

A dramatic, high-contrast photograph of a single red rose in a clear glass vase. The rose is the central focus, with its petals tightly packed and vibrant red. The vase is set against a dark, almost black background, which makes the rose stand out. The lighting is dramatic, coming from the side, creating strong highlights and deep shadows. Several red rose petals are shown in motion, falling from the base of the vase, creating a sense of movement and mystery. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

BEAST OF BOSTON

A tale as
old as crime...

BELLA DI CORTE

BEAST OF BOSTON

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*For all the little girls who fell in love with fairy tales, then
grew up to be women who fell in love with romance, and who
wanted the villain to win, as long as he treated the heroine like
a princess...this fairy tale is for you.*

“It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn’t want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened?”

“But in the end, it’s only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why.

“But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. They kept going, because they were holding on to something.

“That there is some good in this world, and it’s worth fighting for.”

— J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

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FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

One of the things I look forward to the most after finishing a story is writing one of these letters to you. I know some of you enjoy going into a story blind, but my hope is that even if you do, you'll come back here at some point to see what I had to say.

I have a lot to say about *Beast of Boston*.

This story was never meant to be. I had no idea Cian Cillian O'Callaghan even existed until *Bone Deep*. Like Brando from The Fausti Family, Cash (*Marauder*) was keeping a secret from me...

His wild cousin from Ireland, who Cash was mostly estranged from.

Out of all the leading men in my stories, I feel the most protective over Cian. You'll find out why once you start reading and get to know him.

I also love the fairy-tale feel of this book. It *is* a fairy-tale retelling. I'm sure I don't even need to tell you which one. The title and cover speak for themselves. Growing up, it was one of my favorite fairy tales, and the reason I decided to retell it:

It's the inspiration behind all my mafia books:

I love satisfying transformations.

I'm enchanted by how love, even if little by little, opens these darkened, closed-off hearts to even small areas of light.

It's the most satisfying thing to me to take the journey from hard winters into the warmth of the summer.

Besides Vittorio Scarpone (Mac from *Machiavellian*), I don't believe any of my leading men (up until this point) have experienced a transformation as magical as Cian's.

Maeve shines as brightly as the sun in this one.

My hope is that, even though the mafia takes a back seat in this story, the romance in this one will ensnare you forever.

A tale as old as crime, for sure.

Without further ado, the camera pans in on a magical scene, and you're whisked away to a fantastical world where the Beauty and her Beast await.

Much love,

Bella

PROLOGUE

CIAN CILLIAN O'CALLAGHAN

10 Years Old

Once upon a time...

That's how all stories with castles start, right? The castle I was squintin' at glowed in the distance. The sky had been grey most of the mornin', but the sun had snuck through a few cracks in the clouds, and direct beams hit the towerin' form up on the emerald hill.

Everythin' was so green here, even though most of the time, the sky was stormy silver, it seemed. I couldn't remember if it had always been like this.

I was born in Ireland. When I was seven, my parents and I moved to Boston. My Da got a job with a man by the name of Oran Craig. Da didn't seem to like it. Neither did Mam. They fought all the time. Then, suddenly, I was ten and we were on a plane headin' back to Ireland. Da and Mam both seemed happier to be back.

Especially since we were livin' in a castle.

It had workers and everythin'.

The castle was amazin', but I really liked all the land. We lived in an apartment with no yard in Boston.

A gust of wind blew. I set a hand on my cap to stop the wind from stealin' it. The air was chilled. It felt good against my skin.

It felt freein'.

A zap of energy seemed to bonk me on the top of my head, and it forced my feet to move. I wanted to feel the strain in my legs when I ran up that hill.

Heart pumpin' in my chest.

Lungs burnin' from the fresh air and challenge.

Da said we'd even get a dog soon. He could explore the hills with me. I was pretty sure we had trolls. He'd sniff them out, and we could chase them down together.

“Cillian, are you listenin' to me, son?”

My Da stood behind me. He was dressed plainly, in a sweater, slacks, and flat cap like mine. The shadow of the castle and the hill seemed to eat him up.

He grinned at me and chucked my chin. “I brought you out here for a reason.”

Right. A lough ran behind the property. It even had boats with oars. Da had a few fishin' lines set up along the bank.

I looked over the side. The lines went far under the water, but I didn't know what he had secured to the bottom. Was he tryin' to fish? He hadn't mentioned anythin' yet, just fiddled with a few of them. He was right, though. I hadn't been payin' attention. I'd been dreamin' of rushin' up the hill, a dog beside me, huntin' down trolls.

I could break out of my skin here and become a giant.

Da pointed to no line in particular. “You'll never go hungry, son. Not if you can get to this lough.”

“What kind of fish?”

He opened his mouth to reply when Keenan Ere appeared. Keenan seemed older than my dad, but not too much older. Da told me they grew up together and were good friends. Da didn't have many friends. Even though this village was small, Da only seemed to know Keenan. Da was born in Ireland, too, but he grew up in the city, though he was born in this village. He left when he was a wee babe, as Mam had said.

Somethin' about him bein' the bastard son of Cian O'Callaghan. I wasn't sure what that meant, but it didn't sound good.

My first name was Cian, too, but everyone called me Cillian, after my middle name. Yeah, the names were close in spellin', but no one ever really called me by both together. Together, they were almost a tongue twister.

Even though we didn't have much family, at least I had cousins who were around my age not too far away. Twins. Cash and Killian Kelly. Mam said their mam was her first cousin.

I'd met them twice, but it was short visits. Later on, I was goin' to their place. I couldn't wait to talk to them more about the trolls and the dog I'd be gettin'. I was already makin' plans for me and my dog. Even though Cash and Killian seemed to be cool, I knew my dog was goin' to be my best friend.

“Conor, we have a visitor,” Keenan said.

Da narrowed his eyes, and I could see the strain around them. It was the same tightness he would get when Craig would call on him for somethin'. Then Mam would start bitch—complainin'. He'd walk out of the apartment, his entire body rigid, like either Mam or Craig was going to attack him from the back.

Keenan spit on the ground. “Old woman.”

Da relaxed at the two words. He grasped me by the shoulder and directed me away from the lough and toward the castle. Keenan lingered behind some, takin' in the land. It was hard not to. It seemed to be filled with magic and fantastical beasts.

We walked over to what looked like a convertible Jeep—it had no top at all. Da took the driver's seat, and Keenan sat next to him. I took the back.

The wind whipped through my hair, and the wheels threw up rocks as we made our way past the castle and onto the road that led into the village. The path was lined with stones that had been stacked. I grabbed the pocket knife Da had given me

as a gift our first day in Ireland. I used the tip of the blade to clean underneath my nails. Maybe Mam wouldn't make me scrub my hands so hard before dinner.

Da slowed and cursed when he saw the old woman.

The woman was a witch. Had to be. She had long silver hair and weathered skin, almost like the old baseball glove I'd left behind in Boston. She was stumped over with a long face, and I was pretty sure that was a mole with hair on her chin.

I was about to bring up about the castle bein' magical, because I was willin' to bet she controlled the trolls, but Da's mood had darkened. The jeep came to a skiddin' stop, and Da seemed to be eyein' the space between her and us.

"Don't be gettin' any wild ideas, Conor," Keenan said. "I'll take care of her."

Da didn't seem to calm at his words. He squeezed the steerin' wheel, his knuckles strainin'.

As soon as Keenan tipped his hat to the woman, she pointed over his shoulder at Da and me. Her shouted words caught on the wind and seemed to slap my father in the face.

Bastard child of my husband.

He stole the castle from my husband's children after our family lost it.

She cursed all who set foot in the castle who didn't bear the O'Callaghan name through marriage. She said the day an O'Callaghan man found true love would be the day the curse would come to an end. She believed that would be never.

Keenan pointed to the road behind her, and I thought he said somethin' about trespassin' on *O'Callaghan land*, but he didn't wait for her to turn and leave. He got back into the Jeep.

The ride was quiet back to the castle, but I couldn't help myself. I turned back to get another glimpse of the woman.

Woman?

Nah, she was definitely a witch.

I tried to copy the cacklin' in a witch's laugh as we stared at each other.

“Cillian.”

The sharp tone of Da's voice made me face him. I didn't look back.

When we got to the castle, Da told Keenan that he and Fiona could leave for the night. Keenan put up a fuss, but Da couldn't be moved.

Mam and Fiona came out of the kitchen, both with dish towels. Fiona had one slung over her shoulder.

Fiona was a bit...odd. She had wild, dark hair and pale skin. Besides her skin, her eyes were the lightest thing about her. Mam said they were the color of sherry at sundown. The first memory of her I had was her wearin' a black butcher's apron that was smeared with blood. Drippin' with it. She always wore long black dresses with stockings and boots. I thought she was around my parents' age too.

Mam had told me once that Fiona had some chaos swirlin' around inside of her head. I believed it.

“Do I need the cleaver, then?” Fiona asked no one in particular.

Da shook his head. “Go into town with Keenan. Meet Henry. The three of you take the night to get acquainted with the village.”

