connect with the people listening, tapping into a vast range of emotions. Today we are looking at the power of song. First, take a few minutes to choose a song you relate to. Then, once you have your piece, I want you to write your name, not the song, onto a piece of paper and drop it into the hat.” He drops the hat onto his desk. “Every Tuesday, I will draw a few names from the hat, and each student will perform their piece using their chosen instrument.”

A collection of groans floods the classroom, making Mr O'Dowd shake his head. “Performance is fifty percent of your final exam. If you're in my honours class, you've no excuse. Each of you has one or more music mediums—vocal or instrumental. Now, no more protests. You've got three minutes.”

Unwillingly, my gaze lands on the girl across the room. With her head bowed, her dark hair covers her face like a thick curtain. My fingers twitch as I drum my pen against the desk, itching to touch her and push her thick natural waves away from her face so I can lose my anger in the colour of her amber eyes.

But then this morning replays through my mind, reminding me how quickly she walked into Devereux's arms. Sure, I gave her the push she needed, but that doesn't make it hurt any less. Drawing my attention away from her, I drop my gaze to the blank page before me as I scan through my mental music library, trying to find the perfect song to express my feelings.

A few minutes pass, and Mr O'Dowd calls it. Row by row, he walks along, and the students drop their names into the hat. Once he's collected everybody's, he walks to the front of the classroom and pulls one out.

"Rohan King. You're up, kid."

Usually, it wouldn't faze me to perform in front of my class. I've done it a hundred times before, but that was before her—before she landed in Killybegs and turned my world upside down.

Ignoring the jitters trampolining in my stomach, I push from my desk and stalk towards the piano, ignoring how Saoirse follows my every movement with her taunting eyes.

Finally, I sit in front of the piano and roll my shoulders back.

To my right, Mr O'Dowd sits at his desk, kicking his feet onto the tabletop. "Okay, class. Rohan will open our lesson. I want you all to listen carefully and take notes on the tempo, melody, and lyrics. Once he's finished, we will discuss what emotional impact the song had on you and why."

With a wave of his hand, he urges me to begin. My lungs expand with a deep inhale, and my fingers hover over the keys. Finally, I begin, opening the song with the bass note G. My right hand explores the melody, repeating the opening

twice. I look up over the edge of the piano right as the lyrics to “Exile” by Taylor Swift and Bon Iver flee past my lips.

I can’t look away, singing every word to the girl sitting directly in my line of sight. Saoirse’s mouth hangs open, shock raising her brow, and judging by how her breath quickens, she knows I’m aiming every lyric to her, too.

The lyrics are perfect—a broken man singing about seeing the girl he loves in the arms of another. He expresses how quickly she moved on and how he doesn’t know why he’s still defending her when she’s no longer his to protect.

Her eyes darken, and she bites down on her lip, anger pinching colour onto her cheeks. When I get to the instrumental break between the first chorus and the second verse, Saoirse pushes from her seat and makes her way towards me.

“What are you doing?” Beibhinn mutters, eyes wide.

Saoirse ignores her, stopping next to me as I continue to play the melody.

Everyone is staring, waiting for what happens next, but then she opens her mouth and starts singing Taylor Swift’s verse. Her voice is like silk, and I lose track of everything around me.

The lyrics are like a knife, jutting into the centre of my chest, piercing so deep, I don’t think the wound will ever heal. The words paint a picture of a man who thinks he’s better than the guy she chose, about how he may be willing to get his knuckles bloody to get her back, but she is done. She’s given him enough chances, it’s over, and she’s not his problem anymore.

Her eyes never leave mine as the song continues, windows to her soul, one I broke with my necessary lies. Every word she sings digs the knife a little deeper, stating she doesn't care who she's offending by choosing someone else. Her choice has already been made.

Together, we hold each other with nothing more than our gaze, bringing the song to a close. Tears prick her eyes, and I battle the emotions beneath my skin. This is it, the moment I genuinely lose her.

When the final note echoes around us, I stand.

The classroom remains silent, all eyes lingering on Saoirse and me. The unspoken words steal the breath from my chest, and the need to be anywhere but here weighs down on me with the force of a freight train. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I bite down on my lip.

Peering over my shoulder, I level Mr O'Dowd with a glare. "Jealousy, heartbreak, betrayal. Take your fucking pick."

One last look at Saoirse, and I walk straight past her and out the fucking door, slamming it behind me.

Fuck this shit!

TWENTY-THREE

LIAM

SOMETHING IS WRONG. SAOIRSE HAS BEEN OFF SINCE yesterday morning, but I can't pinpoint what the hell happened after she left me at the entrance to go to her class. I've been racking my brain, mulling over a thousand scenarios. She says she's fine, but after growing up with Beibhinn, I've learned the true meaning behind those words, and they go something like this: *Ask me that question again, and I'll imbed my pointiest high heel in your junk.*

Desperate for some—or any—insight, I even poked at my sister for advice. But unfortunately, that girl is loyal to a fault where her new best friend is concerned—her lips are locked up tighter than Fort Knox, divulging little-to-no details.

At first, I thought Saoirse might be worried about her upcoming initiation, but she's progressed with our twice-a-day sessions, leading me to believe there's something more to her sombre mood. If I had to take a swing, I'd bet Rohan has something to do with it. Not that she'd tell me if he did.

I'm not an idiot. She still has feelings for him, even after he tossed her aside without an explanation. But I'll take whatever piece of herself she's willing to give me, then hope like fuck I can convince her she belongs with me in the end.

Starting today.

“Can I remove this blindfold yet?” Saoirse groans as I lead her up the rough terrain, taking extra care to watch every step we take.

“Few more minutes, Free Bird. We’re almost at the top.”

Saoirse pulls from my grip, and I halt, allowing her to catch her breath.

Bent forward with her palms resting on her knees, she exhales a lungful of air. “What is it with you, Devereuxs?” Her breath stutters. “I thought Beibhinn’s 6 a.m. runs and your torturous gym sessions were bad enough, but now, here I am, hiking Mount Everest blindfolded. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to kill me.”

Laughing at her dramatics, I shake my head and reach for her. “It’s the Wicklow Mountains, darlin’. Nothing more than one over-glorified hill on top of the next. We’ll be at the top in just a few more steps. I promise it will be worth every aching limb.”

“I’m gonna hold you to that, Dev.”

Dev. She’s called me that a few times since the night at the gym, and I’ve been meaning to ask her about it.

“Why Dev?”

A small chuckle slips past her pouty lips, and even though she can’t see through her blindfold, she cranes her neck over her shoulders, following the sound of my voice. “Everyone calls you Liam, but you’ll always be Devin to me. The boy from the lake.”

A series of sputtering heartbeats tick inside my chest, and for a moment, time stands still. Normally, I hate my first name because it reminds me of the life I could have had if I hadn’t been born into a syndicate family—back to a time when life

wasn't as fucked-up as it is now, and before the pressure of who I need to become wasn't crushing me to death.

“Besides, your surname is Devereux, too.” A smile graces her face. And it takes everything in me not to rip her blindfold off and kiss her senseless.

Finally, Saoirse stretches to her full height, and I guide her the rest of the way. Once we reach the top, I twist her body until she's facing the view of Dublin City. I step closer, moulding my chest to her back. “Ready?” My words brush across her neck.

She nods, giving me permission to remove her blindfold.

“Close your eyes. Don't open them until I tell you, okay?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Slowly, my hands tease the material settled on the bridge of her nose, and I ease it up and over her head. I lean closer, brushing my lips against her cheek. “Keep them closed.”

Nestling in behind her, I rest my chin on the top of her head and draw in a breath, filling my nose with pomegranate and lavender. I place a fleeting kiss on the top of her head. “Now. Open those gorgeous eyes, Free Bird.”

The second she does, her surprise stalls her breath, and she releases the tiniest gasp. Then, she peers over her shoulder and strikes me right in the centre of my chest with her megawatt smile. “Dev. This”—her head tilts towards the skyline as her eyes trail along the panoramic view—“is so beautiful.”

My attention never leaves her. “You got that right.”

Pivoting on the balls of her feet, she twirls towards me. Her arms wrap around my waist. “You can see the entire city from up here.”

She's right, you can, but for whatever reason, I don't want to look anywhere but at her and the smile I put on her face. The caveman in me roars to life, and I make a mental note to do whatever it takes to make her *this* happy every day from here on out.

With her arms spread wide, she twirls around and tilts her head towards the sky. She's lost in the moment, and my chest tightens at the sight. This is what she needed, to get lost in the beauty of nature and forget about all the heavy shit that's weighing her down. For once, she can pack up her worries and be a normal seventeen-year-old hanging out with a guy, not training to become an heir to a national crime organisation.

This is what I needed, too. To escape from my responsibilities and lose myself to the girl slowly stealing my heart. Fuck Rohan. Fuck my dad. And fuck the syndicate. None of them matter, not without her.

Closing the distance between us, I wrap my arms around her waist and draw her into my chest. Her head tilts, eyes peering up at me under her lashes. "What is this place?"

I bring my hand to her face, teasing my fingertips through her hair before gently tucking a strand behind her ear.

"It's called Montpelier Hill, but all the locals know it as the Hellfire Club." With a shift of my feet, I turn us both towards the old ruined building sitting in the middle of the mountaintop and add, "Rumours state this building was one of the first Freemason lodges in Ireland, but they're wrong. Right here, on this very hill, the syndicate was formed."

When my eyes fall back to Saoirse's, her joyous expression is gone. She's white as a sheet, and her wide eyes have narrowed. Her head falls to my chest. "Hey." I tip her

chin upward with my fingers, stealing her gaze. “What’s wrong, darlin’? Where did your mind go?”

Breaking free of my hold, she steps back and wraps her arms around her waist. “I’d like to leave, please.”

Confused by her abrupt reaction, I step towards her, closing the distance she wedged between us. “Talk to me, Free Bird. Please. Tell me what’s going on in that pretty head of yours.”

Her eyes dart around us, flicking between the old ruins and the beautiful view before finally settling back on me. “My mam.” She swallows. “She, erm. She told me about this place. She, erm, she ...” Saoirse’s shoulders shake, and discomfort creeps across her face, making me feel the unease that weighs her down. “I don’t want to be here, Liam. Can we please go?”

Her unease has the protective side of me on high alert, and I know what I need to do without hesitation. A barrage of questions threatens to slip off my tongue, but with how on edge she is, I hold them in, storing them for later when she’s not about to shut down and close me out completely.

Fuck watching the sunset. That’s not what she needs.

“Sure, darlin’. Let’s get you home.”



WE ARRIVE BACK AT THE RYAN MANOR, AND ALMOST AN HOUR later, Saoirse has barely spoken a word. Instead, she’s tracing slow and lazy circles on my stomach where my T-shirt has risen. The silence between us is deafening, but I don’t want to push her by forcing her to open up. It’s clear she’s lost in her

thoughts and needs a little time to process whatever is going on in her head.

So, for now, I give her what she needs—a safe place to land.

Together, we lie on Saoirse's bed, with her tucked against my side as I hold on tight. Bringing my hand to her head, I tease my fingers through her hair, trying to comfort her. Finally, she lifts her cheek from my chest and cranes her neck. "I'm sorry for ruining your plan."

"Don't worry about it, darlin'. There will always be another sunset."

A sad smile crawls across her face, and I wish I knew what's upsetting her so I could fix it. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but when you're ready, maybe you'll tell me what happened to make you clam up the way you did."

She pushes up onto her elbow, and her tongue swipes at her lower lip. "It's not anything you did. I promise." Her eyes close briefly as she draws in a breath. Then her focus shifts onto me. "A few days ago, when we were at the cabins, my mam told me why she ran from Killybegs." She pauses. "Sorry, this is hard to repeat, so I'm just gonna give you the CliffsNotes."

My hand settles beneath her jaw, and I swipe my thumb across her cheek. "It's okay. You don't have to tell me anything."

"No. I want to, Dev. You planned this romantic day for us, and I bailed. The least I can do is explain why."

"Only if you're sure."

“I am. It’s just a little rough for me. But you have to promise you won’t tell anyone, okay? Not even Beibhinn.”

Leaning forward, I drop my lips to her forehead. “I promise, Free Bird. You’re safe with me, always.”

Saoirse swallows, nodding her head. “My mam told me that the night of her second trial, before it was set to begin, Gabriel and a few of his friends brought her to this place in the mountains and they—” Her eyes drift towards the window, but I catch a glimpse of the lone tear sliding down her cheek. “They raped her. Over and over again. Then they beat her to a pulp and left her for dead. It was there, Liam. The Hellfire Club is where they took her.”

Fuck! I always knew Gabriel was a piece of shit, but hearing what he did to Éanna makes me fucking murderous. Somehow, I push past the rage boiling like acid in my gut and concentrate all my energy on Saoirse. The last thing she needs is me flying off the handle, especially when she is so delicate. Wrapping my arms around her, I rock back and forth as she soaks my shirt with her salty tears. “I’m so sorry, darlin’. I would never have taken you there if I had known. I’m sorry.”

Her chest heaves as she fights through her emotions. “S okay.” She hiccups. “How were you to know?”

A few minutes pass, and I stay wrapped around her, giving her the comfort she needs. All the while, one question eats at me. “Saoirse?”

“Hmm?”

“Is that—” I hesitate, unsure of how to broach the subject “Did your mam— Shit.”

She must realise what I’m trying to ask because she answers for me. “No. I’m not ... My mam was already

pregnant with me before that night. She and Lorcan met a few months earlier. Honestly, it's a miracle she didn't miscarry."

My eyes widen as I pull back. Shock ricochets through me, rattling my bones. Did she just say—? Surely not. "Lorcan's your dad?" I can't stop the words as they flee my mouth.

Realisation dawns on her face, raising her brow as her hand flies to her mouth. "Liam. You *cannot* tell anyone. Please. Nobody can know."

Fuck, how has it taken me this long to piece that together? It makes total sense. I feel stupid for never questioning it before, but I believed him when he told me the syndicate tasked him with keeping Saoirse and her mam safe. It never even dawned on me to dive deeper. And why would I have? Lorcan is a descendant of the original High King families. What reason would he have to lie? And why would he hide her for eighteen years, like she was nothing more than a dirty secret?

Unless ... "The syndicate doesn't know he's your father, do they?"

Saoirse shakes her head from side to side. "They can't find out either, Dev. Dealing with Gabriel is enough. If they knew I was the heir to two quarters, the other original families would start a riot. Mam and Lorcan have done everything possible to keep anyone from finding out—including me—but now that I'm back here, it's become harder to conceal."

Fuck. This just got a shitload more complicated. If my dad or anyone else finds out, Saoirse's safety would be compromised even more than it already is. The need to keep her safe overtakes every other thought I possess. Then it hits me. Saoirse needs more than me to protect her.

More than Rohan, too.

If she's gonna make it through these trials unscathed, she needs us both. Together.

TWENTY-FOUR

ROHAN

THE FRONT DOOR OF MY POOL HOUSE RATTLES WITH AN incessant pounding. I'm not in the fucking mood to be dealing with impatient cunts today. I'm still salty as hell after yesterday, and whoever the fuck is at my door can suck my giant cock.

The banging grows louder as I lean back on my couch, kick my heels onto the coffee table, and bring my joint to my lips. Breathing in, I feel the familiar burn stinging my lungs. My head falls against the backrest as I elongate my neck and stare up at the ceiling, billowing a cloud of smoke into the room.

"Rí, open the fucking door before I kick it off the hinges." Devereux's roar penetrates my ears, but I'd rather sit on a box of rusty nails than do anything prickface asks me.

Reaching forward, I pick up the smart TV remote and raise the volume on my open Spotify app. "All The Things I Hate About You" by Huddy blares through the surround sound as Liam's persistent pounding reminds me why I'm sitting here, pissed as fuck at Saoirse. Sure, I pushed her into his arms, but there wasn't much resistance. She went willingly, and that pisses me off more than anything else.

Liam's rage drowns into the heavy beat, and I sit, enjoying my weed, wondering how long it will take for him to realise the door's unlocked.

It turns out, not as long as I'd have liked. The door whooshes open with a violent crash, smashing into the wall behind it and knocking my coat off the rack.

Motherfucker just kicked my door open.

After muting the TV, I push myself from the couch and glare daggers at him. "What the fuck, Devereux? Was there a need to boot my door down? Next time, try the doorknob before Daniel LaRusso-ing your way into a room."

Within an instant, he's bounding over me and shoving me up against the wall. "When the fuck were you gonna tell me?"

Too high to give a fuck, I ask, "What crawled up your shaft and rotted?"