Fiona didn't look sure. She looked at Keenan. He shrugged, then nodded toward the door. Fiona handed Mam the towel. “See you in the mornin', Mona.”

Mam gave Da a look after they were gone. It was one of those looks that I knew meant somethin', but I wasn't sure what.

It was better than what she usually gave him. A full-on fight. In Boston, it always came down to a row, but ever since we arrived in Ireland, Mam's smile was like the sun breakin' through dark skies. Her flamin' red hair added to her fire.

Da said she was lit up because I was going to have a brother or sister. I wasn't sure if I liked the idea, especially since I might have to give up Bucky to the newcomer. Bucky was the stuffed buck I'd had since I was a wee babe, but I was too old to outwardly put up a fuss about it, ya know? But the new babe made Mam happy, and if Mam was happy, we were all happy.

After Da got some drink in him at dinner, he seemed to relax some. Mam went on about the castle, the plans she had for it. Da was mostly quiet, and so was I. The food was good, and for a second, I was full. My stomach felt like a bottomless pit lately, and in a couple minutes, I'd be beggin' for dessert.

Mam looked happy that I'd eaten so much. She said all the fresh air and land was goin' to do me good. Then she took my hand and Da's and led us into what she called the ballroom.

She twirled around in the center of it, like she was a queen. Da grinned as he lit the candles on the wall. A stained-glass window shimmered with the soft candlelight. Mam spun in front of it, Da meetin' her there. He took her hand, and they started movin' together.

An unfamiliar sensation rushed my chest with warmth at the sight of them. I'd never seen my parents so happy.

"Dance with us, Cillian." Mam held out her hand for me.

As soon as I took it, it sounded like a door had opened and closed.

Da's eyes narrowed, and he gave Mam another one of those looks. I wasn't sure if it meant *stay here* or what, but it seemed to have an order behind it. It was the same look he gave me when he wanted me to keep still in public.

Mam wrapped her arms around my chest, pullin' my body against hers. Her eyes darted to the right, like she was thinkin' of a way out.

Why was she nervous?

My heart started to beat harder, and the food made a solid lump in my throat.

“Do you know of a good place to hide, Cillian?” she whispered to me, her palm pressed against my poundin’ heart.

“In the castle?” It was a dumb thin’ to say, but I was freaked out.

The trolls...that witch...even Fiona with her bloody apron, they were all playin’ havoc on my nerves.

“Yeah. Or outside of it?”

My eyes narrowed as I started to think. The castle was huge, and I hadn’t even explored half the land. I was still gettin’ used to the place.

“I—”

My answer was cut off when Da came back in the room. He scratched his forehead and tucked the gun he was carryin’ behind his back.

“Just these old doors.” He shrugged. “Maybe Keenan and Fiona didn’t close them properly on the way out.”

Mam held me tighter, like she didn’t believe him, but she nodded.

A flicker caught my eye, but before I could even scream out about the shadow materializin’ out of the darkness, the man came up behind my Da and set a knife to his throat.

The man ticked his mouth in Da’s ear. “Hiding out under another fella’s name? Has it come to cowardliness, O’Callaghan?” The tip of the knife pressed into Da’s neck, the blade against his throat, and a droplet of blood ran. “Where’s the gold?”

I couldn’t stop starin’ at the man’s hand. It had a poisonous lookin’ spider tattooed on it.

Another man materialized, stalkin’ toward me and Mam. He took a step forward, and she took a step back, movin’ me behind her as we moved together.

He had a web tattooed on his neck.

Spider and Web.

In the glow of the candles, I could see the menace on Web's face. I'd only seen that meanness in action movies. But it was much scarier in real life. And with men who were not actin'.

It didn't stop me, though, from steppin' away from Mam and in front of her.

"Cillian!" she shrieked, clawin' at my shoulders to get me behind her.

"Cillian." Web repeated my name, his tone mockin'. "Are we going to defend mommy?"

His accent...he wasn't from Ireland. America. Boston.

My hands balled into fists. I clenched them so hard, my muscles seemed to be shakin'. My entire body felt coiled, like it was waitin' for the right time to spring.

"Leave my family out of this." Da's words were almost choked from the hold Spider had on him.

"You should have thought about that before you fucked with Oran Craig. You're a traitor. A thief. And you know the punishment for those things." Spider nodded to mam.

I looked up. Even though the room was warm, my mam looked like a cold ghost with no blood in her veins. She was pale, and her eyes were wide. She held me tighter, and I could feel her tremblin'.

"Let my son go," she whispered.

Web smiled at her. "You're too smart not to know the rules, Mona. Isn't this what you wanted, though? You gave that bastard enough heartache that you drove him...to this. To where he stands now." He nodded toward Spider and Da. "With a blade pressed against his throat. But you knew the consequences. When you doomed Conor, you doomed your entire family. Including...*Cillian*."

"No." Mam took a step back, bringin' me with her.

Web didn't move with us. I had a feelin' it was because he knew we were trapped. I took a deep breath, and after it rushed

out, Web rushed us. He was goin' for my Mam, but I blocked him by rammin' my head into his stomach.

“Cillian! No! Run!”

Mam's voice seemed to echo inside of my head, but all I could concentrate on was fightin' this big bastard. I was half his size, but I was goin' to give him all I had. Maybe Da could get loose and help me. But I stopped fightin' at the sound of Mam's screech.

Da made a strangled noise before he fell to the floor. Blood poured from his neck and spread around him. It looked like his throat was smilin' at me.

“Cillian! *Runnn!*”

The panic snapped my eyes away from my father's fallen form and to Mam. She had her hands up, backin' away from Web, but she kept screamin' at me to run.

I started runnin' toward them, but I slipped in my Da's blood. I scrambled to get up, but it felt like I was swimmin' in it. Spider hauled me up by the collar. He wasn't givin' me any slack. He was goin' to kill me.

Instead of clawin' at my throat like I wanted to, I reached in my pocket and pulled the knife Da gave me. Spider was too busy starin' at the scene before him—Web had cornered my mam and had pulled out a knife. I flicked the blade of mine and squirmed some, just enough to stab him between the legs. I hit jeans, but used all my strength to pull up, hoping I'd hit his balls.

He roared and let me go. I'd hit somethin'. I rocked a bit on my feet, the entire place swayin', about to help Mam.

“CILLIAN—RUN, SON!”

Web lifted the knife, put it to her throat, and...she fell to the floor, her blood rushin' out and mixin' with Da's.

My feet seemed to have a mind of their own. I changed directions and started to run toward the door. I heard another man say somethin', but I wasn't stoppin'. I was fast and strong, and I raced up the hill like fear itself was chasin' me.

Legs strainin'.

Chest tight.

Lungs burnin'.

Cramp startin' in my side.

I pushed past it, not sure if I was feelin' the wind on my neck or the breath of one of those killers.

Up head, rocks were stacked and set in a square shape, like a short stone fence around a Celtic graveyard.

I barely stopped when I got close enough. I used my arms and leapt over it. I fell to the ground, scramblin' to get to what Da had helped me make.

A fort.

He'd cut a piece of grass from the ground and dug underneath it. It was a hole big enough for me and my dog, when I got one. He was goin' to find me a piece of wood to wedge underneath the patch, so I could look out at the hills from my hidin' spot.

I covered myself with the patch of grass like a blanket. The mud was hard and cold, and the earthy smell went straight up my nose. My heart was beatin' so fast, I wondered if it was liftin' the patch of grass.

I wondered if those killers could see it.

Closin' my eyes tight, I kept very still until my stomach rolled. I turned my head and puked.

Tear streaked down my cheeks. Not because I was scared. But because I'd lost the good dinner Mam had taken the time to make.

She'd never make me dinner again.

I'd never smell her flowery perfume or the scent of onions on her hands after she cut them up for one of her recipes.

Voices.

I heard them comin' before the sound of footsteps in the grass made it to me.

Those bastards were lookin' for me.

Turned out, trolls were not the meanest creatures.

People were.

Go to sleep, Cillian. Close your eyes and go to sleep.

“Looks like a graveyard,” a voice said.

“Good. We'll bring them here.”

“If we have time. We need to find the gold. That's all Oran's worried about.”

“What about the kid?”

“We'll find him—sooner or later.”

A few seconds passed. The whistlin' of the wind made me feel even colder, and I was worried they could hear my teeth startin' to chatter.

“He's not here. Little bastard might be halfway back to the village. We should have gone that way first.”

“I'll go check.”

I heard footsteps retreatin', but I didn't move, in case it was a trap to lure me out.

Like a dead body, I kept my arms pressed to my sides and my legs straight, even though my muscles were havin' fits. I slowed my breathin' because I was strainin' to take in air.

How long can I stay under here?

It didn't matter.

I imagined my parents, even the brother or sister I'd never know, and how they were probably goin' to rest upon this hill for eternity.

I fell asleep with their blood coatin' me, knowin' one day I'd rest here too.

After I killed those bastards.

CHAPTER I

MAEVE

PRESENT DAY

I was surrounded by time. But there never seemed to be enough of it.

Even with all the clocks.

So many clocks.

Sometimes I felt like I was trapped in an hourglass, sand continuously pouring over me, until one day it would take me under.

I sighed, glancing up at the many timekeepers hanging on the wall. At twelve sharp, they would all go off at once.

My father was a clock maker, an engineer when it came to gadgets, and a man who still found life fascinating, the wonder of living never lost on him, even at his age. Some people called him a genius, and others called him eccentric, but he was mostly known as the man who kept the books for Oran Craig. Mr. Craig was the leader of a ruthless Irish mafia in Boston. The only reason my dad worked for him was because he was forced to. He didn't have much of a choice in the matter.

The same was going to happen to me. I wouldn't have a choice when it came to marrying his son, Dermot Craig, when the time came.

For whatever reason, Dermot had set his eyes on me, and they hadn't strayed since. He wanted to marry me. That was all it took for Oran to hold everything over my father's head—my life, our apartment, my father's businesses, his very livelihood—unless I agreed.

The thought sent the sand down even faster, and I closed my eyes, visualizing the moment it covered my mouth and nose.

It would be the moment Dermot held his hand out for mine, and I was forced to take it in matrimony.

I held the little wooden figure tighter in my hand.

My father had taught me how to work with wood, and it was a pastime that allowed me to breathe without usually feeling the passage of time. But it seemed like lately, my father's clocks were only a reminder of how little of it existed for me.

The Craigs were not known for their patience.

I sighed, releasing the tension on the wooden figurine. I was carving replicas of the cast of a fairy tale. In the story, the beauty fell in love with a beast. I'd sketched out a few of them, bringing them to life in my head. I was smitten with the ones I'd already finished.

If I did say so myself, Belle was coming out fantastic. I was saving the Beast for last.

I hadn't even sketched him yet because I was having a hard time visualizing him. Fleshing him out. Yeah, I knew how he looked in the movie, but these figurines were for me. For my personal collection.

It was my favorite tale.

That was why I loved working for The Belle of Boston Book Store. I loved to get lost inside a story—an entirely new world. Besides woodworking, it was an escape.

They both were. I'd read and get inspired, and that inspiration would come out through my hands. I had hundreds of little figurines from books that I'd read collecting dust all over the house.

All the clocks struck twelve at the same time.

“Ah!” The knife slid against the wood too fast, slicing my finger, and the figurine dropped from my hands to the floor.

I'd been living with time all my life, the reminder of it, and it had never bothered me before. But the sound had come at me like a strike of lightning in a quiet library.

Blood started to well, and the cut was stinging. I picked up Belle, who was covered in my blood, and set her on the table. I couldn't relax anyway, so I decided to bandage my finger and get ready for work.

My father, Pauric, knocked on the bathroom door, even though it was cracked.

He adjusted his goggles. There was no telling what he was building. My father was a genius, but he was also eccentric, and it meant he dabbled in a few things, because mentally, he always needed a challenge. "Are you okay, Maeve Rose?"

I lifted my finger. "Just a cut."

"Let me look at that." He yanked my finger closer and went cross-eyed, his nose scrunching comically. "Not too bad."

"No." I smiled at him, even though he was examining my finger like he could see the germs about to attack my open wound. "It's too far away from my heart."

That was his go-to saying when I was little and got hurt. If I'd fall and skin my knee, that sort of thing, he'd tell me I was going to be okay. *It's too far away from your heart.*

Maybe that was why this thing with Dermot felt like a death sentence. It was entirely too close to my heart.

It was a dark topic around our house, and it seemed like Dad felt the impending tick of time too. His face became stoic as he took the first-aid kit from the cabinet and started to bandage my finger. "I'm going to find a way out of this. Even if it costs me everything."

"I know," I whispered. I set my hand over his, stopping him. "But not at the expense of your life. Promise me."

He was all I had left. I refused to lose him. I'd rather marry Dermot a hundred times than not have a father. My mom died when I was three. Memories of her were hazy, at best, and

scarce. Not to mention I had no brothers or sisters, we had no extended family, and that meant I'd be without any family if I lost him.

I didn't mind being alone, existing inside of my head with a bunch of characters, but it still seemed...scary. I knew I had my dad whenever I needed him.

He nodded and mumbled something, but I wasn't sure if it was a promise to stay safe or something else. He left me in the bathroom before I could call him out on it.

Rinsing out the sink, I watched as the blood swirled down it, wondering if I should go after my dad or not. I decided not. We'd had this conversation before, and talking about it only pushed him closer to the edge.

I put the kit back in the cabinet, then fixed my messy bun, letting a few more chestnut strands fall around my face before I went to my bedroom and changed clothes. I threw on a thick white sweater, black jeans, and an army-green coat. I slipped my feet into a pair of boots hearty enough to keep my feet warm in the snow, then grabbed my messenger bag. My perfume of the day would be wood shavings.

Instead of bothering my dad, I left him a note on the counter reminding him I had to work and there was food in the fridge. I also set the Rooster timer he'd rigged from the inside of our cabinet. It would pop out at the time I scheduled it to. Another one of his gadgets. He'd forget to eat if I didn't.

I grabbed my bike helmet off the peg and rolled my bike downstairs. We lived in Beacon Hill, in a historic apartment complex, only about a ten-minute commute to The Belle on bike.

Boston was frozen over from a hard winter, but the sun was high, and the cold, fresh air felt good in my lungs. Delaney Emerson, the owner of The Bell, usually gave me a ride during the winter months. But like my father, she was eccentric, and she drove a car that had a bumper sticker that said: *So many book boyfriends, so little time*. I loved her to death. And her taste in books was superb. But her driving? Not

so much. Her feet felt like they weighed a ton when she hit the gas and the brake constantly.

My dad had bought me a car, but there was something about riding a bike that I loved. Maybe it was the fresh air. Or just seeing the world without a windshield.

Maybe that was basically the same thing?

Either way, I enjoyed it.

I hummed my favorite song as the bike bumped along the cobblestone road. The Belle was also in one of the oldest areas of Boston. A lot of the businesses in this area had *bell* in the name. Even the tavern across the street.

I'd thought it was kismet when I'd seen the little help-wanted sign in the window of the store. My last name was Bell.

I slowed down some as I got closer to The Belle. I kept my boots planted on each side of the bike while snow collected on my helmet and fell in flurries in front of the shining window display of the bookstore.

A warm rush surged through my veins at seeing it. Especially in winter, when it reminded me of a scene out of a Charles Dickens' novel—the cobblestone street glazed over like a frozen donut; the softly glowing lights in the iron fixtures; the scent of woodburning fireplaces slow dancing with the perfume of packed snow.

Butterflies with paper wings bearing my favorite quotes started to flutter when the warm rush of blood reached them. They were stretching their wings and getting ready to fly.

It always gave me a thrill to know I was about to cross a magical threshold into a space filled with endless words that would transport me to endless worlds.

It also gave me a sense of being trapped in a book-shaped prison.

Don't get me wrong, I lived for the second it took me to trip and fall down the magical rabbit hole only books could transport me to. I mean, my last read was alien romance! I

slipped into the skin of an extraterrestrial being who had no idea what it meant to love at first. I traveled miles, *no* lightyears, inside of my head without leaving my bed.

The other side of that, though...I wasn't leaving my room. When reality returned, I was exactly where I'd always been. Boston. If my favorite rom-com was set in Chicago, I would never step foot there. The deal with the Craigs stopped me and...it didn't look like I was leaving on a jet plane anytime soon.

No foreshadowing in the book of Maeve Bell's life would lead me to believe great adventures were waiting for me a couple chapters in.

My escape was also my prison.

Sometimes I yearned to set my boots on this side of reality, to feel these places that books brought me to with words. Smell the coffee at the quaint little place on the corner. Taste the caramel in the latte. Hear tiny droplets of rain as they start to fall from the sky and hit the old cobblestone pavement. Feel the rush of endorphins when the handsome man, who arrived at the perfect time through a series of unfortunate events, came to my rescue by picking up my fallen book before the rain could drown the worn-out pages.

Shouting in the distance seemed to come at me through a tunnel, and once it was close enough, it popped my dream bubble.

Devin and Shay Craig stood outside of the tavern across the street doing what they seemed to do best. Yell at each other.

Devin was Oran's other son. He seemed to spend a lot of time chasing after Shay. I always tried to avoid them when I saw them, which was too much in my opinion. They were always in this area.

Shay screamed something at Devin's back as he walked away in an angry huff. Shay's back was to me, and I decided to wait her out. The Belle was across the street from The Bell

Tavern (which Delaney's partner, Robert Kennedy, owned), and there was no way to bypass her unless she went after him.

She didn't. She turned and our eyes met.

She looked me up and down. "You're beautiful, but so fucking odd. Almost too quiet. You're never going to survive this family. You'll be emotional minced pie in no time. Devin is a puppy compared to Dermot. There's no book deep enough for you to get lost in. I'd run if I were you."