His forearm pins against my neck, adding way more force than fucking necessary. "Oh, I don't know, Rohan." He applies more pressure, cutting off the airflow to my brain. "How about how you talked me into your grand plan but forgot to fuckin' mention a crucial detail."

I raise my brow, seemingly unfazed by his roid rage. My fingers grasp his arm, and I pry it from my neck. "First off, what the fuck are you talking about? And secondly"—I step into him, square my shoulders, and invade his space—"next time you put your hands on me, I'll lay you out. Deal or no fuckin' deal."

"Fuck you." Liam pushes my chest, knocking me back a peg. "You're so fucking wrapped up in the repercussions of your own decisions, and you're forgetting *I am* doing you a favour here, not the other way around."

“Get off it, D.” My elbow collides with his rib cage, giving me enough time to dig around him and switch our places. My hand flies forward, and I grip his neck, forcing him back against the wall. “Don’t act like you had nothing to gain from our arrangement. I handed you the fuckin’ keys to the kingdom. All you have to do is keep her safe. Fortunately for you, Donnacha’s been MIA since the day of Saoirse’s attack, giving you ample time to stick your dick somewhere it doesn’t belong.”

My grip tightens, and Liam’s face turns a deeper shade of red. His eyes bore into mine, delivering a warning I refuse to take. Next thing I know, the greasy fuck levels me in the jaw with his iron fist. Startled by the birds floating behind my eyes, I loosen my hold and stumble back a step.

“This is much bigger than Donnacha and your piece-of-shit father.” Liam grips the front of my shirt and lifts me off my feet. Toes dangling, I hover above the floor. “But you already know that, don’t you?”

My hands fly out, and, leveraging my upper body strength, I grip his extended arm with both hands and swing my hips forward, wrapping my legs around his waist. Liam is fast, but I’m faster. I knock him off balance, and we tumble to the ground, arms swinging, no mercy given. Using my position to my advantage, I straddle his waist and let my fists fly. Unfortunately, this fucker knows how bruised I am after the weekend, and he uses it to his advantage.

Things get out of hand. We roll around, knocking seven shades of shite into each other, wrecking the fucking place in the process. Finally, when I get him beneath me for a second time, Liam tucks himself into my chest, bringing his arms tight to his side. Before I know what’s happening, he swings his

elbow upward, cracking me in the nose. Blood pisses from my nostril, and when I reach up to swipe at it, Liam shifts his hips to the left, tossing me off him like a bucking bronco.

Next thing I know, I'm flat on my back, staring at the ceiling. Manic laughter erupts from me as I cover my face with my forearms. A few moments pass before I drag my head off the floor and peer over at Liam. He's got his sorry arse propped against the wall as his head drops to his knees. Finally, he lifts his gaze, and I see the defeat in his eyes for the first time in a long time. "Why didn't you tell me Saoirse is Lorcan's daughter?"



"HERE." I TOSS AN UNOPENED BAG OF PEAS AT LIAM, THEN drop into the armchair facing him, holding a bag of frozen potato wedges to my nose.

His grumbled response makes me want to ram the olive branch I just extended up his arse. Fortunately for him, I'm more concerned with *how* he figured out Lorcan is Saoirse's dad than instigating round two. "How'd you find out?"

"She told me." His eyes find mine, but it's the smug smile gracing his lips that pisses me off the most.

Anger aside, nothing, and I do mean nothing, can stop how my heart sinks to the pit of my gut. If Saoirse did share that titbit of information with Liam, she must trust him more than I assumed. My fingers tighten on my makeshift ice pack, hating the way this revelation seats itself beneath my skin. I underestimated the connection they shared back when they were kids, because for her to trust so quickly after everything she's been through ... it's the only thing that makes sense.

“What about you?” Liam questions. “When did she tell you?”

“She didn’t.” Shifting in my seat, I grab my metal cigarette case from the coffee table and pull out a smoke. After resting it between my lips, I grab the lighter and flick the flint, sparking a flame. Once I have it lit, I inhale, spreading nicotine through my lungs. I take my time, savouring the pull, before finally continuing. “Lorcan did.”

Liam’s face falls, and I imagine he’s feeling something very similar to how I felt moments ago—unimportant and replaceable.

“How long have you known?”

“What’s this?” My lips curl. “Twenty fucking questions!”

“Don’t be a dick. Just answer.”

“A couple of years.” *Two, to be exact.*

“Unbelievable.” Liam shakes his head. “For years, I was going to those cabins, and what, he forgot to mention it?”

“Well, you don’t have the greatest track record for keeping your mouth shut. Can you blame him?”

Liam sits back, dropping his head against the couch. “I was just a kid, Rí. I didn’t know any fuckin’ better.”

I lean forward, balancing my elbows on my knees. “That may be so. But she’s *his* kid. There’s fuck-all people he’d trust to protect her when he can’t.”

“Yeah?” He mirrors my movements, eyes laser focused on my every move. “What makes you so fuckin’ worthy?”

My tongue slides over my bottom lip, quickly followed by my teeth. I contemplate his question, digging deeper than I

thought possible. “You gave her up for a chance at everything. I gave up everything for a chance with her.”

“Things have changed.” Liam’s hand slaps against the table, his anger flowing over. “I’m not that kid anymore, Rohan. She means something to me. More than the syndicate.”

My teeth clamp tight, and jealousy seeps through me. I knew this was a probable outcome when I walked away from her, but hearing it aloud cracks my chest plate wide open. My fists curl into balls, and my fingernails bite into the soft flesh of my palms. Beneath the surface, a caveman bangs his chest, repeating the word *mine*.

The urge to jump from my seat and slit Liam’s throat is almost too tempting ... but I created this. Now I need to pay the price for the choice I made.

“How do you do it?” Liam interjects a question into my thoughts. His voice holds a pensive note.

“Do what?”

“Tell your dad to go fuck himself.”

“Easy.” I rise from the chair, make my way over to the liquor cabinet beneath the TV, and pull out a bottle of Jameson and two glasses. After dropping the glasses onto the coffee table, I pour both of us a generous measure and slide one glass towards Liam. “Four syllables, one after the other.”

“Hilarious.” Liam reaches for his glass as I fall back into my seat.

“Do you want my honest answer?”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

Downing the whiskey like a shot, I refill as I reply. “There comes a point when you have to decide if the person you’re

trying to impress is who you want to become. For me, I was pretty fucking young when I realised I never wanted to be a reflection of the devil. From that point on, I knew I'd do whatever it took—and endure whatever hell I had to—in order to claw my way out from beneath his shadow. Don't get me wrong," I continue, "standing up to him is never easy. Hell, you saw me on Saturday. But Gabriel King and Oliver Devereux have one thing in common. They both think they're untouchable. They thrive on power and greed. Taking them down is a marathon, not a sprint. You need to play them at their own game and bide your time."

I reach towards the chessboard on the side table next to my armchair, and Liam's eyes follow. "Then, when they think they have control of the board, you swoop in." With my pointer finger, I knock the black king over, and it rolls across the board before falling to the floor. "And checkmate."

"Why are you telling me all this?" His brow furrows, eyes narrowing with doubt.

My shoulders rise with an intake of breath. "Like it or not, we're on the same side of the board, Liam—protecting the same queen."

His head drops into his palm as his shoulders rise and fall with his heavy breaths. Finally, he brings his eyes back to me. "I can't protect her from the entire fucking syndicate, Rohan. My dad, Donnacha, Gabriel ... those I can handle. But we're talking about the entire fucking organisation here. Reality is, once they find out she's Lorcan's heir, all hell will break loose."

I had a feeling it would come to this. He's in too deep, falling too fast and too hard. Like me, he's never giving her up, not now. Not fully.

“What are you saying?” I prod, needing clarification on what I think he’s throwing out.

Liam swallows his pride, keeping his eyes on me. “I’m not enough, Rohan. She needs us both.”

“You’re right, but that’s not what she wants. She said it herself”—or rather, sang it—“she’s made her choice.” *And so have I. At least, I think I have.*

Then Liam says the last thing I’d ever expect. “As much as I hate to admit it, you’re wrong. Her heart lies with both of us.”

I lean back and tilt my head to the side. “Prove it.”

TWENTY-FIVE

SAOIRSE

IT'S MORNINGS LIKE THESE WHEN I WISH I COULD STOMACH the taste of coffee. I'm exhausted, running on a few hours of broken sleep, and I could really use the caffeine boost.

After the heavy conversation I had with Liam last night, I stupidly told him I wanted to be left alone so I could settle my thoughts, and I immediately regretted my decision, but I powered through, resisting the urge to text him and ask if he'd come back. Logically, I know it would be so easy to lose myself in him and the comfort he gives, but I have to learn how to do this without him holding my hand.

Then there's Rohan. Like it or not, he got under my skin with that fucking song he sang, and I've been having a hard time deciphering the emotions he draws out of me so effortlessly. I want to hate him, really I do, but the way he'd looked at me as though I tore his soul out makes me believe there's more to the story.

Sending Liam home was the right choice. I needed time to process everything that's going on—Donnacha, how I feel about the trials, and finally, the day I've been dreading ... my eighteenth birthday. Most teenagers live for the day they officially become a legal adult. But for me, today marks the day my life is no longer my own.

Today I start my journey to becoming a syndicate member. And although my trials don't start for another four days, I can't help but overthink all the shit I still don't know yet.

Beibhinn has been great, assuring me that once I pass the first round, the syndicate board will bring me up to speed, but that means sharing a table with Gabriel King. The thought alone makes my stomach coil into knots and my skin crawl with disgust. But no matter how much I want to run from it all, I won't. I need to prove myself—for me, for my mam, and for the murdered uncle I never met.

I won't let Gabriel scare me away from what's rightfully mine. If he wants Killybegs and the rest of the Leinster Syndicate, he'll have to pry it from my cold dead hands, because now that I'm finally of age, I'm ready to take back what belongs to my family, even if it nearly kills me.

Entering the kitchen, I flick on the overhead lights and make my way towards the kettle to make myself a cup of tea. It's still dark outside, so I peer up at the clock on the wall next to the patio doors and check the time—five after four. Beibhinn won't be awake for at least another hour—if her gentle snores are anything to go by—giving me time to sit with my thoughts before she drags me out for another gruelling cardio session.

Waiting for the kettle to boil, I see a shadow pass the window above the sink. I shake my head, pushing away the sinking feeling in my gut.

It's just your imagination. No one is out there.

I pause for a second and the kettle clicks off, instantly flooding the room with silence. Staying still, I strain my ears, hoping I'm exaggerating. I hate to admit it, but I'm still nervous after everything that happened last weekend, and

unfortunately, every creak this old house sends me into a state of panic.

Placing my hand on my chest, I try to steady my racing heart as I talk to myself off the ledge. *It's just the reflection of the forest, Saoirse. Nobody is breaking in.* But when the door handle rattles, panic widens my eyes. *Oh my God. Someone's here.*

Somehow, I reach forward and extract a large knife from the knife block sitting on the counter. Blood rushes to my ears, but I drop to my hunkers, shielding myself from sight behind the centre island.

The hinges release a small squeak when whoever is on the other side slowly eases the door open. I should run, scream, anything, but my body becomes petrified stone, unmoving.

My chest rises and falls with rapid breaths, but time slows as I await my fate.

Peering around the side of the cabinet, I steal a glance at the intruder. His hood is up, and there's a half balaclava covering the bottom half of his face, making it hard to identify him. My eyes drop to the large box in his hand, which looks similar to the one my mother told me to take the night I ran, only far bigger.

Closing my eyes briefly, I inhale a strengthening breath, then jump out, knife at the ready. "Who the fuck are you, and what are you doing in my house?"

The box falls to the floor as the man turns to face me. "Go handy, doll. It's me." He reaches up and tugs down his mask. Lorcan's face comes into view and a wave of calm washes over me. His eyes dart towards the weapon aimed at him, and

a proud smile tugs at his mouth. “Sorry for frightenin’ yeh. I thought you’d be sleepin’.”

My head shakes slowly, and I lower the knife and place it on the countertop. “Why are you even here? When I left the cabins, you said it was best to keep our distance.”

“And I meant it. Hence my reasonin’ for showin’ up in the middle of the night when prying eyes are asleep.”

“Okay, but I still don’t understand why you’re here, especially when you presumed I’d be sleeping.”

Lorcan bends and plucks up the box he dropped, then closes the space between us. “I was droppin’ this off.” He places it on the countertop and gestures toward it with a swipe of his hand. “Happy Birthday, doll.”

“What is it?”

“Sit and open it. I’ll make the coffee.”

“Okay. But I’ll have tea. Coffee is the devil’s liquid.”

His laugh is gruff yet somehow soothing. “You’re your mother’s daughter.”

“Maybe.” I sit at the breakfast bar and pull the box towards me, but I don’t open it yet. “But after the week I’ve had, I think I might take after my dad more.”

He winks before turning away from me. “How’s training doin’?” he asks over his shoulder.

“Good. Between Liam and Beibhinn pushing me to my limits, my body aches in places I didn’t know existed.” *Although some of that might be down to how Liam fucked me senseless on Monday night—now, that’s the type of cardio I can get behind, or should I say under, but I’m sure that’s the last thing my dad needs (or wants) to hear.*

“Muscle pain aside, the workouts have been helpful because I’m finally feeling somewhat confident about my upcoming fight against Hannah. I’m slowly getting the hang of it. I am nowhere near Beibhinn-level bad bitch, but I’d like to think I can hold my own when I face Hannah.”

Taking a seat across from me, he then slides my cup towards me. “I don’t doubt it, doll.”

Finally, I remove the lid from the box, and I’m greeted with the USB Rohan took from me the night we met and a bunch of paperwork and envelopes. “Oh, just what every girl wants on her birthday.”

“Might not look like a lot,” Lachie smirks. “But everythin’ in there serves a purpose. You’re eighteen now, which means the Ryan empire is yours—properties, businesses, both legal and illegal. You name it, it’s all in there. That’s why we had Rohan take the USB from you. If you’d tried to gain access to any assets before you turned eighteen, Gabriel would’ve known you had the key codes in your possession. As of midnight, he’s no longer the Ryan beneficiary.”

My eyes widen as I rummage through all the bank statements, rental property agreements, land ownership, and more.

“D’ya still have the box from your ma?”

“Yes.” I nod, still shocked at the substantial nine-figure number staring back at me from a bank statement in my name. *No wonder Gabriel wants me dead. This is hundreds of millions of euros.*

“Good. That wee box contains the access codes to every account. You’ll need them for transactions over €50,000. Any

figure up to that, you can use the bank cards.” He points to a black envelope with the Ryan family crest on the front.

I’m in shock, mouth swinging open and eyes blinking rapidly. *Is he seriously handing me millions as though it’s only a few euros? Fucking hell. I think I’m going to pass out.*

Lorcan’s phone pings with an incoming message, and he pulls it from his pocket before glancing down at the screen. “I need to get gone, doll.” Lorcan pushes from the stool. “Keep any important documents locked inside the safe. Change the code to something only you know, and don’t tell a soul.”

Again, I nod my head, still unable to form words.

“One last thing.” He reaches into his other pocket and whips out a key fob, then slides it towards me. “Lá breithe shona duit, a ghra.”

“You got me a car?”

Completely ignoring my question, he gestures towards the hallway with the tip of his chin. “Walk me out?”

Doing as he asked, I follow behind him until he comes to a halt next to the door. “If you need me, I programmed my number into the car.” He removes his hands from his pocket and shifts from foot to foot.

Finally, I encase my arms around him and hug him tight. “Thanks, Dad.”

Within seconds, he returns the gesture and tucks me beneath his chin. “Take a day off, doll. Wake Beibhinn up and go treat yourself. You only turn eighteen once.”

Taking a step back, I flash him a smile, knowing full well that’s what I’d intended to do, anyway.

Finally, he pulls the door open, and my eyes land over his shoulder at the guy leaning against a purple sports car. Green eyes scan my body from head to toe, sending shivers down my spine. “What’s he doing here?”

“Look after yourself, princess.” Lorcan pulls my attention back to him before he leans in, placing a fatherly kiss on my forehead. “And keep your eyes open.”

With that, he walks out the door and down the steps—unwilling to give me a response.

Leaning against the doorway, I watch as Rohan tosses a set of keys at my dad before he stalks towards Lorcan’s black Mercedes, opens the passenger door, and lowers himself into the seat.

Once again, Rohan’s eyes connect with mine, refusing to let me go. Then it hits me... words Lorcan said when he handed me the keys to my new car and why he avoided answering my question. The gift isn’t from him ... it’s from Rohan. *Lá breithe shona duit, a ghra. Happy birthday, love.*

Mother of fuck. He’s unbelievable.