I opened my mouth to say something, but instead, I shook my head and walked into the bookstore.



A FEW CUSTOMERS were browsing the shelves of The Belle when I walked in. The store was separated into three parts: children's literature, non-fiction, and romance. All the customers seemed to be romance readers, since they were on that side of the store.

Delaney was a supportive figure in the indie-author book community. She championed the authors by dedicating an entire side of the store to their books. She invited them to do regular signings, and she always threw a party for them.

It always impressed me how she catered to each one perfectly. She'd dive into the stories and base the parties on the theme of the book. For non-fiction, she'd mostly invite the authors to read snippets of their books. She'd serve wine and usually have appetizers. The entire gathering would have such a rich, literary feel to it. For the children's books, it always felt like I'd walked into a kid's whimsical birthday party.

I couldn't remember my mom, but I always thought it would be fun to have one like Delaney. She loved to read, and we had long conversations about the books we devoured and loved. She was just so warm and maternal.

She was chatting with two girls who were inquiring about new romance releases and asking about the book club. It was something new Delaney was about to start. I couldn't wait.

My entire point, though...they were smitten with her too.

She had short, dark auburn hair, whiskey-colored eyes that seemed to pop behind chic leopard-print eyeglasses, and perfect curves that were always on display in a body-hugging black top and leggings. Her flats matched her glasses. She was fond of cardigans and turtlenecks in fall and winter, and she usually added splashes of color through her accessories. She had a signature red lip.

I was totally jealous of how put together she always looked.

No, not only put together. She looked...literary. Like a trendy agent from New York.

I adjusted my own eyeglasses. Delaney had helped me pick them out. The color was called flamingo, and the style was a lot bolder than what I would have gone with if I'd gotten my usual ones. For me, it was sort of like having a red door, but not as bold.

I could see Dermot chasing after someone like Delaney, but me?

Why?

I didn't have time to obsess over it. The girls finished checking out, and Delaney wrapped up their purchases.

As they left, they were going on about *Fire and Ice* night. Delaney decided to go with a theme for each season—*Spring Fling*, *Cuddle Fall*, *Fire and Ice Winter*, *Sizzling Summer*—for the book-club nights. We'd emailed all our customers, and we had flyers up in libraries, coffee shops, and other places we thought readers might notice.

The first meeting was planned for that night, and already more than forty people had claimed spots. Even though that seemed like a small crowd, for a bunch of introverts who loved to read, it might be overwhelming. I was hoping that was as big as the crowd was going to get.

“Guess what came in today?” Delaney lifted a romance book we'd been waiting on. It was an advance copy. Her face

fell and she set the book down. “What’s wrong, beautiful turtle?”

Besides Mae, Eve, and Belly (after my last name), sometimes Delaney called me her beautiful turtle. Probably because I “turtled” when things got hard. Meaning, I tucked into my shell and shut the world out.

Her news perked me up some, though. It was rare when a book boyfriend made it to husband status for me. Which was why we’d been waiting on this book to come in. It was the anticipated last book in an amazing eight-book series, and the hero was made up of all the elements that certified him as book-husband material.

I sighed and set my bag behind the counter. “Devin and Shay Craig. They were across the street. Shay caught me on her way out.”

Delaney’s face pinched. She’d been personally acquainted with the Craigs. They had harassed her for money because they said her business needed to be protected. Robert got involved, and the only reason they ducked back into the shadows was because Robert’s cousin was in politics and had pull with the police department.

Robert’s connections weren’t enough to convince the Craigs to leave me and dad alone. My dad was too smart, and again, Dermot...liked me.

Delaney sighed and set her arm around my shoulders. “It’s not going to happen. I’m not going to let it.” She gave me a big kiss on the forehead.

“Thanks.” My voice came out as a whisper. I had no clue what else to say. I was worried enough for my dad. I didn’t want to add Delaney into the bubbling pot. I wasn’t a big people person, but she was one of my people. After I gave her a big hug, I stepped away. I was ready to change the subject. “Have any more readers confirmed for tonight?”

She studied my face, wanting to say more, but just shook her head. “No.” Her smile came slow. “I know you love that.”

I couldn't even fight my smile. "I do. Forty is a huge crowd for introverts."

She laughed. "Maybe we'll get a bunch of intro-extroverts since we all love what we're coming together for...books."

I picked up the book she'd set down. We met eyes and squealed. We both started talking at once about how excited we were to have the chance to read it. The author had sent two advanced copies for us and a few extras for a few lucky readers who were a part of our mailing list to win. We were going to have a private meeting after we all finished reading.

Delaney grabbed my hand, but she couldn't pry my copy out of it. "What happened here?"

"Woodworking accident."

"Ouch." She started laughing. "Pauric must have done this. You have enough padding to cover ten cuts. And on your bird finger too!"

I waved it around, and she started laughing even harder. Then she knocked on my helmet and told me to take it off so we could get to work.

Work? What I did never felt like work. A prison sometimes, but never work. I took in a lungful of air that was perfumed by the scent of crisp pages, new ink, and Delaney's rich perfume...heaven.

Maybe because of the book-club meeting, it seemed like we were extra busy, and before I realized it, Robert and Kyle had arrived with the food and drinks from across the street. Kyle was Robert's nephew. He was around my age, and super flirty. He was always trying to get me to go out with him. He was nice, but not my type. He liked to hit the party scene. A lot. I thought forty bodies was a crowd.

"Hey, Maeve!" Kyle set a platter of finger foods down on a table Delaney had bought specifically for it. "You up for that party next weekend or not?" He nudged me with his elbow and gave me his best smile.

"Sorry." I fixed the flowers on the table. "I have to work."

“The shop closes early, right?”

“Not that early.”

He laughed. “I think you’re the only person I know who likes to be in bed by nine.”

Yeah, so I could get in an hour of woodworking, take a nice bath, and then...read.

Those inked winged butterflies fluttered in my stomach at the thought of it. If a book was new, I looked forward to seeing where it would take me. Each chapter usually felt like I’d paused a good movie I couldn’t wait to get back to.

“Come on.” He nudged me again. “That’s what bookmarks are for, right?”

“Do I look like a quitter to you?” I fixed my glasses and met his eyes.

His face scrunched.

“That’s what bookmarks signify,” I clarified. “A quitter.”

A second later, his face relaxed and he laughed at the joke. “You’re seriously a wicked-smart hot chick, Maeve. *Smoking hot.*”

I sighed. Maybe it was historical novels that did it, but I almost winced at the term *hot chick*. If he was going to win me over, he had to do a lot better than that. I wanted romance—in all its forms. Including language. *Hot chick* and *smoking hot* seemed like lazy terms, and if he wasn’t going to put in some effort this early on...he probably wasn’t going to get any better.

That was probably why Delaney always told me I was born in the wrong time. My soul was old. Hers was alien-romance young, she always joked. She was born nineteen years or so before me, but her soul was light-years ahead.

Robert called Kyle over to help with whatever was left to bring. Before he left, he fixed my glasses. I fixed them after him, not even sure why. Maybe they didn’t feel straight enough.

With the help of Robert and Kyle, Delaney and I set everything up before the book-club guests started to arrive. No one was late, and I had to admit it was a lot of fun. We had a set of questions to answer, and almost everyone spoke up. Even if a few guests didn't, the crowd understood what it meant to feel shy in a group.

Robert and Kyle hung around while a few of the book-club members chatted with Delaney. They were already planning for the next one.

I grabbed some books that were left out and started putting them back where they belonged. Less to do before we closed. The door chimed—someone had either walked in or left. I turned with the remainder of displaced books in my arms, about to head to a different section, when I ran into a man's stomach.

My feet took an involuntary step back, and if I could have, I would have held the books even closer.

Dermot Craig leaned against a shelf, grinning at me.

"Hey, Baby," he said, like I was his.

Only inside his twisted head.

"We're about to close," I whispered, hoping he'd go away before Delaney found us. I didn't like the way he looked at her. She could get mouthy. And I knew she probably hadn't noticed him because she hadn't followed him like she usually did.

He shrugged. "This place will stay open all night if I want it to." He looked around. "So many books."

That's why it's called a bookstore was on the tip of my tongue, but instead I just nodded.

"This place would make a spectacular fire. Books... paper..." he continued.

As he took in the place, I took him in. He was of average height and stocky. His shirts and sweaters were always a little too tight. So were his pants. His light brown hair was cut short, and his eyes were a dull brown.

He grinned at me when our eyes met. I went to slide around him with the mound of books in my arms, but he stepped in front of me.

“Saturday night. Dinner at my parents’ place. Your dad will come. We’ll talk about the wedding.”

I went to sidestep again, and he blocked me...*again*.

“Can’t,” I said. “I have work.”

He took the top book in my pile and flung it like a frisbee. He continued to do the same with each book until my arms were empty. His face was impassive, like stone. “That’s what I think of your work.”

“What’s going on?” Delaney appeared behind Dermot. She crossed her arms.

He didn’t even turn to look at her when he answered. “A private conversation. None of your business.”