Slamming the door shut, I push all thoughts of Rohan King from my mind, then race up the stairs and rush towards Beibhinn, who’s still passed out in my bed.

“Bitch! Wake the fuck up. We’re going shopping.”

TWENTY-SIX

ROHAN

“YOU BETTER BE JOKING!” GABRIEL SEETHES, HANDS SLAPPING against his desk as he pushes himself out of his desk chair. “Where the fuck is *my money*? It’s gone, every fucking cent.” He aims his murderous stare at Lorcan, who remains unfazed at his outburst.

“It’s out of my hands.”

Unbeknownst to my father, Lorcan’s loyalty doesn’t lie where he thinks it does. Lorcan has played the long game, gaining my father’s trust and making him believe he had an alliance within the syndicate’s High Kings. But unfortunately, as calculated as my sperm donor is, Lorcan is far more strategic—a Trojan horse who’s infiltrated the kingdom gates with plans to burn it to the ground.

If I could, I’d capture the look on Gabriel’s face—eyes flaming with rage as his nostrils flare with every heavy breath. It’s priceless, and it takes every bit of me to keep my expression clueless and hold in my laughter.

Boiling with untamed fury, Daddy Dearest picks up a crystal whiskey decanter from his desk and flings it across the room. He’d known this day was coming, but I doubt he’d thought it would happen this soon. At least not until he could put his backup plan in place. “Fix this, Reilly.”

Poised as ever, Lorcan stands across from my sperm donor with hands loosely resting in his pockets. “I’m sorry, but I can’t. As of midnight, all *Ryan*”—Lorcan emphasises Saoirse’s surname—“accounts have been transferred into Saoirse’s name.”

Behind the scenes, Lorcan has been pushing the syndicate council for this outcome, but they were slow to move. For a moment, I didn’t think he’d pull it off. They wanted to wait until Saoirse finished her initiation, but luckily, Lorcan convinced them the Ryan estate and all holdings belong with the last remaining Ryan heir, relieving my father of every ounce of control.

“No. No. I won’t accept this.” Gabriel tugs at his tie as he paces back and forth behind his desk. “Who signed off on this?” He halts, glaring daggers at Lorcan. “She hasn’t even begun her trials. This is fucking ridiculous. I want that money back in my account by the end of the day.”

Lorcan keeps his mask in place as he shrugs his shoulders. “I’m sorry, King. But there’s nothing I can do. It was put to a vote, and the majority agreed. The Ryan Foundation belongs to Saoirse Ryan.”

Gabriel’s hands fly to his head, and he threads his fingers through the chaotic strands. Frustration rolls off him like raging thunder. “A vote?” He grinds through his teeth. “Where was I for this decision? I am one of the four High Kings, they cannot put a vote into motion without my presence.”

I mash my lips together, sealing them tight as I bathe in the glory of the first stage of my father’s demise. He’s about to blow a fuse, and fuck, I can’t wait.

“I’m afraid they can.” Lorcan offers, keeping his face free from delight. “I questioned their decision to leave you out of

the voting process, but unfortunately, I was overruled.”

“This is unacceptable.” Gabriel rounds his deck and steps into Lorcan’s space. “Get me my fucking money back, right fucking now.”

With ease, Lorcan removes his hands from his pockets and folds his arms across his chest. “I don’t know who you think you’re fuckin’ speaking’ to, King. But you best remember your place.” His lilt rolls off his tongue, wrapped in condescension yet perfectly controlled.

“My place?” My father’s shoulders rise with temper. “My place is the head of the Leinster Syndicate, and you’d do well to remember that.”

“Nah, see,”— Lorcan rolls his shoulders back, straightening his spine as jaw muscles flex—“that’s where you’re mistaken. Once Saoirse Ryan completes her trials, she will fully control the Leinster chapter. The syndicate will see to it.” Lorcan’s words carry a slight edge, but he’s careful with his wording, keeping Gabriel where he needs him.

Darkness crosses Gabriel’s eyes. “It won’t come to that. I’m not losing a lifetime of work to an eighteen-year-old tramp who spreads her legs for anyone with a swinging member between theirs. Saoirse will not pass her trials, not if I have anything to do with it.”

“And how do you stop her?” I open my mouth for the first time since entering his office.

My father’s glare falls on me, and he steps closer, closing the distance between us. “Don’t ever question me, boy. I’ve been training Hannah night and day, and I can assure you she will wipe the floor with Ms Ryan. I’ve made sure of it.”

“Training?” I cluck. “Is that what you’re calling it now? ’Cause from where I’m standing, the only thing you’ve trained Hannah in is how to suck your wrinkly cock as if it’s an Olympic sport.”

His hand flies out and latches around my neck in a vice grip. I tilt my head to the ceiling, and his fingers tighten, crushing my windpipe. “Listen here, you disrespectful runt. Where I stick my dick is none of your concern. Keep pushing my buttons, and I’ll give you a front-row seat when I bend your bitch over and ram my dick up her arse.”

Over his shoulder, I see the moment Lorcan snaps. He’s never one to lose his composure, always looking at the broader perspective, but unbeknownst to Gabriel, he’s just released the fuckin’ beast.

In the next breath, Lorcan swiftly removes his Glock from his waistband and then presses it against Gabriel’s head. “You’ve got one point one of a second to let him go, or I’ll paint these office walls in your blood.”

Daddy Dearest tightens his hold as he cranks his neck towards Lorcan with eyes wide. “What the fuck are you doing?” He barks, but I can feel his shudder of nervousness against my throat.

Lorcan pushes against the butt of the gun, digging it harder into the side of my father’s forehead. “Do as I tell ye, King.”

He loosens his grip, and I draw in a breath, filling my lungs with some much-needed air.

Slowly, Gabriel raises his hands in surrender, then twists to face Lorcan—who keeps his gun trained on his target. “What’s this about? Since when did you give two fucks about my boy,

Reilly?” He questions before falling silent, too fucking silent. “Unless ...” He steps back.

“Rí.” Lorcan grabs my attention, then tilts his chin to his left, silently telling me to come and stand next to him.

I don’t hesitate, stepping away from my father, who looks like he’s just cracked open *The Da Vinci Code*.

“You know,” Gabriel smirks. “I wondered who the fuck had the balls to fuck something that belonged to me without my permission.” He stalks forward until he’s only an arm’s length away. “Turns out you were right under my nose this entire time.”

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

He knows.

Lorcan’s grip on his gun tightens, finger hovering over the trigger, ready to fire.

“Tell me this, Reilly ... Did Èanna get into your bed willingly, or did you get the same fight I did?”

Lorcan lurches forward, ramming the barrel of his Glock down my father’s throat. “Keep my wife’s name outta your fuckin’ mouth.”

Gabriel’s eyes widen, brows rising as his measly existence flashes before his eyes.

Wrapping my hand around Lorcan’s bicep, I pull him back. “Don’t. A quick death is the least of what that cunt deserves.”

Lorcan’s eyes find mine, and I know he can see what’s reflecting from them.

Don’t kill him.

Don’t take that away from me.

When he dies, it will be me who steals the light from his eyes, just like he stole the light from my soul.

His hand shakes as the war rages inside him. He doesn't want to let him live. Thankfully, he pulls back, but not before he wraps his fist around Gabriel's shirt and forces him into the bookshelf. "You should count yourself lucky, King. The kid just granted you a lifeline." Then using the butt of his gun, Lorcan clocks him in the side of the skull with an unmerciful crack.

Taking a step back, Lorcan raises his gun again. "Take this as a warning. Open your fucking mouth, and next time, Rí won't stop me." He pulls the trigger, lodging a bullet into my father's shoulder, causing him to wail out with pain as he slumps to the floor.

Lorcan drops to his hunkers, bringing himself down to my father's eye level. "Your days are numbered, King, and I'm keepin' count."

TWENTY-SEVEN

LIAM

ARMS FOLDED ACROSS MY CHEST, I LEAN AGAINST THE LARGE stone pillar outside Ryan manor with my eyes trained on the deep-purple BMW i8 that's raising dust as it races up the driveway before sliding to a stop at the base of the entry steps.

Within seconds, the butterfly doors elevate, and my sister and Saoirse come into view. From the passenger seat, Beibhinn's eyes land on mine. "I hope your birthday present game is strong, brother. Because Rohan really knows how to buy a girl a gift." Beibhinn laughs as she pushes out of the passenger seat. "This car is sick."

My smirk drops. *Son of a bitch. He bought her a fucking car.*

I should've known that prick had something up his sleeve. He was far too smug last night. Mainly when he delivered his message with a devious *Prove it*. Rohan doesn't know the meaning of the word *share*, but being a twin, sharing comes second nature to me, and I'm man enough to admit the only way I can have Saoirse is if I'm willing to halve her heart with him.

He's there, embedded beneath her skin, right next to me. I see the conflict in her eyes when we're both in the same room

or when she thinks she has to choose between us, and a little piece of her heart breaks.

There's only one way this ends, and the sooner I come to terms with that, the easier it will be to accept that she loves us both in different ways and for various reasons.

Pushing from the pillar, I descend the steps and round the car, ignoring the curious glare Beibhinn points my way. Finally, Saoirse exits the car and stands at full height—and I almost lose my breath at how fucking stunning she looks.

Gone are the worn yoga pants and hoodies I'm used to, and instead an angel wrapped in edible sin stands before me. Starting at her feet, I let my eyes trail over knee-high black boots before rewarding me with a tease of her silky thighs. My gaze travels further, approving of the leather wrapped around the tops of her legs, hugging her hips and waist like a second skin. My mouth waters, and my greedy perusal continues by stealing a peek at her toned stomach beneath the mesh top that barely covers a silvery bikini-style bra beneath.

Stepping closer, I notice numerous delicate chains crisscrossing her waist—begging me to peel off every item of clothing so I can fuck her wearing nothing but them alone. I know it's her birthday, but fuck me, I'm seconds away from unwrapping her as though she's my fuckin' present.

Finally, her eyes capture mine, and I'm a goner, falling arse over fist. Wide smoky eyes blaze with a ferociousness that wasn't there the last time I saw her. It's as though her confidence has skyrocketed overnight. They're wilder than wind, and I know, here and now, she's finally accepting the life she is born to lead. Saoirse Ryan has found her fire, and I'm hypnotised by the flames.

My tongue swipes at my lip, and I close the distance between us, stopping centimetres from her. Then, placing my knuckles beneath her chin, I tilt her chin and fall into her amber eyes. “Happy birthday, Free Bird.”

We stay like that, lost in time, our eyes locked on each other as the world passes us by. There is a name for the feeling spreading through me—three words, only eight letters, that I’m terrified to say. I swallow them back before they can slip past my lips. Instead, I lean in, claiming her mouth with mine, expressing my unspoken words with every stroke of my tongue. My arm wraps around her waist, drawing her closer as I lean in. Our height difference makes me fall forward as she leans back, but I catch her thigh, holding her steady as I lose myself in her.

“Well, as cute as this is,” Beibhinn interrupts, reminding me of her presence, “I think I’ll head back to the gate-lodge for the night. Leave you two lovebirds to it.” Her eyebrow rises as she winks at Saoirse. “I’ve already seen enough of my brother’s naked arse to last a lifetime, and I don’t think my eyeballs could handle walking in on you two for a second time.”

Saoirse chuckles in my arms. “Thanks for today, B. I needed a little normal.”

“Tomorrow we’re celebrating properly, no objections. Party at the gate-lodge, and wear the BBE dress you bought, because it’s hot as fuck.”

Beibhinn comes closer, and Saoirse steps from my grasp. The next instant, they wrap their arms around each other in a friendly hug. As much as I’m thankful that Saoirse is back in my life, I’m also happy my sister found a friend. Before

Saoirse, Killybegs was a man's world, and Beibhinn, as badarse as she is, never quite fit in. At least not entirely.

Beibhinn steps back and clutches Saoirse's shoulders. "Love you, bish."

"Love you, too."

Beibhinn tilts her head towards me. "Take care of our girl."

I wrap my arms around Saoirse's waist and draw her back to my chest. Then, resting my chin on the top of her head, I wink at my sister. "Oh, I plan to."

Her body shudders. "Fucking hell! At least wait until I get to the end of the drive."



"LIAM! PUT ME DOWN." SAOIRSE BEATS HER LITTLE FISTS against my back as I rush up the staircase with her slung over my shoulder.

My hand skates up her thigh, roaming beneath her leather skirt until it meets her plump arse cheek. My fingers dive in, and I grab a handful, making her squeal.

We make it to the main bedroom in seconds, and I toss her onto the bed. Her body hits the mattress with a slight bounce, and her sweet laughter fills the room. Next, she rises onto her elbows and tips her chin to her chest. "Someone is needy today."

"Did you seriously think you could rock up looking like my favourite dessert and not expect me not to devour every

inch of you?” I reach behind my back, and then in one swift motion, I tug my T-shirt over my head.

When my eyes fall back on her, I bask in the rise and fall of her chest as she drinks me in with her hungry gaze. Then, starting at the Greek Gods of Olympus tattoo that covers my lower torso, she appraises my artwork, biting down on her lower lip. Slowly, I pop the button on my jeans, lowering them enough to display the crowned skull tattoo on my pelvis. Her breath hitches.

Placing one knee on the bed, I grab hold of Saoirse’s boots, tug them off, and toss them over my shoulder. Once I’ve removed them, I wrap my hand around her ankle and pull her towards me. “Tell me, Free Bird, how many orgasms do you want for your birthday?”

Before she can respond, I circle my arm around her waist and lift her off the mattress. Then, flipping our positions, I sit on the edge of the bed and lower her onto my lap.

Her arms come up and rest on my shoulders as I run my tongue along the column of her neck. “Two?” I bite down, then soothe the burn with a brush of my lips. “Four?” My hands trail up her waist, gathering the mesh material and guiding it up and over her head.

Saoirse’s thighs tighten around my hips, and I draw her closer. “Six?”

Lowering my head to her sternum, I flatten my tongue against her olive skin and draw my piercing across her flesh, forcing her to drop her head back and elongate her neck. “Dev,” she cries, a breathless moan as she arches her back.

My fingers dance up her spine with a feather-light touch, stopping at the thin band holding her bra in place. With a flick,

I unclip the tiny clasp. Then using my teeth, I ease the straps down her arms until they fall to the crease of her elbows, exposing her perfect breasts. I take my time, tasting every inch of her. Then, gripping her hips, I lift her from my lap and place her between my legs, feet on the floor.

From this position, I'm at eye level with her stomach, so I lean back, resting my body weight on my palms. "Take off the skirt, darlin'."

"Yes, sir," she sasses. *Fuck, I like the sound of that.*

A sultry grin pulls at her lips, eyes raging with desire. Then she reaches behind her back and lowers the zip. She eases the tight leather over her hips with both hands until it pools around her feet.

Standing before me in nothing but a high-rise black thong—which makes her legs look like they go on for days—and those taunting body chains, she has me harder than fucking steel. Unable to keep my hands to myself, I reach out, wrap my fingers around the jewellery, and tug her towards me. Saoirse falls forward, but I catch her around her waist, then lift her off her feet until she's on top of me.

Needing her beneath me, I flip us over and grind against her pussy.

"Fuck, Dev. Stop torturing me."

Flashing her a wicked smile, I lower my mouth to her skin and kiss my way down her torso, stopping when I meet the lace material of that sexy-as-fuck thong. My fingers tease the fabric, then slowly pull it down her legs. Once they're off, I keep them in my grasp and ease myself off the bed. "Turn over, Free Bird."

Without question, she does as I ask, then peers over her shoulder, watching as I pull my jeans and boxers off. Once I'm bollock naked, I climb back onto the bed, bringing her thong with me. I kneel behind her and then trace the small scrap of lace over her spine. Her body bows at the sensation, and I lower my mouth to her ear. "Put your hands behind your back." I tug at her underwear, ripping them open.

"Um, huh." She watches me over her shoulder with bated breath.

Her arms come behind her back, and I draw her wrists together, then tie them tight with the lace. Keeping my grip on the material, I pull her up onto her knees, then use my other hand to push between her shoulder blades so her face rests against the mattress. "Good little queen." I praise her as she rests her cheek against the duvet but keeps her arse high. "Now, spread those legs for me, darlin'."

Drawing her knees apart, she opens wide, giving me a glorious view of her dripping cunt.

Unable to stop myself, I lower my mouth and flatten my tongue against her swollen clit, teasing her with slow, open-mouth kisses. Her hips rock with every stroke, chasing the high I'm building. Like a starved man, I lap and suck until my fucking tongue goes numb, and she's begging me to push her over the edge. Adding two fingers, I plunge them into her depths, loving how she clamps around my digits.