I wasn’t sure what to say, because I didn’t want to make the situation worse.

“It is my business because this is *my* business. You’re not welcome here. And you owe me for the books you tossed.”

He grinned, and a chill ran down my spine. He turned to face her. “Like I told my sweet Maeve. All these books... paper...they all catch fire so easily. The perfect start to a great big bonfire in winter. So pretty.”

She stuck her chin up, and her arms seemed to press even tighter against her stomach. “Get out.”

Robert came to stand behind her, setting his hand on her shoulder.

A tense few seconds passed. My chest burned from holding my breath. It released in a rush when Dermot lunged forward. I wasn’t sure who he meant to get, but Robert pushed Delaney out the way and took the hit.

The two men started fighting. They knocked into shelves, books flying everywhere, until a children’s shelf went completely over, the two men with it. Leftover guests from the

book club were screaming, some scrambling to get out the door.

Kyle wasn't sure what to do. Especially when Dermot pulled out a knife and stuck it to Robert's chin. Dermot was breathing heavy, and his eyes were almost black, dilated from rage.

I could barely breathe when blood start to run from Robert's chin. Dermot was slowly slicing him. Delaney's eyes rolled before she hit the floor. I went to scream at Dermot to stop, my hand up in the same motion, but the words refused to come. I felt queasy, and my knees went soft suddenly, but I stood despite it all.

“Dinner or his throat slashed, Maeve?”

“Dinner.” My hands balled into fists, my nails biting into my palms. Maybe the pain would keep me on my feet. “Dinner, I said!”

Dermot stopped cutting Robert right before he made it to his throat. He smiled at me. “Not my favorite choice, because that choice means it's time to stop, but good enough.” He stood, wiping the bloodied knife against his pants before he stuck it in his pocket. “A car will pick you and the old man up. Seven and not a second after. I won't like it if you're late.” He winked at me before he left.

CHAPTER 2

MAEVE

The memory of Dermot's knife slicing Robert's chin open like a ripe peach moved me to get dressed for dinner with the Craigs.

It was such an odd state to be in—to feel drained of all blood and forced to move at the same time.

The reality of tonight was...if I didn't go through with dinner, the knife was going to be turned on my dad. Because that's what people like Dermot do. They hurt the ones you love to get to the source of whoever and whatever they want.

Trying to find the right outfit was only adding to my anxiety. My bed was piled with clothes. Everything was probably too casual. Too many T-shirts, oversized sweaters, and jeans. I remembered how Shay was dressed, and my stomach sank. I didn't have anything that fancy.

A strong urge to call Delaney and ask her opinion came over me, but I decided against it. After what had happened to Robert... I didn't want to remind her of the situation or get her involved any deeper.

I finally decided on a cream-colored turtleneck, a faux brown suede skirt that landed right above the knees, light brown stockings, and a pair of brown boots that looked almost Victorian. I set my hair in a loose bun. Applied light makeup and called myself done.

My father was pacing in front of the front door and mumbling to himself. The only reason he stopped was because I set a hand on his arm.

“I don’t think you’ll be needing these.” A grin I couldn’t fight came to my face as I took his safety goggles off and set them on the entry table.

“Go along with whatever is said tonight, Maeve. Just go along. Let them believe whatever they want. I won’t allow this!”

A loud knock came at the door. I jumped a little. My heart started to beat against my ribs, like it was trying to break free and flee. Dad fixed his glasses and answered the summons. It was a man dressed in a suit.

“The car is waiting, Bell,” the man said.

Dad grabbed my thick plaid jacket and crossover purse from the peg, then turned to face me. “Time to go, Maeve.”

He helped me into my jacket, handed me my purse, and then stepped outside. I locked up the apartment before we both followed the man to where a car waited. My dad and I sat in the back, quiet the entire fifteen-minute drive.

It wasn’t a surprise when we started to cruise the streets of a million-dollar neighborhood. Dad didn’t talk about the Craigs much, but from doing some research on my own, I knew they owned a successful meatpacking plant. It had been in their family for generations.

No wonder they were dubbed the Butchers of Boston. Their legit business was like the one they hid.

The driver stopped in front of a towering townhouse. As he stepped out, before he opened the door for us, Dad squeezed my hand. It was a silent reminder: *just go along with whatever is said*. We climbed the steps, still quiet, but Dad’s thoughts seemed as loud as my heart. I turned the ring on my pointer finger around and around, trying to dispel some of the anxiety.

A woman answered the door. She wore a black tunic with a white collar over black pants and sensible shoes. She gave me a once-over, and I got the impression she did it to assess me for later. She took our coats and told us to follow her through the foyer.

The house was huge and filled with what seemed like antique furniture. It also had a lot of antlers as trophies hanging up. It fit with this family. As we moved deeper in, the scent of simmering meat permeated the air. My mouth watered, and my stomach made an obnoxious noise, even though I hated seeing the proof of dinner all around me.

We weren't starved for food, but I was the only one who could cook in our house. I'd learned from books, television, or eating out and then trying to replicate the dish by attempting to pinpoint all the ingredients. Most of my dishes were edible, but just from smells alone, not to this level. It was like walking into a five-star restaurant.

I didn't want to like the smells in the air, but my stomach had a mind of its own. Even though the lady who answered was leading us, I could have sworn it was my nose instead.

The lady stopped at the dining room. Oran Craig sat at the head of the table, Dermot to his right and Devin to his left. Shay sat next to Devin. It seemed like they were getting along. He had her hand and was kissing it. She beamed at him.

Oran acknowledged our presence by nodding to Dermot's side of the table. I took a deep breath when his eyes met mine. He winked at me, like he had sensed my hunger.

My dad went to take the seat next to Dermot, but Oran shook his head. "Across from me, Bell." He nodded to the seat.

Dad hesitated for a second before he took the chair on the other end of the table. That left me standing. I took another deep breath and took the seat next to Dermot.

He didn't even pull out my chair for me. *Such a jerk.*

My thoughts were stalled when the lady came back with a cart that held bowls of soup already ladled out. My stomach made another obnoxious noise. I covered it with my arms, hoping no one heard. It didn't seem like they had. The conversation was on business.

I tried to tune it out while I ate the parsnip soup. I could taste a hint of apple in the background, and I had to stifle the

urge to make a pleasurable noise in my throat at the taste of it. It was creamy and warm, and it seemed to be sticking to my bones. I almost wanted to lick the bowl clean before the lady came back and took it away, but that was just the beginning of the dinner. She brought out roast with mashed potatoes and gravy, grilled carrots on the side.

I looked up from my plate to grab my glass of water, and my eyes met Shay's from across the table. I got the feeling she'd been watching me. I hadn't even noticed. She grinned at me, then picked up her wine. I turned my eyes back to my plate, eating a little slower.

The next bite almost got lodged in my throat when Dermot's hand came underneath the table and rested on my leg. The skirt had ridden up some when I sat, and I didn't like how he was inching even closer to my thigh. I put my hand over his to stop him, but he only grinned as he forced his up even higher.

I was about to stand and ask where the bathroom was, but a man appeared outside of the dining room and apologized for interrupting. He had a web tattooed on his neck. The guy who came to stand beside him had a spider inked on his hand.

"I have news that can't keep," Web said, waiting for Oran to tell them, it seemed, what to do next.

Oran didn't seem to care that we were all there. He nodded to Web, and Web went on. "Cillian—or as he's going by now, Cian—O'Callaghan is trying to buy guns in Boston." He'd pronounced the name Cian as KEE-en, and Cillian as Kill-ee-in. No "S" sound at the start of either one.

I'd never been more thankful for a man named Cillian O'Callaghan, or Cian O'Callaghan, because at his name, Dermot's hand stopped and he reached for his beer, a pinched look coming to his face.

The entire mood had changed at the mention of the man's name.

Oran took a slow sip of his whiskey. "Ah, so the son of the bastard thief has arrived in Boston to avenge his father."

Spider glanced at us. “He killed six more of our men.”

I stabbed at a carrot, acting like I didn’t care about the conversation, as I slid my eyes to my father. He was acting nonchalant too, like he was still enjoying his dinner, but I knew him. Whatever this was about had his attention. I could almost feel his excitement from where he sat.

“Why does O’Callaghan still exist?” Devin pulled Shay closer and started playing with her hair.

Oran and Dermot exchanged a look I couldn’t understand. But neither one of them answered him.

Oran looked at Web. “My office. Now.” He looked at my father. “This concludes dinner. Here’s the deal you were supposed to get at dessert. My son wants to marry your daughter, your daughter seems okay with it, so they’re getting married. It’s a good deal between your family and mine. You’ll both be taken care of. It happens next week.”

“Next week!” I blurted.

Oran looked at me for the first time, like I had just teleported into the room. “Next week. Is there a problem with that?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but my father said, “Such short notice doesn’t give a girl much time to plan.”

Oran waved this off and stood. “She’ll have everything she needs. No one in this town will say no. I’ll have my guest list to you tomorrow—I’ll pay for the entire thing. Whatever Maeve wants, Maeve can have when it comes to this wedding.”