"Dev, please. I need to come."

"As you wish, darlin'." I curl my fingers, drawing them in and out in slow, deep thrusts. Within seconds, her breaths become heavy pants, and she explodes, my name erupting from her mouth with a satisfied cry.

TWENTY-EIGHT

SAOIRSE

HANDS TIED BEHIND MY BACK, MY SPINE CURVES AS LIAM tugs against the fabric, pulling my front off the mattress to meet him at the foot of the bed. A spark of ecstasy blazes through me, setting my skin on fire. My breath catches in my throat, tightening my lungs. My orgasm attacks my nerve endings, and I struggle to control my shaky limbs.

Liam's name rolls off my tongue, and his grip on my wrists tightens, tugging with so much force I spring back against his chest. With a move I wasn't expecting, he wraps his arm around my waist, his hand splaying my stomach, and he twists us like he's Magic fucking Mike.

His back hits the mattress with a soft thud as his feet plant on the floor, then suddenly I'm straddling his thighs in a reverse cowgirl. His fingertips dig into my hips, raising my body before bringing me closer to his face.

"Take a seat, Saoirse." He tugs, burying his face between my thighs. His tongue laps up every drop. Still sensitive from the last orgasm, my hips shudder against every stroke. "Jesus Christ. I can't."

"Yes, you can."

Using my knees, I try to balance above him without tumbling off the edge of the bed, but he doesn't relent, holding

me steady as he tortures me with his pursuit.

His hot breath teases, “Darlin’, don’t be shy. I said take a fuckin’ seat. Let me eat you front to back until you’re coming all over my fuckin’ face.”

My body ignites, and he dives back in, giving no mercy. Before I know it, my second orgasm races to the surface, and I’m coming so hard I see fucking stars. Liam grips my hips, fingers indenting my skin, savouring the taste he pulls from me. Finally, when I feel like I’m about to collapse into a boneless mess, he lets up. “Fuck, Free Bird. I could eat your pussy all day and still crave more.”

Between his legs, his rock-hard cock calls to me. My mouth waters, and I have a sudden urge to wrap my lips around his engorged head and taste the metal decorating his crown against my tongue. “Untie me,” I demand. “It’s my turn.”

Liam’s chuckle vibrates beneath me, then he lifts my body with ease, placing me on the floor between his legs as he pulls himself into a seated position. “Not tonight, darlin’. Tonight is about you.”

“But I want to.”

“Tomorrow.” His hot breath brushes against my spine, spreading a shiver through me.

Suddenly, he removes the restraint from my wrists and I stretch my arms above my head, freeing the dull ache across my shoulders from being tied for so long. “Now, turn that sexy body around so I can see your face as I fuck you.” I turn to face him, and he tugs me closer. “Climb on, darlin’.”

Positioning myself on his lap, I rest my knees on the mattress, then lower myself onto his dick. His delicious

piercings tease past my entrance, and my body bows at the sensation. “Oh, that feels so good.”

With a wicked smile, he grinds upward, rolling his pelvis like an expert, hitting me right where I need him most.

Over and over, he rotates his hips, thrusting into me with slow, deep strokes.

“That’s it, Free bird. Grip that dick with your tight pussy. Show me how you make me come.”

I match his movements, fucking his cock like a dirty little dancer.

His hands roam my skin as his mouth latches onto my nipple, sucking, licking, nipping. The sensation is almost too much to bear, and before I know it, my pussy clamps around him, pulsating with the force of yet another release. “Oh, fuck. I’m gonna come.”

“Give it to me, baby,” Liam cries. “I want your everything.”

Black spots form behind my eyes and white lightning spreads through me. “There. Oh, yes, Devin.”

He pumps his hip again, this time his movements are more forceful. His speed picks up, and then he’s throwing his head back as his own orgasm ripples through him. “Fuck, Saoirse. Take it all, darlin’.”



FRESHLY SHOWERED AND UTTERLY SEDATED, I LIE SPRAWLED against Liam’s side, his arm slung around me as I rest my head against his pec. My body feels boneless, completely satisfied

after Liam's sex marathon mission. The guy has stamina and endurance in abundance. It's been hours, and if I wasn't hanging on by a thread, he'd be more than happy to go again, but I couldn't take any more of his delicious form of torture.

His fingers dance up and down my back in lazy strokes. "You know, I never gave you your present," he whispers into my hair.

Tilting my chin, I peer up at him under my lashes. "I beg to differ, Dev. You gave me five."

His chest rumbles with his deep chuckle. "As fuckin' good as those were, I have something a little more than orgasms up my sleeve."

My hand settles on his abs. "Well, I'll never turn down a gift. What are you waiting for?"

He taps my back, gesturing for me to let him move from beneath me. I pull myself up, and lean on my palm, watching as he rolls out of bed and stalks towards his jeans, wearing nothing but a devious smile.

He pulls a small black box from the pocket, and crosses the room before sitting on the edge of the bed, his eyes on me.

I crawl closer, my wide eyes flicking between his and the ring box.

"Before I show you what's inside, I have a few things I want to say." He swallows and looks to the ground before bringing his attention back to me, waiting on a response.

I nod. "Okay."

Reaching forward, he takes my hand in his. "I love you, Saoirse. Fuck, I fell for you fast."

My heart picks up the pace, pounding against my rib cage like a crazed lunatic. “I’m falling for you, too. But ...” I trail off, not knowing how to express the turbulent emotions ripping through me like a tornado.

A small shy smile curls at the edges of his mouth. “I know, darlin’. You’re falling for him, too.”

My eyes close, holding back the tears pricking my eyes.

His hand tucks underneath my chin, and he tilts my gaze back to his. “That’s what I’m trying to say. I know you feel something for us both, and it’s tearing you apart having to choose.”

I nod, hating that I can’t just cut Rohan from my heart when he doesn’t deserve to be there. But every now and then, he does something unexpected, and it roots him deeper. Whether I like it or not, he’s wrapped my heart in his thorns, embedding himself so deep nothing I can do will ever remove him. Liam deserves more than half of me, but I know I could never give myself to him fully, not when the darkest parts of me already belong to someone else.

“Saoirse.” Liam swipes his thumb across my lower lip, grabbing my attention. “I want you to know I will never make you choose. If loving you means I have to share you with Rohan, I’ll do whatever it takes to make it work. This thing”—he holds his hand across his heart then tilts his chin, peering down at his chest—“only beats for you.”

A lone tear slips free, sliding down my cheek and pooling at the edge of my mouth. “I love you, Dev. I swear I do, but I can’t ask you to do that. You deserve all of me. It wouldn’t be fair to ask you to share me with anyone, not when all you’ve ever done is fight for me. Besides, Rohan walked away. It just might take me a while to sort through that.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “You’re not asking. I’m offering. And as for Rohan, he may have walked away for now, darlin’, but trust me, he’s not ready to let you go, either. If sharing you with him means I get to keep you too, I want to at least try.”

“What are you saying?”

“He can have your darkest nights as long as you promise your sunsets belong to me.” He opens the box, and my mouth falls open. Resting on a small silk pillow sits a beautiful Claddagh ring. It’s nothing like the traditional ones you see in every jeweller in Ireland. This one is spectacular. The band ropes like thick ivy vines, and they wrap around the two hands that hold up the purple diamond-crowned heart. “Oh my God, Dev. It’s gorgeous. I love it.”

His face lights up with a beaming smile, showing off the dimples on his cheeks. “It was my grandmother’s ring—eighteen carat rose gold with a four carat purple-orchid diamond—one of the rarest diamonds in the world.”

“I ...”—my eyes hold his—“it’s beautiful, but I can’t accept it. It’s too much.” My fingers itch to touch it. It’s gorgeous, but there’s no way I can keep it. Not when it’s his family’s heirloom. It must be worth a fortune.

“It’s not too much, not for you. My grandmother gave it to me for the girl I wanted to share my life with. That girl is you, Saoirse Ryan.”

Lost for words, I watch as Liam lifts my right hand and slides the ring onto my ring finger. “Do you know how to wear this?”

“Yes. Heart pointing inward if someone has my love, heart facing out if not.” I look down at how Liam placed the ring on my finger—the heart faces out.

Liam wets his bottom lip with a swipe of his tongue. “The Claddagh ring has two hands holding up one heart. When you look at this ring, I want you to know that I’m okay just being one of those hands.”

I draw in a breath, letting his love fill my lungs. Then I slide the ring from my finger and turn it, facing the heart in. When I peek up at him through my lashes, I’m rewarded with the most breathtaking smile he’s ever given me.

Suddenly, his mouth is on mine, sealing the exchange with a soul-searing kiss.

“I love you, Free Bird.”

“I love you, too.”

TWENTY-NINE

SAOIRSE

ARMS RAISED ABOVE MY HEAD—DRINK IN HAND—I SWAY TO the heavy beat as it courses through my ears. Liam's hands grip my hips, and his hard, toned body grinds against me, making me wish we were anywhere but the middle of this makeshift dance floor.

Unfortunately, the Devereux gate-lodge is wedged wall-to-wall with people here to celebrate my eighteenth birthday. One thing is for certain, Beibhinn sure knows how to throw a party because I'm having a blast losing myself in the normality of a Friday night session. So much so I don't even care that I know practically nobody other than the few Killybegs Kings.

Parched, I drop my hand to my mouth, and lift my cup to my lips, then pout when I find it's empty. Twisting in Liam's arms, I rise to my tippy toes and bring my mouth to his ear so he can hear me over the thundering bass. "I'm gonna go get a refill. Do you want anything?"

His head dips. "I'll come with you."

Taking my hand in his, Liam and I make our way through the throng of people towards the kitchen.

"Ah, there's the birthday girl." Aodhán pushes himself off the kitchen counter and stalks towards us with Beibhinn hot on his heels. Suddenly, his arms wrap around me, and he lifts me

off my feet before spinning me around. The smell of hard liquor radiates from his pores, and one look at his face lets me know he's fucking wasted. "Where have you been? I feel like I haven't seen you in ages. You know, now that you're too busy riding Devereux's monster cock."

"I saw you twenty minutes ago, you big goof." I slap at his chest as his grip tightens. Shouting over the music, I beg him to put me down before he drops me or falls over, trying to keep me up on his unsteady feet. "Aodhán, please put me down."

After he drops me to the floor, his hands come to my face, and he cups my cheeks. "Happy birthday, gorgeous." Next, he plants a big, wet one on my lips before he stalks off to find his next victim. But not before he tosses "Behave yourselves, you beautiful bastards" over his shoulder.

"What's up with him?" My gaze falls on Beibhinn. "He's hammered."

"No idea." Her eyes follow Aodhán as he strides across the makeshift dance floor. "He's half-cut. Never even noticed I'd been feeding him water for the last twenty minutes. I think it might have something to do with the girl Keelan Reilly is dancing with."

"Who?"

"Keelan ... he's Lorcan's nephew." My eyes snap to the dance floor at the mention of a cousin I knew nothing about—not that Beibhinn is privy to all the branches of my family tree. "That guy in the grey shirt." Beibhinn points. "Not sure who the girl is, though, but she arrived with him."

My gaze falls back to Aodhán, who is now standing up against the wall, glaring daggers at the couple in question.

Following his line of sight, I catch Keelan staring right back at Aodhàn over his date's shoulder, his whiskey eyes blazing with murderous flames.

Interesting. There's obviously a story there, but I need to be a lot less drunk to read it. Which reminds me ... "I need a refill."

Liam's hand appears out of nowhere, a water bottle dangling from his fingers. "I'll get you one, but first, drink this. I need you to be conscious for everything I have planned. Peeling you out of that dress is at the top of the list."

Beibhinn raises her hand to her face and sticks two fingers in her mouth, imitating a gag. "That's my cue." She tosses a wave over her shoulder as she heads towards the living space.

Turning my focus back to Liam, I raise the water bottle to my lips and gulp it back, quenching the thirst.

"You know, watching you with that bottle reminds me of the first time I fucked you." His arms skirt around my waist, pulling me into his chest. "Let's get back to the dance floor before I bend you over the countertop and re-enact how many times I made you come that day."

"I wouldn't be opposed."

I flash him a smile, and he closes the space between us, lowering his mouth to my ear. "As much as I'd love to, there are far too many eyes watching."

"Party pooper!" I stick my tongue out, enjoying the buzz flowing through my veins.

He shakes his head, but I don't miss the teasing smile that curls his lips. In the next breath, he's taking me by the hand and guiding me through the crowd. We come to a stop in the middle of the dance floor, and Liam twists me in his arms until

my back moulds against his chest. One song bleeds into another, and I lose myself to the beat, enjoying how Liam's hands roam over every inch of my body as we grind to "Dress" by Charlotte Sands.

Liam lowers his mouth to my ear, and his deep vibrato brushes against the exposed skin below my ear. "Keep moving like that, darlin'. Your boy is watching our every move."

My eyes spring open, landing on Rohan. He's standing at the edge of the dance floor, cigarette resting between his painted black fingernails as he sucks in a drag. "He ... is not my anything."

Just like Liam said, Rohan's eyes are on me, watching as Liam slowly teases his hands up my bare thighs. Doing as Liam asked, I grind my hips against his cock, pretending to be unaffected by the hate-filled, penetrating gaze Rohan is shooting my way.

"No?" Liam goads. "Well then, I guess he won't mind me doing this," he sneers, loving every minute of this devious game. His hands slide over my stomach, raising higher until he cups both breasts. My head falls back against his shoulder, and when he squeezes down, my body reacts by releasing an audible moan.

His breath sweeps across my collarbone as he grazes my skin with his teeth. "Tell me, Free Bird, have you thought about what it would be like to submit to the two of us together?"

The sensation his words evoke forces my spine into an arch, pushing Liam to take this little game a step further. His mouth flattens against my neck, and he bites and sucks, marking my skin. "I know I said I was willing to share you, darlin', but have you thought about what that *really* means?"

“No.” The words slip past my lips because although Liam made his intentions clear, I haven’t really allowed myself to dive into what that scenario would look like. At first, I thought it would be dating them both separately. Almost like a child with parents who have divorced, only far more orgasms and a lot less drama. But what if he meant something different when he said he’d share?

Images of both of them devouring my body—simultaneously—flash behind my eyes, and the thought alone has me craving the fantasy. Opening my eyes, I root my gaze on Rohan, watching his eyes darken and his jaw clench tight as Liam teases my body with his roaming hands. The space between my thighs dampens with need as I imagine what it would be like to be caged between the both of them as they use my body like it’s their favourite toy.

As amazing as things are with Liam and me, I’d be lying if I said my newfound desire had nothing to do with the arsehole across the room. The song switches to “Bad Idea” by Dove Cameron, and the beat becomes faster. Keeping my focus on Rohan, I raise my arms above my head and latch them around the back of Liam’s neck. My body picks up the pace, and my hips grind to the beat.

“That’s it, darlin’. Show him what he’s missing.” Liam drops one of his hands to the hem of my black minidress, and his fingers wrap around the hem, tugging it up slightly. I sing along to the music, mouthing the words to the song directly to Rohan.

He watches the show from the sideline as he finishes his cigarette. Then, when Liam’s hand skates behind my thighs and up under the tight black material of my skirt, something in Rohan’s eyes snaps. Tossing his still-lit smoke onto the floor,

he stubs it out beneath his boot. All the air in the room disperses as he cuts through the crowded dance floor like a hungry lion.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I track his every move. He takes each step with the cool confidence only he could possess. His gaze finds mine, making me a devious promise I hope he can keep. Two more strides, and he cages me between Liam's body and his own. In the next blink, his hand is around my neck, squeezing the breath from my lungs as he lowers his mouth to my ear. "You're playing a dangerous game, love." He pulls back, then leans his forehead against mine until his intense emerald eyes burn into the windows of my soul.

"Well, then ... maybe you shouldn't play." I raise my brow, and my lips quirk to the side.

His growl brushes against my lips before he lunges forward, claiming my mouth with a ravaging kiss.

Behind me, Liam's hand glides higher, his fingers inching closer to the edge of my thong. I gasp into Rohan's mouth when Liam slips beneath the lace and slides his thumb through my folds.

Rohan grips my thigh, raising my right leg and giving Liam better access, then he pulls me closer, shielding me from the crowd around us as he fucks my mouth with his tongue.

"Fuck, darlin'," Liam breathes against my neck, "you're so wet for us." His thumb circles my clit with slow and lazy strokes.

My body bows beneath their touch. Then Rohan reaches under my dress, and before I can register what he's planning, he plunges two fingers inside me. Unlike Liam, he's not gentle, ramming his digits into my pussy, breaking our kiss.

My head falls back, landing on Liam's shoulder as Rohan edges his fingers in and out of my cunt while Liam rolls my clit between his fingers.

So close to breaking, my breath quickens to a needy pant, but right before I succumb to the orgasm rattling through me, Rohan rips his hand out of my pussy and Liam follows suit. A strangled cry falls from my lips, my body aching for release.

"Tell me, love. Who fucks you better?" When I refuse to answer, he shoots Liam a look that has me melting into both of them.

"Guess we're gonna need to test it out?" Liam's wicked works lick across the back of my neck.

Rohan's emerald eyes darken to almost black as he grips my chin in his hand. "Let the games begin, mo bhanríon."

THIRTY

ROHAN

GRABBING HOLD OF SAOIRSE'S HAND, I NOD FOR DEVEREUX to lead as we manoeuvre our way through the living room full of people. Liam parts the sea of drunken arseholes with ease, and I tug Saoirse forward, my grip tightening as I fight the urge to push her up against the nearest wall and remind her how fucking much she loves my cock.

She knew well what she was doing, grinding herself all over his body in that little black dress with slow seductive movements, each sway of her hips brewing a potion to make me lose it.

The next thing I knew, I was crossing the dance floor, starving to taste her lips.

I couldn't contain my fucking self.

Nothing was going to stop me—especially after putting Gabriel in his place yesterday. Sure, we're nowhere near out of the woods with him yet, and with Donnacha gone into fucking hiding, it's anyone's guess what they have up their sleeves.

I spent the whole of last night at the cabins with Lorcan and Éanna, formulating a game plan. I'm running on nothing more than an over-glorified power nap, but at least we have a strategy. One that ensures Saoirse will pass her first trial, all

while one-upping my cunt of a father even more than we already have.

So, for tonight, I will allow myself to indulge in her, fulfilling her fantasy before I distance myself until the time comes when I can claim her as my own. Devereux may think he's clever, offering to share her heart with me, but he forgets one crucial detail: Saoirse's heart is not his to share—it's mine. I own every beat and every fucking heartbreak.

Mine.

Not his.

He can't gift her to me, wrapped in a pretty bow, because she's already mine.

If she wants to pretend otherwise, so fucking be it, but mark my words. The day will come when she learns the truth. She only gets one great love for all her lifetimes, and I will set every world on fire to ensure it's me.

Every. Fucking. Time.

Once we break through the crowd, Liam leads us down the hall towards his room.

He pushes through the door, and I guide Saoirse in by placing my hand on her lower back.

I can tell the second she enters the room that she's never been in here before because her eyes scan the full width of the cabin as she takes in Liam's open plan space.

When we were younger, this was two rooms—a games room equipped with a full-sized pool table and arcade games and a master bedroom with an en suite.

After Liam moved out here—when he turned eighteen—Oliver and Liam knocked the wall into the adjoining bedroom

and made it into one massive man cave with full-length windows overlooking the mountains.

It's pretty sick, to be fair, not that I'd ever tell him that.

Stepping from my touch, Saoirse waltzes farther into the room with her head held high. Her shoulders roll back with a new air of confidence. Her eyes travel over the space, and she reaches out, running her palm along the edge of the pool table as she steps towards Liam.

She's changed in the few weeks she's been here, learning to stand firm as she prepares for her new role and lifestyle—and fuck me, it's hot as fuck watching her transform into a phoenix, rising from the ashes and claiming her rebirth.

Suddenly, her eyes fixate on Liam—resting against the pool table—and she steps between his legs. His arms circle her waist, and he draws her into his chest. “So, this is where you spend all your time.” She tilts her chin towards him, flashing him a smile that coils my stomach and sets my possessive side alight.

“When I'm not in the gym or with you.” Liam shrugs his shoulders. “Beibhinn got her library, and I got this place.”

Ignoring their little display of affection, and the vile taste it brings, I cross the room and lower myself onto the couch. Sitting back, I pull out my cigarette case and extract a pre-rolled joint. Once it's lit, I sit back, drop my head to the cushion and indulge in the high. Pull after pull, I wait for Liam to ease Saoirse into the game they want to play. Suddenly, low moans draw my gaze towards them, and I watch as Liam's fingertips trail down Saoirse's spine before gripping her arse. He moulds her to his chest as he grinds his cock against her.

My tongue swipes across my bottom lip, both hating that he can pull those tiny moans from her but also delighting in the fact she'll soon be screaming my name louder than she's ever screamed his. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I connect it to Liam's sound system via Bluetooth, and then I open my Spotify app, pressing play on my favourite playlist.

Within seconds, the sultry bass of "Who Do You Want" by Ex Habit floods the room from the overhead speakers. Next, I push myself from the couch and close in on them, interrupting their little bubble when I step behind Saoirse. Brushing her hair over her shoulder and lowering my mouth to her neck, her head rolls back, elongating that delectable neck to give me better access.

"Is this okay, love?" Usually, I would take what I want, but this is her first experience with two guys, and I need to know if she's on the same page.

Her rapid breath forces her chest to rise and fall, but after a second, she nods her head.

Liam shifts slightly, roaming his hands up her waist until they meet the thin shoulder straps of her minidress. "Use your words, darlin'."

Cranking her neck, her wide but eager eyes dart between us both. Then she draws in a heavy inhale and straightens her spine. "Yes."

My teeth graze her neck in approval. "Good girl."

Green light given, Liam plucks the straps of her dress off her shoulders as I reach for the silver zipper that runs the length of her spine—starting between her shoulder blades and stopping at the curve of her arse. Taking my time to unfasten the dress, I gently ease it down until it's completely open,

exposing her olive skin. “If you want us to stop at any point, love. Just say so. You’re in charge.”

“Okay.”

The dress falls to the floor, pooling around our feet. Saoirse steps out of the material. Then, with a quick swipe of my foot, I kick it to the side, out of the way. My hands are on her in an instant, tracing the curve of her spine as I drop to my knees behind her. A quick glance at Liam and I see he’s lowered his head to her breasts, teasing her nipples with his tongue. When my palms glide over her arsecheeks, her spine arches, pushing her tits into him further, and I bask in the moan that escapes her lips.

The need to be the one who tears her greedy moans from her lips almost undoes me, so I carry on with my exploration and tease the length of her legs with a brush of my hands. Shifting her hips back slightly, I rest her arse against my face as Liam leans forward, following the flow of her body, keeping his mouth on her at all times.

Next, I wrap my hands around her outer thighs, sit back on my heels, and then bury my face between her thighs. My tongue traces over the material of her bright-purple thong, making her thighs clench, caging my face, and I fucking delight in the affection.

A loud moan ripples from her as I lap at the wet patch dampening the lace. Pulling back just enough to allow me to get her thong off, I mumble, “Need these fucking gone, mo bhanríon.” Raising my hands to her hips, my fingers curl around the tiny strings that hold it in place. Next, I comb the material downwards until it gathers around her heels. One and then the other, she lifts her feet until she fully steps out.

Gathering the lace, I tuck the scrap of fabric into my back pocket for later. “That’s a good girl.”

My hand travels to her cunt, cupping her pussy as I stand to my feet. Wrapping one hand around her hair, I pull her head back as my other hand teases her dripping folds. Liam laps at her chest, dotting tiny red marks along her tits, and something feral creeps through me, begging me to show her who she belongs to.

Without so much as a warning, I thrust two fingers inside her. Feeling me between her legs, Liam brings his attention to her clit, pinching the little pink bud between his fingers.

Saoirse clamps down on my digits. “Oh shit. That’s, eh, fuck! So good.”

Curling my fingers, I rub against her G-spot, applying the right amount of pressure to make her legs shake. Releasing my hold on her hair, my hand fastens around her throat, denting her perfect skin with my bruising touch. My mouth falls to her ear. “Come for me, love,” I whisper, drawing her earlobe into my mouth with a flick of my tongue. “Let him hear you scream my name.”

My fingers plunge deeper, and I slide them out slowly before forcing them back in and hitting her right where I know she needs me.

“Rohan.”

Beneath my punishing pursuit and Liam’s relentless exploration, her body vibrates with the sensations we’re giving her. Over the heady bass thumping from the speakers, her breath quickens, and her moans dissolve into nothing more than unintelligible cries of pleasure.

A wicked grin forms on my lips.

“I’m gonna ...”

Her words trail off when Liam pinches down on her hard nub, and together, we send her over the edge. “Liam.”

Her breath gushes past her lips, relieving the tension in her shoulders.

Fuck, I’ll never tire of watching her crumble.

THIRTY-ONE

SAOIRSE

AFTER ROHAN REMOVES HIS HAND FROM BETWEEN MY THIGHS, his fingertips grip my waist, holding me steady as I come down from the high that's sedating every muscle. A boneless mess of shaking limbs, I collapse against his chest, my body melting at the way he holds me close—my back to his front.

“You doing okay, love?” His mouth falls to my neck, his words erupting goose bumps along my skin. Logically, I should despise him for how he's treated me, but I can't let myself hate him—no matter how hard I try. My body craves him and the reckless pursuit of madness that goes along with him.

Drawing my attention back to Liam, I scan his face for any doubt, but I find nothing but desire lighting his grey eyes. I know sharing me was his idea, but I can't help but wonder ... deep down, is he really okay with Rohan's hands all over my body? Even if it's what I want, both of them worshipping me until I can't remember my name, will Liam truly enjoy Rohan joining in?

The old Saoirse would balk at the thought of two men sharing her body, mind, and heart, but I'm not that girl anymore. Killybegs destroyed her innocence, but it also gave her something she never knew she needed—power.

Tonight, that power rushes through me. I'm greedy for it—a drug addict needing her next fix.

“Words, mo bhanríon. Fucking use them or all this stops.”

I couldn't care less about what anyone thinks of me sharing my heart with two men because nothing compares to the fire Liam lights within me or how Rohan douses that fire with gasoline, strengthening the flames.

My chest rises with an intake of breath, and his masculine scent wraps around my senses, reminding me this is where I belong. “Keep going.”

“Good girl.” From behind me, Rohan grips my chin and directs my gaze over my shoulder. His other arm comes around my neck. Then, guiding his fingers to his mouth he sucks each digit. “Fuck! *Chaill mé blas tú ar mo theanga.*” I missed the taste of you on my tongue.

A satisfied moan hums past my lips.

My gaze connects with Liam's as he pushes off the pool table with a shit-eating grin lighting up his face. In two steps, he's caging me against Rohan's chest, his icy eyes roaring with need. “Now is your chance, Free Bird. If you don't want to go any further, we won't.”

Rohan's arm tightens around my waist, his body speaking the protest he's containing. Peering back at him over my shoulder, I fall victim to the blends of green darkening his eyes. Through gritted teeth, he assures me, “Whatever you want, love.”

When I focus my attention back on Liam, I straighten my spine. “I'm not going anywhere.” He reads the look on my face, because without exchanging words, he stalks across the room and begins rummaging through his nightstand.

“Supplies,” Rohan whispers as he spins my body around to face him. In the next breath, he lifts me off my feet and perches me on the edge of the pool table. His forehead falls to mine, and his eyes hold a look only he could provide. *Dark, dangerous, promising.* “First, I’m gonna fuck your cunt with my tongue. Then, after you paint my face with your cum, we’ll spread you wide and fill you up with both of our cocks.”

My tongue swipes across my lower lip as my core tightens at his filthy words. “Mm. Yes.”

Leaning back on one arm, I brace myself on the green felt. Then, reaching forward, I grip the bottom of Rohan’s T-shirt, pulling him closer, ready for him to make good on his promise. “What are you waiting for? An invitation?”

Immediately, he knows what I want. He reaches back and tugs his shirt over his head, exposing his perfectly defined torso. Wasting no time, he drops to his knees between my legs, tugging my hips forward and bringing me closer to the table’s edge. A wicked smile forms at the corner of his mouth, and then he lifts my leg and trails his tongue upward until he reaches the apex of my thigh. My hand flies to his head, and I bury my fingers into his tossed strands. Tugging slightly, I guide him to where I need him most.

Once his mouth hovers above my pussy, he blows a hot breath against my sensitive clit, and my spine arches at the sensation. My heels dig into the back of his shoulders, spurring him on. Then, just when I think he’s going to spend the night torturing me, his tongue trails along my soaked slit as he draws in a breath, filling his senses with my scent.

“Yes,” I hum, and my gaze lands on him. As if feeling my stare, he lifts his eyes to mine, peering up from under his

brows. Keeping my eyes locked on his, I grind forward, chasing every stroke of his tongue. “So good.”

My teeth clamp down on my bottom lip, and Rohan’s eyes light as he keeps me trapped with his needy gaze. He doesn’t stop, swiping his tongue along every inch of my pussy. “I’m going to spell my name with each stroke, love. Mark this pretty little cunt as fucking mine.”

Before long, my whole body breaks into a violent shake, and my thighs clamp around his ears as my nectar drips down his chin. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

When my body relaxes, my gaze lands on Liam as he stands naked, holding a bottle of lube in one hand as he pumps his slick cock with the other. I swallow the lump forming at the base of my throat, not allowing my insecurities to ruin whatever this moment is. Instead, I focus on him—my safety net. His eyes blaze with desire, and he stalks across the room as if he’s been waiting to fuck me all night. “Jesus, Free Bird, You’re fucking stunning when you come.”

Between my legs, Rohan rises to his feet, then steps aside, letting Liam take over. Liam keeps his eyes on me as he tosses the clear gel towards Rohan before he steps between my thighs. Without warning, his hand flies to the back of my head, gripping me in a firm hold, then he pulls my mouth to his, claiming me. There’s nothing gentle about how he attacks my mouth with greedy strokes, and with every swipe, his metal bar massages my tongue. His other hand paws at my breasts, twisting my nipples, and I arch forward, begging for more.

“Do you want my dick, darlin’?” he whispers against my lips.

“Yes, please,” I beg, wrapping my legs around his waist and drawing him to my centre.

Next to us, Rohan peels off his jeans, then squirts the lube into his palm, coating his dick with a few strokes. Within seconds, he's back at my side, lowering his mouth to my exposed nipple and circling the hard bud with his tongue.

Liam lines his cock up to my entrance, teasing my clit with the metal studs along his crown. My eyes bounce between them both, and my stomach tightens with anticipation.

I want this.

I need this.

I need them.

“God, Dev. That feels so good.”

Not sparing Liam a glance, Rohan grips my chin and tugs my face towards him. His lips mould against mine, and he kisses me the way he would smoke a cigarette—drawing my air into his lungs and savouring every breath.

Lost to them both, I gasp into Rohan's mouth when Liam thrusts forward, filling me with his crowned dick. I bask in the sensations they evoke, taking everything they're willing to give me and still craving more. My body bends to every movement, every thrust, every fucking kiss ... until I'm so consumed by desire, I don't know where Liam begins and Rohan ends.

Rohan breaks first, stepping back and sliding his arm beneath my knee, raising my leg to grant Liam a little more access.

“Fuck. So tight, Saoirse,” Liam grunts as he grinds his pelvis against my clit, filling my pussy with his cock. “You feel like heaven.”

With every thrust of Liam's hips, I release the needy groans that rumble from the back of my throat. "Oh my God! More. I need more."

Rohan lowers his mouth to my ear. "No, mo bhanríon. You need *me* more."

A shiver races down my spine. He's right. I crave his touch. But I crave them both. Giving him a slight nod, he reads my expression perfectly. "Need you both."

With a nod, Rohan orders, "Move to her side," then tips his chin for Liam to look down where he's hooked my leg in the crook of his elbow. They share an unspoken thought, and Liam nods, shifting out from between my legs to mirror Rohan's position on the opposite side.

"Up you go, mo bhanríon." Rohan and Liam hike me off the edge of the table.

Needing to steady myself, I latch my arms around both of their necks, using them as an anchor while they grip me behind my knees, lifting me until I'm sitting in a throne position in their arms—one on either side of my body.

Then, taking his cock in hand, Rohan guides the tip of his dick between my folds and thrusts upward, pushing into me with a grunt. He pulls back slowly, intensifying the madness that pricks at my skin. "Fuck, love. You feel so good."

"Oh my God." My body bows with each push. Joining in, Liam lowers his head to my chest, drawing my pert nipple into his mouth before sucking hard. "Jesus. It's too much."

The sensations coursing through my core intensify with every second, and right as I think I'm going to break apart in their arms, Rohan pulls out, leaving me panting for more. I glare at him, hating the smug smile teasing his twisted lips.

“Don’t worry, mo bhanríon. We’re nowhere near done with you yet.”

Before I know it, Liam grabs my attention with his gruff command. “Eyes on me, darlin’.”