My dad nodded and thanked Oran for dinner. Dermot squeezed my thigh before he followed Oran out of the room. Devin didn’t look like he was going to get up until Dermot came back a minute later and pulled him up by the collar.

Shay smirked at me. “Saved by the beast, right?”

I had no clue what she meant by that, but I was glad we didn’t stick around to find out. Dad led me to our coats and my purse, and we left without anyone seeing us out.

The food I'd just eaten turned into sand from an hourglass, and I was having a hard time catching my breath. It was stuck in my throat. Not even the cold winter air could do anything to reverse it.



THE COLD AIR was overwhelming me, making me shiver. Maybe because of the news that had just fallen on my shoulders—*a week!*—and the shock of it had made it to my bones. I was about to start hyperventilating, but I didn't want my dad to notice.

If he broke down, it would completely break me.

The neighborhood had quaint businesses. My dad took me by the arm and brought me into a warm little coffee shop—The Bean of Boston. Acoustic music played in the background, and a few people sat at tables, some on computers. A man and a woman chatted over coffee. One girl sat alone with a book and a cup of hot chocolate. Though I doubted she was alone. She was lost in an entirely new world, with all new faces, and I envied her for it.

“Would you like something, Maeve? Coffee? Tea? Hot Chocolate?”

“No, thank you,” I barely got out, taking a seat at an empty table. I crossed my arms over myself to keep warm. I was chilled to the bone and my chest felt tight, like I'd been running a marathon.

While my dad stood in line for a cup of coffee, I used the app on my phone to arrange a ride home for us. I stared at the screen longer than I should have, lost, before I looked up.

My dad was next in line to place his order. He was mumbling to himself, which for him was normal. I didn't miss the odd looks he got, though. I also didn't miss the same energy coming from him as before. It had started when Cillian—Cian—O'Callaghan's name had been mentioned at the table. It reminded me of when he found a missing piece of a project he'd been working on. It was almost electric.

Maybe he thought Cillian—Cian—O’Callaghan would take care of the problem for us?

By the time dad got his coffee, my phone pinged with an alert that the driver was waiting outside at the curb.

The weather seemed to have grown colder, like I had been stuck out in the rain and then thrown into frost. My hair was so cold, it felt welt, and snow laid an icy hand on my face.

My father gazed out the window the entire ride, but he’d stopped mumbling. I wondered if he had accepted the situation, or if he was still trying to find a way out of it. He hadn’t touched the coffee.

As soon as we were back at our apartment, I rushed to my room. I swapped out the cold clothes for an oversized sweater and soft fleece leggings. My hair was plastered to my head, and I took it out of the bun and let the frozen strands defrost as they fell down my shoulders.

My father still had his hat and coat on. He was looking for something in the front of the apartment. Opening and closing cabinet doors in the kitchen. Turning in circles, wondering where to look next. When he turned to face me, he wiped a hand down his face. “I seem to have misplaced my keys, Maeve.”

“Your car keys?”

“Those!”

“Where are you going?”

He started to mumble again, going back to the cabinets in the kitchen. I knew my dad. Even if I kept his keys from him, he’d look until he found them—in my pocket. He was relentless. The table by the door had a little plate for knickknacks. It was like my dad’s own version of a junk drawer. I dug through it until I found his keys.

“Here.” I handed them to him, my hands smelling like a wet penny after. “Where are you going?”

His face was grave as he looked into my eyes. “I think I might have found a way to fix this.”

I hesitated before I asked, “Cillian—Cian—O’Callaghan?”

He blinked at me, reminding me of an owl. Then he took me by the shoulders. He wanted to say something, but it seemed like he was having a hard time finding the words.

It scared me to the bones. I had a feeling he was about to start the conversation with...*if I don't come back...*

Instead, he squeezed my shoulders, gave me a hard kiss on the forehead, and left.

CHAPTER 3

CIAN

S now came down in thick sheets outside the window. From the way the trees bowed, the wind was harsh, and the storm was gainin' strength.

I heard nothin'. Felt nothin'.

I was buried deep in the ground, and the world around me was muted.

A continuation of that night my parents and siblin' were slaughtered.

The only time I came alive was when I killed one of them.

One of them.

Craig's men.

When I did, I had arms and legs. Hands and feet. My lungs took in air, and blood pumped through my veins.

The kid inside of me awoke from the slumber they had put me in, but it was the beast who opened his eyes.

I lived for revenge and nothin' else.

My hands had been killin' his men since I was fifteen. Every time he would send one to look for the gold, I'd hand him the same fate that had been handed to those who belonged to me.

Death.

I'd continue to kill until the Craigs were destroyed or they lowered me into the ground.

Boston called me the Beast. That was exactly what I'd become. Only movin' when the scent of tainted blood wafted underneath my nose. Nothin' else could get me to budge.

The rest of the world was dead to me.

Footsteps pounded along the wooden floor before a form shimmered against the glass door and Keenan entered.

He tilted some, about to knock. He'd lost a toe a few months after my parents were killed. He was cuttin' grass and not wearin' the proper shoes. Fiona lost a finger with one of her knives. Henry an ear when a small dog ripped it off. All odd occurrences, especially Fiona's accident. She was skilled. They all believed in the curse the old woman had cast and were hopin' I'd find true love soon.

Hope waisted.

I barely had any thoughts, except to strategize so I could destroy the one thing that kept me alive.

The enemy.

Love didn't exist for me.

But Keenan, Fiona, and Henry had been trusted by my parents, and that trust had proven to be true. Keenan was sharp with a bow and arrow. Fiona with knives. Henry with explosives. His wife, Beatrice, with the poisons she cooked up. We'd trapped and hunted Craig's' men together. I let them go on about the curse because I respected them, but love was a fairy tale only fools believe in.

Out of our entire gang, I was closest to Keenan, just as my father had been. That was why I chose him to represent me. His face and voice doubled as mine when the name Cian Cillian O'Callaghan was spoken. I stood next to him, but as silent as a dead man.

Maybe a silent leader wouldn't inspire some men to join my organization, my cause, but most of the men seemed to understand without words.

I was going to rule Boston someday—with or without a loud voice.

Keenan adjusted his weight. “Brady refused our offer. Oran’s reach is wider than we thought. No one will sell us weapons. Or do business with us. Oran made them believe your name is cursed because of Conor. We’ll never win this war without enough weapons. We need to sell them and use them.”

My cousin’s name—Cash Kelly—appeared in my head. I’d thought about reachin’ out to him before. His Da, Ronan, had been in control of Hell’s Kitchen in New York and was well known, even in Ireland. Henry knew him because they were both known for explosives. But I was keepin’ Cash Kelly as a memory until I decided to bring him into my reality.

“Oran doesn’t have too many weaknesses,” Keenan continued, runnin’ a hand down his face. “He didn’t even when your Da dealt with him. It was almost impossible to get the gold out from underneath him even while the deal was still hot. After he got burned...he’s locked up even together now.”

Keenan continued to talk as if we were goin’ back and forth, comfortable with my silence. He did the same thing when he visited my parents on that hill in Ireland out of respect. He’d talk to them like they still existed in the world.

He talked to me the same way.

I stopped existin’ what felt like centuries ago.

A soft knock came at the door, and Fiona stepped into the room. She was soppin’ wet, like she’d been out in the snow and then stood before a fire. Water and blood dripped down her slick black apron. Her knives were secured around her waist in a scabbard. She held a clever in her hand.

“We have a situation. A car rammed the gate. The man is hurt.” She touched her head. “Needs stitches and medical attention. He’s askin’ for you, though.” She nodded at me. “You’ll know the name. Pauric Bell.”

It took Keenan a second to remember the name, but it came to me straight away. Pauric Bell worked for Oran Craig. He was a slight old man with eccentric tendencies. Everyone said he was a genius. Good with money. Not so much at

tinkerin' with things. Said he came from a long line of inventors.

Keenan repeated Pauric's history when it came to him a few seconds later. His eyes met mine. "A traitor to Oran's cause?" He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

I shook my head. *No*. I made no deals with any man lookin' for refuge from Oran Craig. I refused his sloppy seconds, and I'd never know how loyal the turncoat was. Craig might try to plant someone amongst us as a way inside.

Fiona gave Keenan a look. I knew it meant there was more, but she didn't continue.

"Let's hear him out before we do anythin' drastic," Keenan said. "Bell's different from the rest. He's deep inside of Oran's organization as a money man. He knows what he has in terms of cash. Who he deals with—on both sides of his businesses—but he doesn't draw blood."

Fiona turned and headed downstairs, Keenan on her heels. He was too fuckin' eager to hear Bell out. Just because the man wore goggles and had a genius IQ didn't mean he could be trusted.

And why had he rammed my gate? Seemed to me Bell was desperate. Desperate enough to ruin my property and gamble his life for whatever he needed.

He was sittin' at the dining room table, blood drippin' down his face from a gash on his head. His hands trembled as he lifted a cup to his mouth. Fiona had wrapped a shawl around his shoulders.

I growled at her some and she shrugged.

Bell's wide eyes were fixed on me when I turned mine back on him.

"Speak your business," Keenan said to him.

"I— I—" he stuttered, then he started to mumble, before words poured out of his mouth. "Oran Craig. Forcing my daughter into marriage. I refuse. Not going to happen. Dermot will only hurt her. I refuse!"

Keenan held up a hand, stoppin' his ramblin'. "Let me get this straight. Oran's forcin' your daughter into marriage with his son? Dermot?"

Bell nodded, a defeated look on his face. "In a week."

Keenan usually looked directly at me so he could gauge my reaction and respond accordingly. This time, he looked at Fiona, and her thick eyebrows went up. When Keenan finally looked at me, his face was almost glowin'.

Whatever was on his fuckin' mind was not happenin'. I wasn't in this to play games with Oran and his sons for women. I was in this to take Boston and every Craig, along with their men, to the grave.

End of story.

The Craigs could have Bell's daughter.

If Bell had been thinkin' clearly, he would have come to this conclusion before causin' trouble. His daughter wouldn't be with Dermot long anyway. Not after I destroyed them. And because the man showed up at my home, ruined my property, I was goin' to kill him. He reeked of Craig, and the stench was startin' to draw me closer.

Before I could move, Keenan glided in front of Bell's wimpy form. He held his hands up. His eyes said everythin' his mouth didn't. He didn't want to waste Bell's life.

If this was about the girl and the curse...I was goin' to fuckin' kill Keenan Ere.

Sidesteppin' Keenan, I hauled Bell up by the collar, and his wide eyes took me in as I lifted him off his feet some. Keenan kept step with me while I hauled his ass to the basement and threw him inside, lockin' the door behind me.

If this was Ireland, and we were at the castle, he'd be in a real cell.

"He's hurt, Cian." Keenan was at my heels. "Let Fiona look at him—"

I whirled on him so fast, he almost fell backward. Our eyes connected, and he read the violence behind mine. He lifted his

hands and walked around me, probably going to find Fiona.

I paced around my room.

Somethin' about this felt fuckin' off. Like everythin' we'd been doing to get to the Craigs was somehow thrown off by the night. Like my straight path was about to take a turn.

My anger turned on Bell for even comin' here.

A low growl trembled in my chest.

What the fuck did he want me to do about his daughter? Offer her protection? Steal her from Dermot?

That was petty shit. Shit for chancers and cheats.

I was neither.

I was nothin'.

Nothin' but a killer.

A killer who only had a heart to keep his body goin'.

If Bell thought he'd found the answer to his problem through me, he was sorely mistaken, and was about to pay for it.

Time didn't exist for me, except I knew I'd run out of it in this war if I couldn't get weapons soon. Bell had taken enough of it from me.

The storm outside had reached its crescendo. It was time to put Bell down.

As I reached the edge of the stairwell, activity from downstairs made me stop.

Keenan and Fiona rushed toward the front door, which was wide open, a slight form standin' in a twister of white flurries. There was no doubt Fiona and Keena let her in after Pauric had plowed over my gate. She held up a phone—shovin' it at their faces. She was screamin' at them over the whirlin' of the wind, but she sounded like she was underwater, muted.

Keena and Fiona took a step back when she took a step inside, shovin' the phone at them harder, turnin' to point over her shoulder, her mouth continuin' to shout.

Her eyes turned up toward the stairs and narrowed behind pink spectacles.

She was lookin' for someone.

She found me.

Her dark brown hair was twisted in a bun, a bunch of loose strands plastered to her fair skin from the slush and wind, and her eyes seemed light. Probably an electric blue.

The dull beat of that thin' in my chest started to pick up. Instead of *ba thump*, skip a few beats, *ba thump*, it went, *gung, gung, gung*. It worked overtime, like it was chasin' down prey.

My soul took a breath.

I could feel it inside of my lungs—fresh and new.

The blood in my veins rushed with heat.

My skin felt hot.

My ears cleared. No more clog.

Chaos exploded inside of my skull.

It sounded like the lowest of whispers were shouts, and I had to scare off the impulse to plug my ears. Even the scents in the air were fuckin' overwhelmin' me. Woodsmoke from fires and the scent of an electrical storm.

For a second, I wondered if I'd been struck by lightnin'.

Then I realized it was her.

The storm of life had entered my house.

CHAPTER 4

MAEVE

Something was wrong.

My dad was in trouble, I knew it. And he was in this mansion somewhere.

My eyes collided with a hulking form at the top of the steps.

The lights in the house flickered from the power of the storm. They simultaneously cloaked him in darkness and gave him glimmers of life.

My breath caught in my throat, my hand tightened around my phone, and I involuntarily took a step back when he started to move down the stairs.

Cillian—Cian—O’Callaghan.

The Beast of Boston.

No name had ever been more perfect for a man, though it had nothing to do with the way he looked.

He was tall and muscular, probably not an ounce of fat on his imposing form. His hair was such a light brown that it bordered on dark blonde. In the sun, it probably had tons of gold specks. But it was a mess, like he hadn’t had a haircut in years. The long, messy strands hid half of his face.

The other half...

Sharp features—especially his nose and cheekbones. A dusting of hair framed his jaw. He had a few grooves on his

forehead from what seemed like his eyebrows being perpetually narrowed in suspicion.

It made him seem...intense.

Cillian—Cian—O’Callaghan was beyond beautiful.

No use in denying the truth.

The one gray eye I could see, though...

It was dead.

The lights were on, but no one was home.

That was where I thought he got the name from. It was metaphorical, probably because of the way he conducted business. It didn’t seem like he’d mind tearing an entire village apart to get what he wanted. Like maybe he had Viking blood running through his veins.

I refused to move, though, even when he towered over me. Something inside of me had snapped on the drive over. I’d had enough of keeping quiet, of doing the avoidance dance with Dermot, and I wasn’t going to take it anymore.

If one of these bastards was going to kill me...I was going to go down fighting.

It had been hours since my dad had left our apartment, and he wasn’t answering his phone. I’d tracked him here. It took me longer than expected because the weather was bad, and I wasn’t familiar with the outskirts of Boston.

I’d finally found the address and found the gate broken. This place had zero lights on the outside. My dad’s stalled car took me by surprise, and I had to swerve. I’d hit a small bush in my rush down the long drive. It was surrounded by woods on either side. I ran the rest of the way on foot until I came to the mansion. The door was unlocked, so I’d let myself in.

Fear for my dad overrode any fear I had for myself.

Two people had met me at the door. A tall, thin man who walked a little off kilter, and a woman with crazed black hair and light brown eyes. She wore a butcher’s apron with blood on it. The knives were sheathed and attached to a leather belt.

I kept screaming at them to tell me where my dad was. He was here and I knew it, but they wouldn't tell me where he was. They kept whispering, saying little. Even from that short interaction, I could tell they both had thick Irish accents.

“Where’s my dad?” I held the phone up, close to the Beast’s face.

I’d decided then I wouldn’t give him the pleasure of calling him a beast again. He’d be a man. Just a man.

Cian O’Callaghan.

Even though his eyes were dull, a current of pain lit them up when I shouted at him. It was like the flickering of the lights. There and then gone.

A shouting voice inside of my head told me to shut up, to whisper the question, because he seemed truly unstable, but I was done.

I’d cracked, and the crazed part of me oozed to the surface. I wanted these people to tell me where my father was! He was all I had left, and it felt like he was slipping through my fingers.

“My dad! Where is he?” I shouted again, and this time a growl seemed to tremble deep inside Cian’s chest. He held his hands over his ears.

I looked at the man and woman who had met me at the door. They were huddled together, watching our interaction with what seemed like...fascination mixed with fear on their faces.

Why is he holding his head like that? Is there something wrong with him? Is he hearing impaired, maybe?

Instead of asking the questions, I found the courage to hold up my phone to the man and woman again, to prove I knew my father was in the mansion somewhere. The man took a step toward me, maybe to look at the phone closer.

Cian made one of those deep, growling noises in his chest again. The man held his hands up in a sign of surrender and took a step back.

Like a storm, Cian—what a gorgeous name for a man as beastly as him—blew around me and disappeared somewhere inside the mansion.

“Please,” I whispered to the man and woman after he’d gone. “My dad is all I have. I know he’s here. I tracked his phone, and his car is outside. He was coming here to talk to... Mr. O’Callaghan about the Craigs.”

“Oran is forcing you to marry Dermot,” the man said.

Melted ice slid down my cheeks like cold tears. I wiped my face. “In a week.”

The man turned and rushed after Cian, which left me alone with the woman. I was hoping she would have more compassion for my situation, but I wasn’t so sure. I couldn’t find any other word to describe her but *different*. And those knives she wore? They made me anxious. Her eyes kept darting around, like she was expecting someone to jump out at her. When they stilled on me, I wanted them to go back to darting around. It was like she was trying to get past my skin, her eyes as sharp as the blades she wore.