Following his gaze, I watch with bated breath as he lines his dick against my pussy and pushes upward. Instantly, my walls tighten around him as he teases me with the delicious piercings lining the crown of his cock. “Fuck, you’re soaked, Free Bird.”

Over and over, they torture me by taking turns stretching my pussy—edging me with a promise before ripping it away right as I’m about to fall.

When I can’t take it anymore, I cry out for release. “Please. I can’t take it. Please, I need to come.”

Liam captures my gaze. “What do you want, Saoirse? Tell us, and we’ll give it to you.”

“Both,” I pant, needing them more than I ever thought possible. “I want you both.”

Liam tips his chin towards Rohan, and they share a look, exchanging thoughts without words. Rohan loosens his hold as Liam takes control, shifting my body weight with ease. He manoeuvres me until I’m pressing up against his chest. “Wrap your legs around my waist, Free Bird.”

Doing as I’m told, I fight the anticipation crawling across my skin. Then, in the next breath, Rohan is behind me. His gel-covered fingers play at my back entrance.

“Oh my God.” I arch forward as the cool gel trails between my cheeks. My body instantly clenches, and he slides his fingers across my puckered hole, prepping me for what’s coming.

“Relax, love. I promise I have you.” There is something lingering in his tone that has my gaze falling to his face. His eyes are wild, but there is a softness hidden beneath. “*Níl do mhuinín tuillte agam, ach tá mé á iarraidh ar aon nós.*” I don’t deserve your trust, but I’m asking for it anyway.

The way he delivers those pretty Irish words has me nodding my head for him to continue, handing him my trust, even though my body vibrates with nervous anticipation.

“Deep breath for me, love,” he commands as he slowly—and very gently—eases a finger inside me. Rohan’s breath dances along my neck, his fingers working me over and supplying a feeling I’ve never felt before. “That’s it, love. Open for me.” He adds another, driving me crazy as he pulls sensation after sensation from me.

Liam brings his mouth to mine, distracting me with his tongue as Rohan steps closer, wrapping his hand around my hip.

“Relax, darlin’,” Liam whispers against my lips.

“We’ll go slow. It might sting for a minute, but we’ve got you, love. Promise.”

Relaxing as much as I can, I draw in a breath before blowing it out. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Once again, Liam lowers me over his dick before sliding his hand from my waist, hooking one of my legs over his forearm.

It’s too much. I can’t see straight. And yet, I want more. I want it all.

“Oh, God. Yes.”

“Drop that other leg, darlin’.” He pulls me tight to his chest, grinding his hips upward, drawing his cock in and out, making my head hang back and my eyes roll.

I peer over my shoulder at Rohan as he coats his dick with more lube before stepping behind me and spreading my cheeks with his palms. Suddenly, I feel him slide the head of his cock between my cheeks, and my body tenses with anticipation. His crown teases my entrance, and I hum at the sensation. “Mm.”

Carefully, he pushes forward, teasing in a little before pulling back. Liam stills his movements, letting me adjust, and Rohan adds another inch, repeating until he’s fully seated and filling me up in the most delicious way. “How does it feel, love?” he whispers as he slides in and out in a slow, torturous motion.

“So good,” I moan, my body bowing as Liam picks up his thrusts, working in and out of my pussy, pushing a little further each time.

Needing more, my hips move with them, savouring the whole feeling. “I need more,” I pant before leaning back to hook my arm around Rohan’s neck.

“That’s it, love. Fill your body with our cocks.”

My pussy clenches, swallowing Liam in a vice grip, making his hips pick up the tempo. “Oh, fuck. There, Right fucking there, darlin’.” I focus on him, giving him what he needs, practically bouncing up and down on his dick. “Oh, fuck, darlin’,” he grunts, pumping upward and rocking his hips. “That’s it, baby. Take what you need.”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ.” Rohan’s head falls to my shoulder.

“I’m so close,” I heave between anxious breaths.

“Me too, darlin’.”

“Let go, love. We’ll catch you.”

Within seconds, I’m falling over the edge, my orgasm ripping through my body and barrelling past my lips in an earth-shattering scream. “Fuck! *OhmyGod*. Fuck.”

With two more pumps of his hips, Liam follows me over the cliff, emptying ropes of hot cum inside my pussy. “Jesus Christ.” His body shudders as his head falls back in ecstasy. He eases back and places a kiss against my lips, then Rohan pulls out, and they lower me to my feet. “Be right back, darlin’.”

Liam’s grip on me loosens, but Rohan takes control. “My turn, love.” Before I can steady myself, he presses down on my back, bending me over the pool table’s edge. He grips my hips, then lines his cock against my rear, pushing forward and seating himself between my cheeks once again. “Oh, shit.” I arch back, lifting my front off the table as he chases his high. He doesn’t hold back, ramming into me with no mercy.

“Rohan. Oh my God, Rohan. Yes. Shit. Yes.”

Words fumble from his lips in jumbled succession. “That’s it, love. Fuck my dick like you own it.”

My hips thrust back, meeting his every grind. Then suddenly, the familiar quake returns as another orgasm races to the surface. Without any prompting, he reaches around and pinches my clit, sending me skyrocketing towards the stars.

My orgasm takes over, and I let it wash through me with a cursed war cry. “Fuck, Rohan.”

“I’m coming, love. Fuck! That’s it, tighten that arse around me and take every fuckin’ drop.”

When the feeling in my legs comes back, he pulls me up by wrapping his hand around my throat in a primal choke

hold. Lowering his mouth to my ear, he whispers with a note of possession. “You want to explore your options, fine. I’m down. I’ll play along and give you what you want, but just remember, love”—his hand trails along my spine, then he wraps his hand around my hair, tugging my head back—“I told you once, and I’ll tell you again ... We are not the beginning of this story. *We are the end.*”

THIRTY-TWO

SAOIRSE

I'D KNOWN THIS DAY WAS COMING, BUT NOTHING—NOT EVEN the extra hours I'd put in at the gym this past weekend—could have prepared me for the onslaught of emotions raging beneath my skin.

Tilting my chin, I look towards the old stone-peaked ceiling and summon a calming breath—not that it helps ease the anxiety grappling my lungs. A tendril of panic ropes around my spine, making the walls in this gloomy round tower feel like they're caving in as I await my fate. With every pounding thud, my heart battles for space behind my rib cage, but the pressure to succeed presses down on me with gruelling force, robbing the air from my lungs.

It's a moment of weakness. The only one I have allowed myself since Rohan pulled out of me on Friday night and walked out of Liam's room without so much as a backward glance.

Closing my eyes, I push all thoughts of Rohan to the back of my mind, needing a clear headspace for my fight. I've spent enough time over the last forty-eight hours dissecting every interaction, every word, every regret. I need to focus my energy elsewhere—preferably somewhere far the fuck away from Rohan King.

“Fuck!” I release a strangled curse, and it bounces off the old stone walls, echoing around the hollow space. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Yes, you can,” Beibhinn reassures me as she secures my hands in cotton wraps. “Hannah Crowe has nothing on you. You are Saoirse fucking Ryan. And Killybegs belongs to you.” Summoning a deep breath, I exhale it slowly, releasing the tension coiling my shoulders. “Look at me.” Bev draws my gaze towards her icy depths. “Everyone down there underestimates you. But I’ve seen you train, Saoirse. You’ve got this in the bag. Don’t let your mind take it from you. Use your head, and your fists will follow.”

“You’re right.”

Tonight, I fight for my place in the syndicate.

Tonight, I take the first step towards reclaiming the Ryan throne.

“I always am.” She flashes me a smile, interrupting my internal pep talk. “Besides, you have me as your sponsor.”

Suddenly, the iron cell door creaks open, flooding the room with a rusty squeal. “Actually”— my head whips towards a familiar voice—“if my daughter wouldn’t mind, I’d love to escort her into the ring.”

I haven’t seen my mam since I left the cabins, and other than a rare text here and there, we haven’t spoken. “Oh my God!” I bound across the room, and my arms wrap around her waist before I pull back and take her in. She’s dressed to kill, clad in high-waisted leather trousers, a black bandage tube top, and sky-high red heels. She’s pulled her hair back into a sleek high pony, showcasing her smoky eyes and blood-red lips, and she looks every bit the badass I strive to be. “What are you

doing here?” Shock ripples through my core. “I thought you couldn’t be in Killybegs. It’s too dangerous.”

“Let’s just say there have been some developments.”

My brow furrows. “What do you mean *developments*?”

Her eyes soften and a slight smile tugs at her lips as she raises her hand and brushes one of my braids over my shoulder. “Don’t worry. We’ve handled it. There was no way I was going to miss your first trial.” She pulls me closer, wrapping me up in protective arms. Issues aside, I’m glad she’s here. After our talk at the cabins, I saw her side of things a lot clearer, and although I disagree with how she handled it all, I understand she thought it was for the best.

“Now, if you girls are ready”—she peers over my head at Bev before dropping her gaze back on me—“we’ve got a syndicate to impress. What do you say, Saor? Want to let your mam lead you into battle?”

“Mam, you can’t.” Disappoint washes over me in a crushing wave. “Gabriel is Hannah’s sponsor. He’ll be in the ring, too.”

The wicked glint in her eye fuels the adrenaline seeping through the cracks in my armour like molten lava, giving me a second wind. “And that’s precisely why I should. The mind is a fighter’s fortress, Saoirse. Get inside it, and it’s game over. What do you say? Wanna cause a little havoc?”

Bev crosses the room with a squeal, clapping her hands in delight before throwing an arm around my mam’s shoulder. “Hate to break up with you like this, Saoirse, but Mama Éanna is my new best friend. I’m always down for a little havoc.”



WHITE NOISE INFILTRATES MY EARDRUMS AS I STAY HIDDEN behind the old ruins while Oliver Devereux introduces Hannah to the large octagon that sits in the centre of the courtyard, drawing the attention of every watchful eye.

My eyes flick between the free-standing flood-lights illuminating the walls of Kill Castle to the blurry faces of the rowdy crowd gathered in the stands. My heart rattles against my chest, but I force my fear down, refusing to feed it. Anticipation slithers up my spine, but I shake my hands out, hoping to ease the pent-up energy it brings.

“Ladies, gents, and people otherwise identified ... it’s the moment you’re all waiting for.” Oliver Devereux draws the microphone to his mouth. “Please give a syndicate welcome to Miss Saoirse Ryan. The last remaining Ryan heir.”

The crowd erupts, drowning out the sound of my heart pumping in my eardrums.

“Shit! that’s a lot of people.”

“The syndicate spans the length, breadth, and width of the country. People from all over came to see the remaining Ryan heir in action.” My mam’s hand clips my chin, tilting my gaze towards hers. “Some will cheer you on, others will pray you fail, but none of that matters. Do you want to know why?”

I nod, holding her gaze.

“Gabriel King and all his fucking cronies almost killed me that night at the Hellfire Club. The doctors said it was a miracle I didn’t miscarry after everything they put me through. You were always a fighter, Saoirse. Have been before you

were born.” She smiles a sad smile, but the raw honesty in her eyes gives me a reason to prove her right. “Now, put your game face on, baby.” My mam grabs my hand and urges me from the shadowy tunnel. “It’s time to show these arseholes what you’re made of.”

With every breath, my chest expands. Steeling my shoulders, I straighten my spine as I take the first step. Every day since I stepped into the Killybegs world has led to this moment, and knowing my mother did whatever she had to do so she could stand beside me as we face our demons—both past and present—makes me want this win even more.

For her, for me, for the Ryan family name.

Heads held high, we make our way around the edge of the octagon, ignoring the audible gasps sounding through the crowd as we climb the three steps and make our way to the centre of the ring where Hannah and Gabriel await.

It’s been years since anyone last saw Éanna Ryan, and now she’s back, ready to watch her daughter take what this world stole from us both. This may be a man’s world, but Killybegs is a woman’s kingdom. Nothing and no one will stop me from taking back what’s rightfully mine.

Gabriel schools his shock with a slight shift of his shoulder, but I see the madness swirling in his piercing eyes before he quickly schools his features. “Well, well. If it isn’t Éanna Ryan.” Her name rolls off his tongue, shooting shivers up my spine.

My mother tightens her hold on my hand, assuring me she’s got this. “Gabriel. How unfortunate to see you again.”

“I see you rose from the dead to watch me take the Ryan throne for a second time.” *Motherfucker. I swear, one of these*

days I will enjoy watching his demise.

“On the contrary.” She smiles and tilts her head slightly. “I came to see my daughter wipe the fucking smug look off your poisonous face. By the way, how’s your shoulder? Heard you had an accident recently.” Her tone is sweet like molasses, dripping with sugar-coated hate, but her delivery has its desired effect. Judging by the glowering twitch of Gabriel’s right eye or how his teeth grind together behind his growl, Éanna’s presence is rattling him. But knowing what I know of him, he’d never let it show, at least not in front of the entire syndicate’s watchful gaze.

Next to him, Hannah stands with her hand on her hip, lips pouting like a brat. “Can we get this over with?” She rolls her eyes. “It’s about time somebody put this bitch back into the hole she crawled out of.” She’s trying to rile me, hoping I will lose my cool and snap back—not today, bitch.

Suddenly, Oliver steps between Gabriel and us, holding the microphone to his lips. “Sponsors, please take your respective places behind your initiate’s corner.” In an instant, the floodlights dim, and Hannah and I walk forward, meeting in the centre, forearms stretched out as we raise our wrapped knuckles before tapping them together. “May the strongest candidate—”

“Wait!” Rohan gains the attention of everyone as he bounds into the octagon with a devilish grin painted across his face. The crowd falls to a hush until all I hear is my heartbeat invading my eardrums.

“What in the fuck is going on?” Gabriel roars, breaking through the stunned silence with his outrage. “You’re interrupting syndicate business. Get out of the fucking octagon.”

“Rohan,” Oliver warns, “you need to remove yourself. This is an active trial.”

“No offence, Ollie, but there isn’t a day I’ll ever do anything you ask me to do. Besides”—his eyes flick to the left of the octagon, and I follow his gaze until I settle on my dad, flanked by two other men I’ve never met—“the syndicate High Kings came to watch the Ryan heir partake in her trials, and you fucking idiots thought a pawn was the right choice.”

What the fuck is he doing? Every ounce of training I’ve done has been in preparation for my fight with Hannah, and here he is, trying to change the opponent. Has he lost his fucking mind?

“The rules are simple.” Gabriel stalks across the canvas, closing the space between him and his son. “All initiates must fight against someone within equal size and or strength, regardless of age or stature, which is why Hannah was chosen. Now, get the fuck out of this octagon. This fight is going ahead, and that’s final.”

Rohan doesn’t back down, squaring up to his father. “Actually, you’re wrong.” Rohan’s gaze flicks towards my dad. “Lorcan, do me a solid and read rule twelve, section b, of the syndicate’s handbook.”

“What the hell are you doing?” The question flies from my mouth.

Behind me, my mother settles her hand against my lower back before whispering, “Trust him, honey. He knows what he’s doing.”

I clamp my mouth shut, brows furrowing with confusion. Too many times I’ve handed my trust to Rohan King, and every single time he’s broken it. He doesn’t deserve my trust,

especially when all he does is shatter it to pieces every time he walks away, taking another fragment of my heart with him.

“I can’t.”

“Then trust me.” She murmurs for my ears only, “Every action has a consequence, and that boy will pay whatever price to ensure you’re safe. Even if it means losing you in the process.”

Before I can sift through the churning in my stomach, Lorcan’s deep brogue ripples through the air. “In the event of a new heir’s fight trial initiation, the above rule is null and void. The heir in question must defeat the strongest fighter within their age class, regardless of strength, weight, or gender, and prove their place among the hierarchy.”

Rohan flashes a smile at Gabriel. “But you already knew that because back when Éanna began her initiation, you invoked that rule so she would have to fight you, and yet, she still kicked your worthless arse.” He stalks closer, bringing his forehead to his father’s. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, you and your slut need to vacate the octagon. Mo bhanríon has a lot of pent-up aggression where I’m concerned, and I’m sure she’s dying to hand me my arse on a silver platter.”

Too fucking right I have aggression, but there is no way I can win against him.

Unless...

THIRTY-THREE

SAOIRSE

ABOVE US THE SKY RAGES. COATED WITH BLACK CLOUDS, THE thunderous pelt of rain drums against the MMA canvas, soaking us both to the bone. My eyes blaze with fury, matching Mother Nature's mood. "For fuck's sake, Rohan. Don't just stand there. Fight back."

His menacing gaze bores into mine, but I get distracted by the raindrops kissing his forehead as they slip down the fallen strands of his inky hair and dance down the edge of his face. "I can't do that, love."

Anger rears her ugly head, seeping through my veins and invading my headspace. "Yes. You can."

We are two minutes into the second round. Unlike Rohan, I haven't held back, unleashing every ounce of anger and delivering each blow with a side of untamed frustration. Him blowing me off after Donnacha, the snide remarks in class, that stupid song that plays on repeat in my mind, the way he left Liam's on Friday—all of it comes rushing out, blow after blow.

Judging by the cheers and jeers of the crowd, many people are enjoying seeing me put this fucker on his arse, myself included, but he's half-assing it, and that's pissing me off more than his pretty face ever could. Like it or not, this fight is

important to me, and I don't want to win because Rohan suddenly found his moral compass and drew the line at hitting a girl. "Stop being a little bitch and fight back."

"That's it, love. Get mad." The cunning dip of his lips riles me further, and he knows it. "Think of all those times I pissed you off and use them, baby. Make me bleed."

My fists fly at him in quick succession, connecting with his jaw, nose, and then finally his ribs, over and over until he's bent forward, heaving out a cough as the air sputters past his lips.

I won't lie, a part of me is enjoying beating on him, but the need to prove myself overwhelms the satisfaction. The syndicate members are watching, and Lord knows I can't let them see me as anything less than exuding strength and respect. It's one thing to beat the shit out of someone who won't defend themselves, but to actually hold my own against someone like Rohan is another. Unfortunately, he's not playing ball, refusing to do anything other than stand there unmoving, and it's driving me insane.

Finally, Rohan lifts his head, his arm slung around his rib cage as he holds his side. "That's it, mo bhanrion." He coughs. "Show me how you hate me."

"You're infuriating." I swing left, catching him on the jaw and cracking his neck to the side, knocking him off his feet and onto his knees. When he peers up at me under his brow, he says, "End it, love."

"No," I bite out. "I don't want to win like this. Get the fuck up and *fight back*. Make me earn it."

"Finish it, Saoirse. Just take the final shot. I deserve it." Time freezes as I stand above him, lost in his pleading stare.

My chest rises with every strangled breath, but I can't bring myself to do it. I won't allow the syndicate to label me as the girl who won her trial out of pity. I'd rather lose gracefully than take a win I don't deserve.

Drawing my attention back to Rohan, I beg him to give me what I need. "Please, Rohan. The guy I fell for would never bow down during a fight. He'd never take my power away. Where's that guy, huh?"

His head lowers, refusing to hold my gaze. "What if I hurt you?"

"You already have." I step forward, dropping to my hunkers. "What you're doing now *is* hurting me. You are throwing this fight, Rohan. How the fuck am I supposed to show everyone I can be a queen when not even you respect me enough to give me everything you've got?"

Fighting for a breath, he exhales a sigh, rises to his feet, and cups my cheeks between his hands. "I have my reasons, love."

"Fuck your reasons. If I ever meant anything to you, you'll put whatever fucking anti-hero complex you have aside, and you'll do this one thing for me."

"*Ciallaíonn tú gach rud, a bhanríon.*" You mean everything, my queen.

His mouth slams against mine, stealing the air from my lungs. The crowd erupts into an indistinguishable white noise, and everything around me fades away. Then suddenly, Rohan pulls back and rests his forehead against mine. Before I can catch my breath, he swipes his foot out and knocks me off balance, and my back crashes to the floor right as the bell rings, signalling the end of the round.

“Round two goes to Rohan King.”

Prick!



THE NEXT TIME I THINK FIVE MINUTES ISN'T ENOUGH TIME TO do something I need to remember this moment. There are forty seconds left on the clock, and I am ready to collapse. Sweat mixed with the heavy downpour soaks my skin and exhaustion melts into my boneless limbs. I'm seriously regretting asking Rohan to give me his all because fuck me, he is relentless.

My breaths come in quick, strained pants, and my lungs scream at me for some reprieve. Circling the octagon, I bask in the few quick seconds it takes Rohan to whip off his soaked T-shirt before settling my gaze back on him. A large stream of blood clings to the side of his face, and when he reaches up to swipe it away, he winces slightly on contact before coating his fingers with the sticky fluid. Eyes on me, burning with desire and hunger, he flicks a few drops of blood from his fingers, then brings his hand to his mouth, sweeping the remains off with the tip of his tongue.

Logically, I shouldn't find that move as attractive as I do, but when Rohan is around, all my logic ceases to exist. My greedy eyes roam over his torso, basking in the glorious divots carved into his stomach and hips, appreciating how they glisten like the sweetest temptation coated in the sky's tears.

When I finally bring my gaze to his face, his eyes trap me, halting my movement. Reading him like a book, I noted the slight narrowing of his eyes, signalling his next move. Swiftly, he bounds forward, ready to strike, but thankfully, I cut him off, blocking him with my forearm. With a twisted smile, he

strikes again, only this time swinging from the opposite direction.

The force of the blow sends a numbing shock wave along my rib cage, making me hiss in pain. Back-peddalling, I quickly circle to the right to give myself time to recover from the blow, but I'm not quick enough. Rohan steps in behind me, wrapping his forearm around my neck. My fingers grip his arm, and I tug forward. A quick glance at the timer, and there are ten seconds to go. My heart races, pounding against my rib cage as I try to recall how to remove myself from a sneak attack.

"Come on, love. Show them what you're made of," he taunts, whispering against my neck.

Think, Saoirse. Think.

Pulling down on his arm, I drop into base position, locking my core and assuring my hips are lower than his. Rohan's hold tightens, and I realise he's too strong. I need to distract him.

Pushing my hips back, his body folds around my back, bringing his head closer to my shoulder.

The mind is a fighter's fortress, Saoirse. Get inside it, and it's game over.

Tilting my head as much as possible, I whisper the words we've expressed but never shared, not blatantly. "I love you."

His grip loosens as his chest rises with an intake of breath. Using his shock to my advantage, I tug down on his arm and fold my body forward. It happens so fast, but in a split-second, he's sailing over my head and landing flat against the canvas.

The crowd counts down. "Three, two, one!" And then the final buzzer sounds.

The stands erupt, and over all the voices, I hear Beibhinn the loudest. “Fuck yeah! I taught her that.”

As Oliver bounces into the ring with his microphone, I reach towards Rohan, hold out a hand, and offer him a way up, but the slimy fucker tugs me forward, and I slump head-first onto his chest. His arms wrap around my waist, and he holds me tighter. His searing green eyes sparkle beneath the floodlights. “Congratulations, love. How does it feel to be Killybegs newest initiate?”

“Pretty damn good.”

With a slow and teasing smile, he brings his lips to mine, taunting me with a fleeting kiss before pulling back slightly. “Did you mean it?”

My eyebrows crinkle as I flash him a wicked smile. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

Bringing his forehead to mine, he peers up at me with dangerous devotion. “For what it’s worth, mo bhanríon. *Tá mé i ngrá leat freisin.*” I’m in love with you, too.

THIRTY-FOUR

LIAM

THERE IS NO FEELING WORSE THAN RECOGNISING THAT sometimes love is not enough. This week, an ugly truth hit me—you can't make someone love you by loving them harder.

Deep down, I don't doubt that Saoirse Ryan loves me, but after seeing her in that octagon on Monday night, fighting Rohan, the realisation struck me like fucking lightning; she doesn't merely love him, she's consumed by him—as he is her.

When they were in that ring, nothing outside it existed. It was them against the world. At that moment, I knew when the time came, I would never be the one she'd choose.

Sure, she loves me, but she's not in love with me, not the way she is with him.

Saoirse Ryan deserves the world, but I'm not the one that holds it in my hands.

So, tonight, I'll allow myself one last dance, one last moment, but then I'm walking away for good. But first, I must face the other demon clawing at my back.

After buttoning up my tuxedo jacket, I stalk down the hallway toward my father's bedroom door. With a deep inhale, I fill my lungs and push my way inside.

“Devin?” he questions as he catches my gaze reflecting through the floor-to-ceiling mirror as he buttons up his dress shirt for tonight’s syndicate event. “Is everything okay, son?” Biting down on my bottom lip, I stride forward, closing the distance between us. As he fixes the sleeves on his shirt, he turns to face me. “What’s this about? I thought you were off to collect Saoirse for her introduction party.”

“Yeah, I’m leaving in a few, but I wanted to talk to you first.”

“Well, spit it out, then. I don’t have all night.”

Rage coats my tongue, but I hold it back, unwilling to give him the satisfaction. Instead, I steel my shoulders and straighten my spine. “I’m done, Dad.”

His face contorts, his features twisting with anger and confusion. “What the fuck do you mean, you’re done?”

“I’m over being your puppet. Whatever fucked-up plan you have to take Killybegs as your own, leave me out of it.”

He steps forward, squaring up to me with proverbial steam exploding from his ears. “You’re a fucking joke. You went and did the one thing I told you not to do, didn’t you? Got your dick wet, and let your heart get involved.”

“This has nothing to do with Saoirse. This is me standing up for myself and what I fuckin’ want. All my life, you’ve tried to shape me into this mini version of you, but that’s not who I want to be.”

In the back of my head, I hear the words Rohan spoke last week at his pool house. *There comes a point when you have to decide if the person you’re trying to impress is who you want to become. For me, I was pretty fucking young when I realised I never wanted to be a reflection of the devil. From that point*

on, I knew I'd do whatever it took—and endure whatever hell I had to—in order to claw my way out from beneath his shadow.

“You, this fuckin’ life”—my hand motions around the room—“everything the syndicate stands for, I’m done with it all.”

His cheeks flame with fury. “The syndicate is not an option, Liam. It’s ingrained in you. There is no escaping it. You were born into this life, and that is a burden you will carry with you until the day you die. You don’t get a say.”

He can intimidate me all he wants, but I’m not changing my mind. After tonight, I’m leaving the syndicate behind, with or without his permission. “Fuck you. This is my life and my choice. And for once, I am choosing me.”

Turning on my heel, I march towards the doorway, not wasting another second explaining something he refuses to understand. Hand on the doorknob, his voice halts my next step.

“What happens to Beibhinn if you walk away now? Do you really think she’s cut out for a leadership role in this family?”

Peering over my shoulder, my eyes blaze with hate for a man I once aspired to be. “Beibhinn will be twice the leader you ever were if that’s what she decides she wants.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Devin. If you walk away from the role of the next head of his family, she won’t have a choice. Maybe you should think about that before you piss away your sister’s future because you got your heart broken by a little slut like Saoirse Ryan.”



STANDING NEXT TO ROHAN IN THE LARGE ENTRYWAY OF RYAN manor, my father's words weigh heavy on my shoulders, but I do everything I can to push them to the back of my headspace so I can enjoy this last night with Saoirse.

My eyes latch on the beauty descending the imperial staircase. Tulle layers flow over her hips as she runs her hands over the strapless bodice, pinching the waist of her midnight-blue ball gown with a glitter overlay that looks like a thousand glistening purple raindrops in a winter night sky.

She's fucking breathtaking. Her dark hair is fastened at the nape of her neck, and wispy strands frame her high cheeks and pouty lips. My heart stops mid-beat when her eyes connect with mine, and she flashes me one of her perfect smiles. Each step she takes slows down time, and all I see is her. The moment is bittersweet, knowing that when the sun goes down, I won't ever call her mine again. I never thought I'd willingly give her up, but somewhere over the past few weeks, her happiness has become more important to me than my own. If I don't do this, there will come a time where the syndicate forces her to choose, and if I don't walk away now, I never will. Knowing Saoirse, she'd never choose between us, not without breaking her own heart—so I'll do it for her.

When her feet hit the last step, I close the distance between us, ignoring the grunt from Rohan behind me. He'll have all her days from here on out. For now, I'm taking every second I can get, stocking up on memories.

“You look extravagant, darlin’.”

“Why thank you, Mr Devereux.” Her amber eyes sparkle as she peruses me and my tuxedo with elevator eyes. “You don’t look too bad yourself.”

Rohan greets her next, bowing before her like some kind of Prince Charming. And, solemn mood aside, the entire show he puts on is laughable, but it makes Saoirse smile. “Your carriage awaits, mo bhanríon.”

Within minutes, we’re driving towards our destination, and the sinking feeling in the pit of my gut worsens, making my leg bounce as Rohan weaves his car around the winding roads towards Kill Castle. From my position in the back seat, I watch Saoirse and Rohan interact, sharing laughs and fighting over the radio station. Their conversation dulls to background noise when their fingers lace together, resting on top of the gear stick. Peering out the window, I let my mind race as I get lost in the blurring of the tree-line while battling with myself about my decision. Deep down, I know she’s not mine, and she hasn’t been since we were those carefree kids getting lost in endless summer days.

Once we arrive at our destination, Rohan and I flank Saoirse’s sides, and when we push through the doors to the main ballroom, all eyes land on us. From every direction, syndicate members from all over the Emerald Isle latch their gazes on the future Queen of Killybegs. And even though she still has two more trials to complete, I don’t doubt she’ll succeed. Together, arms linked through Saoirse’s, Rohan and I lead her through the room and onto the dance floor.

Once we’re in the centre, I silently ask Rohan to give me a minute, tipping my chin towards the bar. His brow furrows with annoyance, but he must read my expression right because he complies.

“I’m gonna go get some drinks.” He leans in, giving Saoirse a quick kiss on the forehead before levelling me with a murderous glare. “Don’t let her out of your sight.”

“I won’t.”

Once he’s gone, my heart kicks against my chest, fear and anxiety mingle as they flow through my veins. Needing to settle the current of indecision swarming through my stomach, I lean down, bringing my mouth to her ear. As if meant to be, the next song bleeds through speakers set up next to the house band—a slow piano-and-string version of “Purple Rain.”

“Darlin’, can I have this dance?”

Saoirse’s face lights up with a smile as I hold out my palm, one hand still tucked behind my back. The picture of the perfect gentleman. Agreeing, she nods and places her palm in mine. Then, circling her waist with my free arm, I draw her closer to my chest. She tucks herself beneath my chin, and I rest my head on top of hers, basking in her lavender scent. Together, we get lost in the sway, and I let the lyrics wash through me.

“Tell me, Free Bird, what do you see in him?”

Her chin tips back, and her amber eyes latch on mine. “Everything he doesn’t see in himself.” Her answer solidifies the decision I need to make.

Bringing my forehead to hers, we continue to dance to the slow, sombre beat.

“Do you want to know what I see in you?” she asks as she spears through my exterior to the torment in my head and heart. When I don’t respond, she adds, “You are my safe place to land, Dev. And when this crazy world threatens to push me

over the edge, I know with all my heart you will be there to catch me if I fall.”

I say nothing, holding on to the hope that maybe I can still be that for her when all this ends.

As the song comes to a close with a delicate stroke of piano keys, I reach up and tip her chin. “I love you, Free Bird.”

THIRTY-FIVE

ROHAN

SOMETHING IS UP WITH DEVEREUX, AND I CAN'T QUITE PUT MY finger on it. He's been in a world of his own since I picked him up earlier, barely muttering more than a few words at a time, seemingly lost in his sombre mood. But right now, I don't have the capacity to give two fucks and dive deeper than that.

Ever since I woke this morning, I've been fighting an unsettling feeling shaking my gut, and it's gotten increasingly worse since I stepped into Kill Castle. So, leaving Liam to watch out for Saoirse, I decide to use the time to scope out the venue.

It's no secret that among us—Éanna and Lorcan included—we've pissed off more than our fair share of syndicate members, and with my father gunning for Saoirse, we need to be on high alert, especially on a night like tonight.

From the corner of my eye, I spy Finn Connelly—the Muster Syndicate king—sneaking out of the formal ballroom looking shady as fuck. Deciding to follow him, I sweep through the crowd, keeping a safe distance. Within seconds, I'm creeping down a narrow hallway as the echo of muttered voices draws me closer.

After slipping my hand into the back of my tux trousers, my fingers curl around the grip of my Glock as I stalk closer, keeping my back pressed against the wall and out of fucking sight.

The corridor angles to the left, and I carefully peer around the wall's edge, spying on my father, Oliver, and Finn deep in discussion. Then, straining my ears, I inch closer, trying to remain out of sight but near enough to pick up pieces of the conversation.

"As promised, after her initiation, I will escort Beibhinn to Kinvarra." Oliver shakes Finn's hand.

"And what about my place on the board?" my father continues. "Will that be secure once everything goes according to plan?"

"Yes. I will handle your problem by the night's end, and there will be no mistakes this time. Get her onto that stage, and we will handle the rest," Finn offers with his lilting brogue.

My heart thunders in my chest. I need to get the fuck back to Saoirse and get her out of here. But right as I'm about to turn, I hear my father ask, "What about Reilly? We need to deal with him and that bitch Éanna tonight. If he is in fact Saoirse's father, he can claim her seat and take over half of the Isle."

I freeze, ears pricking as I try to decipher their hushed words. "Leave it with me. I'll see what I can do. But whatever happens, none of them will leave here alive. Mark my words."

Panic skates up my throat as I weigh my options. I could kill every last one of them with a spray of bullets, but I don't know what they have planned. All I know is I need to get everyone out of here ... and fast.

Making my way back down the corridor—as quickly and as quietly as I can so I don’t get caught—I pull my phone out and dial Lorcan’s number. It rings a few times, but it doesn’t connect.

Shit.

Frantically, I push through the ballroom doors and scan the dance floor.

Where the fuck are they? My heart is in my mouth, choking me and stealing my breath. My eyes dance around the room, surveying all the faces, and finally, I land on Devereux. Forcing my way through the crowded room, I make a beeline for him. The closer I get, the sheer grappling fist of panic tightens because Saoirse is not with him.

Lunging forward, I slam my palms against his chest. “Where the fuck is she?”

His hands grip my shoulders, steadying me on my feet. “Jesus, Rohan. Calm the fuck down. Did you want me to follow her to the bathroom?”

I step back and plunge my fingers into my hair. “Yes. That’s *exactly* what I wanted you to do.” My breath quickens to a trot, and my heart pounds in my eardrums so fucking loud I can’t hear a fucking word Liam is saying. His hands are moving, his lips too, but all I can focus on is the impending panic flooding my fucking veins.

Flicking his fingers in front of my face, he snaps me back to the present. “Take a breath, man. Saoirse’s with Bev. She’ll be back any minute.”

Peering around us, I make sure there are no prying eyes or piqued ears, and then I give him a rundown of everything I heard in that hallway.

“Tonight?” His eyes widen, and I recognise the undiluted emotion that works across his brow because the same feeling is coursing through my every cell.

“What bathroom did she go to?”

“Fuck, Rí, I don’t know. There’s about a million fucking restrooms in this place.”

Before we can devise a plan, my father’s voice cuts through the music and fills the room. “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and people otherwise identified. Tonight, we come together to celebrate our newest initiate, Miss Saoirse Ryan. Saoirse, can you please join me on the stage?”

There are no words to describe the fear that splinters across my chest as I stand frozen, watching Saoirse climb the side steps to stand next to my father. The crowd erupts into cheers, and I can’t form a logical thought. What I do know is I need to get her off that stage right this second.

Reaching into my pocket, I whip out my keys and toss them at Liam. “Here, take these and find Lorcan and Éanna.” Thankfully, he catches them mid-flight. “Let them know what’s happening, then tell them to meet at the manor.”

“What are you planning?” Liam’s brow narrows, eyes squinting with a million questions.

“I’m getting our girl off that fucking stage. Meet you back at the car?”

Liam nods, and I take off.

“Rohan,” he calls after me, halting me mid-stride, and I toss a glance over my shoulder.

“Keep her safe.”

“Always.” I acknowledge with a tip of my chin.

As I cross the dance floor, my father continues his introductions. “On Monday night, Miss Ryan defeated our reigning champion and my son, Rohan King, in her first initiation trial, making her the first Ryan heir to compete in the past nineteen years.”

Even from across the room, I can see her unease, but she doesn’t give him any satisfaction. With her shoulders locked, her spine straight, and her chin tipped up slightly, she holds her head high.

“Strength, respect, and loyalty are all qualities we look for in our future leaders. The trials our initiates face represent the core values of our organisation. But unlike most participants, Miss Ryan is a direct descendant of one of our founding families. Isn’t that right, Saoirse?”

As I reach the bottom step, she nods in agreement.

“Now, keeping with our age-old tradition, when a new heir initiates, they get first choice of who they want to have by their side for their final trial, while the rest of the initiates have to wait until they complete their second task.”

I bound up the steps, taking them two at a time, only to be halted by Oliver who stands guard on the top step. “A little eager wouldn’t you say, Rí?”

Peering past him, my gaze lands on Saoirse as she stands dumbfounded in the centre of the stage, completely unprepared for the next words to leave my father’s mouth.

“All eligible members who wish to offer Miss Ryan their hand in marriage, please join us on the stage.”

A few initiates from other sectors make their way towards the stage, and I reach for my gun, pointing it at the entrance to

the stairway. “If any of you fuckin’ pricks take another step, I’ll blow your heads off.”

My outrage grabs the attention of everyone in the room, including Saoirse, who is now staring at me with wide eyes.

“Well, it seems my son doesn’t like to share,” he laughs into the microphone, and the room erupts, laughter rippling through the crowd. Bringing my gun to Oliver’s head, I raise a brow, silently telling him to get the fuck out of my way.

He raises his palms in surrender, then sidesteps, clearing a path. With every pace I take, my eyes stay on Saoirse, holding her gaze and reassuring her with a look that everything will be okay.

My feet eat up the distance, and before I know it, I am drawing her into my arms and burying my face into her neck. “I’ll explain, I promise,” I whisper for her ears only, “but I need you to trust me, okay?” Behind my back, her fingers tighten their hold on my jacket, and against my chest, I can feel the rapid thumping of her heart as it thrashes wildly against her rib cage. “Just remember, everything I do is to keep you safe, and whatever happens next, it doesn’t change a thing.” I hope she understands my message, and I won’t force her into anything she doesn’t want to do—beyond this proposal, nothing has to change. I’ll wait for her forever. “I love you, mo bhanrion.”

Loosening my hold, I drop to one knee before her. “Saoirse Ryan. You found me in the dark, and instead of dragging me into the light, you sat beside me so I wouldn’t be alone. Please, do me the honour of becoming my wife.”

THIRTY-SIX

SAOIRSE

IS THIS WHAT AN OUT-OF-BODY EXPERIENCE FEELS LIKE? IT'S as though I am rooted in the moment, frozen in time, as the world and all its people refuse to stay still. All eyes are on me as hands spring together and mouths move, but I can't hear any of it. I'm plummeting into silence so loud it deafens me.

Closing my eyes, I focus on the ebb and flow of my breath and how my chest and shoulders rise and fall as my heart kicks against my rib cage. My self-awareness increases until I can feel the blood flooding my veins and the explosion of anxiety that sends shards of panic throughout my entire being.

I peer around the ballroom again, losing myself in a sea of nameless faces. The sound trickles in, but it's nothing more than a blended blur of white noise, accompanied by the thunderous booming of my heart.

Realisation follows, reminding me of where I am. Piece by piece, the puzzle fits together—Gabriel introducing me to the syndicate as the newest initiate, and then ...

I replay Gabriel's words, trying to make sense of them. "Now keeping with our age-old tradition ... new heir ... first choice of who they want ... by their side for their final trial ... All eligible members who wish to offer Miss Ryan their hand in marriage ..."

Marriage—the last trial is marriage.

Strength.

Respect.

Loyalty.

The three foundations of any successful marriage.

Suddenly, all the talks with Beibhinn on how I'd eventually need to choose between Liam and Rohan make sense; or how Liam promised he'd never ask me to pick between them, then tonight he treated me as if it was our last goodbye. He thinks I didn't notice, but I did. It was in his eyes as we swayed together on the dance floor. Him, whispering the lyrics of "Purple Rain," implying he could never steal me from another as he held on tight like the world was ending around us.

He knew this day was coming.

They all did.

Looking back, it's as clear as day—to secure my place within the syndicate, I'd have to choose because there can only be one king.

Confusion weaves across my brow. *How can I do that? How can I choose one over the other when each holds half of my heart?*

Rohan's words splinter through my chest. "Just remember, everything I do is to keep you safe, and whatever happens next, it doesn't change a thing."

He won't make me choose either, not where it matters.

Drawing my gaze to his, the sound trickles in, slowly at first, like the gentle teasing of piano keys leading into soft

strokes of the violin. Every facet of our turbulent relationship—if you can even call it that—races to the forefront of my mind. My eyes trail over his features. Starting with the untamed strands of black hair, my gaze falls to the angular cut of his jaw before landing on the perfect curve of his full lips.

His presence settles me, but not in the way Liam's does. No, Rohan could never be my silence. He's a vivid melody that soothes my soul, and when his wild green eyes find mine, the orchestra he conducts explodes to a booming crescendo until all I see, hear, and feel are the promises his earthy irises hold. "Please, mo bhanríon," he mouths, "trust me."

It's then I notice his posture, how his shoulders are tight, and his chest rises and falls in rapid succession. He swallows, and then a lone tear slides down his cheek as his jaw trembles. An emotion I never thought I'd see where Rohan is concerned tightens his face. He's terrified, but why?

His teeth scrape across his lower lip as his eyes dart around us, surveying our surroundings, before landing back on mine, wide-eyed and impatient. With a slight tip of his head, unnoticeable to anyone but me, he motions towards the exit.

Then it hits me. He needs to get me off this stage.

"What do you say, mo bhanríon?" A smile curls his lips, but it's not the same one I daydream about. It's forced. "Are you ready to spend the rest of your life with *us*?"

He draws out the word *us*, subtlety including Liam, assuring me that this changes nothing.

"Yes."

In a blur, he's off his knee, arms wrapping around my waist as he moulds his mouth to mine in an all too fleeting kiss. When he pulls back, his forehead rests against mine as he

lowers his voice so only I can hear him. "I'll explain later. Just follow my lead, okay?"

My hand grips his, silently giving him my trust. In the next breath, he pulls me across the stage while Gabriel shouts his protest through the microphone.

"I know you're eager, son. But you've been to enough of these parties to know that now is the time for your first dance as a newly engaged couple."

My eyes ping-pong between Gabriel and Rohan, and I note the hard set of Rohan's jaw before he nods. Suddenly he's leading me onto the dance floor, and a sea of people circles the edge, parting the way as the orchestra opens with a cinematic female cover of "I'll be."

Rohan pulls me close, holding me steady with his palm resting where my back bows. Then, bringing his mouth to my ear, he whispers, "As soon as this song ends, we head for the exit, okay?"

I nod into the crook of his neck. "Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"I will. I promise. But right now, I just need to get you out of here. Promise me, whatever happens, you'll get to the exit, Saoirse."

Against my chest, I can feel his heart pounding. "Tell me why."

He spins me out, twirling me beneath his arm before drawing me back into his chest. His eyes capture mine, and he rests his forehead against mine. To the outside world, we are the picture of the perfect couple enjoying a loving moment, but I can see the storm raging behind Rohan's eyes, and he is anything but calm. "I overheard a few of the syndicate

members talking.” His words brush against my neck. “It’s not safe here, love. Fuck knows what they have planned, but I need you safe.”

Reaching up, I cup his cheek in my palm. “I am,” I assure him. “I’m right here.”

His grip tightens, almost stealing the air from my lungs. “Look towards the exit. Your mam and da are waiting.” He spins me again, and I catch a glimpse of Lorcan, scanning the crowd for any threat.

When we collide again, he adds, “When the final note plays, I need you to take my hand and not let go unless you have no other choice. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“Good girl.”

Together we sway for a few more seconds, and as the song ends and another begins, the other members bleed onto the dance floor, blocking us from view. Rohan takes hold of my hand and weaves us through the crowd, keeping us concealed.

When we reach the doorway, Rohan peers around the room. “Where’s Liam?”

“He went looking for Beibhinn, haven’t seen him since,” Lorcan offers as we push into the reception area and make our way down the hallway towards the entrance.

“Fuck.” Rohan halts, drawing me into his chest before he pulls his phone from his tuxedo pants and dials Liam’s number before putting the call on speaker. Thankfully, he picks up on the first ring.

“Where are you?”

“I’m at the car. I was looking for Beibhinn, but it turns out she’s already back at the lodge.” Through the speaker, we hear Liam unlocking the car with a beep and then the door opening as he climbs in. “I was just about to—”

The line goes deathly silent mid-sentence, and a fresh wave of panic crawls up my throat. “Liam ... Liam, are you still there?”

“Rohan,” Liam croaks, his voice breaking on the last syllable. “Under the seat. It clicked. I heard it click.”

“Heard what click?”

“Fuck.” The panic in his voice cracks my chest wide open. “I can’t move, man. If I move ... shit.”

Then, before anyone can stop me, I rip from Rohan’s grasp. I grab ahold of my tulle skirt with both hands, kick off my heels, and take off running.

“Saoirse. Wait!”

I hear them barrelling down the hallway behind me, but I don’t stop, racing towards the car, needing to get to him.

Panic threatens to pull me under, my heart ripping from my chest with every stride. Within seconds, I rush down the steps, frantically scanning the car park for Rohan’s gunmetal grey Aventador as Liam’s name tears from my throat with the sharpness of a thousand razor blades. “Liam!”

“Saoirse!” Rohan roars. “Stop!” But I can’t. I need to get to Liam.

I push as hard as my lungs allow, and finally, the car comes into view. The air cuts every breath as tears stream down my cheeks, blurring my vision. The closer I get, the

more I can make him out, head resting against the headrest, his fingers wrapped tight around the steering wheel. “Liam!”

The next thing I know, I am pressed against the window, my palm against the glass, fighting for his attention. “Dev, please. Please look at me.”

My words tumble out, mirroring stuttering sounds. Hot tears stream down my face, and I squeeze my eyelids shut. Then, through choppy breathing and watery eyes, I bring my gaze back to his and beg over and over. “Liam. Please look at me.”

I thought I knew what heartbreak felt like, but ... nothing in the world could ever come close to the gut-wrenching pain clawing at my every limb. Every breath catches as my cries heave from my chest, rattling my entire body. “No, no, no! Get out of the car, Liam. Please. I’m begging you.”

Without shifting his body weight, he tilts his face towards me, and I break. Falling to my knees, I keep my gaze on him, watching as a stream of tears flows from his eyes as he clenches his jaw tight. “I get it now, Saoirse. You were always supposed to be the love of my life, but I—” His words catch. “I was never supposed to be yours. He was.” He tips his chin slightly, and I peer over my shoulder, finding Rohan standing off to the side, allowing us to have this moment.

When I bring my attention back to Liam, a pain beyond soul deep lines his forehead and the corners of his eyes. “I need you to remember something for me, okay?”

I shake my head from side to side, refusing to hear his goodbye. “Remember it yourself, because I am not letting you leave me. Not like this.”

Ignoring me, he holds my gaze. “I love you, Free Bird. Always have, always will.”

“No-no-no-no. You have to—” My words lodge in the base of my throat, but I push past it, refusing to let him give up like this. “You have to get out of the car.”

His eyes briefly close as he wrangles his emotions. “Just remember that for me, okay? Remember that I loved you until the end.”

“No. *Please*.” My body rattles with heartbreak. “Dev. For me. Please, get out of the fucking car.”

“I wish I could, baby.”

Teeth clattering, I place my hand on the window. “Don’t. Please don’t leave me. You promised, Dev. You promised me all your sunsets.”

“I’m sorry, darlin’. I’m so sorry.”

“No. Don’t say that. Don’t look at me like this is goodbye.”

“Look after Bev for me, okay? She’s gonna need you.”

“Stop, please. Stop!”

Liam’s gaze falls over my shoulder, and the next thing I know, Rohan is behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist as he lifts me off my knees and pulls me from the window. Using everything I have, I fight against his grip, kicking and screaming. “Put me fucking down.”

Rohan’s grip tightens as he backs away from the car, but I am thrashing so hard we tumble to the ground several feet away. “I’m sorry, love,” he whispers against my neck. “I’m so sorry.”

With my gaze pinned to the car, a blood-curdling scream rips past my lips, and I watch as Liam brings his palm to his chest, covering his heart. “All your sunsets, Free Bird.”

It happens so fast. The Aventador explodes into untameable flames, filling my ears with a deafening sound that ricochets through my skull with a piercing note. My hands fly to my head, shielding me from the assault of glass and metal that ripple through the air.

I can’t move.

I can’t see.

I can’t fuckin’ feel.

I once thought I knew the sound of heartbreak, but I was wrong. It’s not silence so fucking loud it consumes every inch of a person’s soul until all they feel is the overwhelming sense of numbness strangling the breath from their lungs.

It’s far worse. It is a gut-wrenching cry that rips from your chest, tearing your entire being to shreds. “LIAMMMMM!”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Creating worlds so the lost souls have somewhere to escape to.

Shauna Mairéad, AKA, alter ego to Shauna McDonnell, is a dark romance author from Dublin, Ireland. She enjoys crafting three-dimensional worlds and memorable characters with redeemable villains and the women who bring them to their knees.

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