I wasn’t too proud to beg, and I was about to do just that when footsteps stopped me from opening my mouth. Cian was back, trailed by the other man. Cian held my dad by the collar and was dragging him down the hallway. I ran to him, falling to my knees, realizing he was bleeding from a gash on his head.

“Maeve,” he barely got out. “Why did you come here?”

“He needs help!” I looked up at Cian. I swallowed past the lump in my throat and lowered my voice. “*Please*. My dad... he needs help. He must have hit his head. *Please* let him go.”

A strike of lightning lit Cian’s face, almost making him look inhuman, before wind rattled the windows. His face seemed like it was made of stone.

The man stepped around Cian. “Here’s the thing, girl.” When he said *thing*, it sounded like *ting*. “You both trespassed on the property. Payment is due.”

“We don’t have that much money. Oran Craig keeps us living a rich lifestyle, as far as our apartment, and middleclass in all other aspects, but it’s all his.” That way we were always indebted to him. We lived in a stunning apartment, had drivers if we wanted them, enough food not to go hungry, but we had little in our bank account.

“Not that kind of payment.” The man ran a hand over his face. His short silver whiskers rasped against his palm. “Your Da is our prisoner—for now.”

Realization hit me as hard as a fist to the chest.

This was it. I was going to have to say goodbye to my dad. He’d gambled with his life by finding Cian O’Callaghan to reason with him so he could save me. But I refused to let these people keep him—or kill him. He might even die without medical help. I wasn’t sure why he couldn’t stand, and his head kept bleeding.

No. I refused to let my father die among strangers in this cold house.

I stood, even though I had no idea how I had. It felt like gravity was pressing down on me. “If a life is the cost of trespassing, then take mine. I’ll trade places with my father. I’d rather die than marry Dermot Craig anyway.”

“Maeve!” my father growled, trying to get to his feet. But he was too weak. He probably had a concussion. “No. I won’t let you do this! Don’t listen to her, O’Callaghan! It’s me you want!”

The man looked at Cian.

Cian’s face was still hard, and his eyes were narrowed, making the grooves in his forehead even deeper.

Cian nodded, and my fate was sealed.

It’s better this way. I wouldn’t have to suffer a slow, poisonous death while Dermot kissed my lips and took my body for his own pleasure.

Maybe Cian O’Callaghan would be more humane.

He’d kill me quickly.

My father wailed, like I'd fallen to the floor and would never rise again.

Before I could react, the man hauled my dad up and whisked him out into the storm. The woman wrapped her arms around my waist before I collapsed.

CHAPTER 5

MAEVE

My dad was gone. I was never going to see him again.

I held all the emotions in while the woman held me. It was awkward, and I was sure she was doing it to restrain me, but for some reason I thought she was doing it to be nice too. Maybe like she was trying to offer comfort and really didn't know how.

It seemed like after she knew the man had taken my father away for good, she set me on my feet. She took me by the hand and led me up the steps to a bedroom.

It was fancy, nicely decorated, with a huge four poster bed in the center. I craved to crawl on top, break to pieces, then wait for numbness to settle over me. Then maybe Cian O'Callaghan would do to me what he'd planned to do to my father.

Kill me.

The woman seemed to be hesitating at the door. I turned toward her before she could leave. "Can I have your name?" I whispered.

She touched a knife, like a nervous person would touch a security blanket, before she gave it to me. "Fiona Plum."

"Ms. Plum, is that man taking my dad to the hospital?"

"The name is Fiona. And that man is Keenan Ere. He'll take Pauric to the hospital, then to a safe house after. Or maybe he will throw him out at Oran's doorstep with a message. Cian Cillian O'Callaghan, who they call the Beast of

Boston, has *what* belonged to them. You. That's the deal you made with the Beast."

My head rushed with questions, but I held my tongue. I hadn't even had a chance to think that far ahead—the fate of my father if I wasn't around to marry Dermot.

Maybe Cian would send them my body in a bag as revenge. Then my dad would be off the hook. He'd be considered a victim instead of a martyr for his daughter's cause.

For a brief second, I considered my life, and all the things I was going to miss and all the things I'd never experience.

I'd miss my dad.

I'd miss Delaney and the bookstore.

I'd miss falling in love with a new world and the people on the page within it for the umpteenth time.

I'd never been *in* love with an actual man, and for some reason, that was the only regret I had. Something I wished I could have experienced. Even the heartbreak of it because that meant someone had meant something to me.

Delaney called me a true romantic. I was. I didn't regret not traveling more, or spending more money, or going to wild parties or college.

It hurt that my heart had never experienced romantic love before. The true kind. I'd always assumed I had more time. That soulmates found each other at any age.

The thought was too depressing, so I switched gears.

I wondered when Cian was going to get it over with. Or maybe Fiona was going to chop me up with her knives.

"I have never heard anyone demand anything of him until this stormy night," Fiona whispered, apropos of nothing, then shut the door. I heard the lock rattle and then a definite *click*. She'd locked me inside the room.

I flung myself on the bed and cried into the pillow. I cried for so long that I'd made a gully inside of my heart and had

nothing left to give—physically, mentally, or emotionally.

A few hours must've passed when I heard the lock turn and Fiona stepped back in. She poked me, but I was too tired to turn and face her. When she shook me, I moaned, and a tear slipped down my cheek. My glasses were skewed on my face but still on.

She sighed and left the room. A minute later, I was being hoisted from the bed by two strong arms. I blinked, trying to wake myself up.

Cian looked down at me, his brow furrowed, before he turned his eyes away from my face and forward.

Maybe this was it.

My last walk.

My entire body trembled in his arms, like my muscles were being shocked.

Cian took each step down carefully, then walked out the open front door. Heavy pellets of snow fell against my face, but they weren't coming down as manically as before. The storm had slowed down. A hard breeze moved the tendrils of hair from my bun, and they stuck to my face, clinging for life. I had a feeling we were close to morning. The night had thinned some.

Keenan opened the door to a dark SUV with tinted windows, and Cian stepped inside. He set me on a seat and then turned to look out the window.

“Where are we going?” My voice reflected my heart. Broken.

He didn't answer. No one did. The car was silent except for the occasional squeak of the windshield wipers.

About an hour later, we pulled up to a private airport and drove around back, where an airplane waited on a tarmac.

Where the hell is he taking me?

If it was out of Massachusetts, that would only be the second time I'd left the state. I went with Delaney for a

weekend away to New York the year before. She attended a bookstore convention. That was what she'd called it, but it was more of a book lovers' intervention—with each other. Which meant...they talked about buying more books.

I'd done okay on the plane ride to New York, but it was a short flight, and I knew where I was landing. It felt like a great adventure. But this? This felt like whatever the opposite of that was. A great doom?

Keenan parked. Fiona slid out first. She had a black crossbody purse across her all-black outfit. It looked like it was made from a fish net and tulle. Cian stepped out next. I gasped some when his arms came back into the SUV and he slid me toward him. He hauled me up like he had at his house and kept me locked in his arms.

"I can walk." I pushed against his chest, but he ignored me, moving toward the plane.

The wind picked up and brought what felt like a gush of cold with it. He was warm, and I couldn't help it. I huddled closer to him, tucking my head underneath his chin, his wild hair tickling my face.

Everyone called him the Beast of Boston, but he didn't smell like one. He smelled woody, with a hint of musk.

After he climbed the steps to the plane, he planted me in a seat, strapped me in, then took the one across from me. He turned his face toward the window.

The sun was just starting to rise, and it fell on him, giving life to all the details that were masked by the night.

He was even more gorgeous than he'd been in the darkness. Even though what I could see of his eyes were dull, like the light had burnt out in them, they were the most gorgeous color I'd ever seen. Gray with a black ring around them. It made them pop against his golden skin.

He turned his face forward and caught me staring. I turned my attention to Fiona. After Keenan had boarded, she'd taken the seat next to me. She closed her eyes and relaxed as the plane took off. I didn't particularly like this part. I'd read that

this was one of the most dangerous moments of flying. The takeoff and the landing.

I started to twirl the ring around my finger.

A few minutes later, we were in the air. Fiona opened her eyes and dug in her fishnet bag. She pulled out a book. From the outside, it looked like a hardback cookbook, but I noticed the book inside didn't match the cover.

She was reading a romance book and hiding it. She'd carved out a perfect square to tuck the smaller book in.

"I love those," I whispered to her.

It took her a second to pull her eyes away from the story and meet mine.

"Do you happen to have an extra?" I asked.

She blinked at me before she dug in her purse again and handed me another hardback. The cover had a knife on it, but tucked inside was an old, worn-down Harlequin.

I had no problem reading my romance books in public. There was nothing embarrassing about love, but Cian and Keenan didn't seem like the romantic types. I could understand why Fiona hid them. She might lose a little of her badass essence if they knew what she was reading.

It didn't take me long to get lost inside the pages. It was about a villain who stole the heroine from the hero and held her captive. There wasn't really a hero in my story, but...the storyline felt close to home, and I looked up to steal a glance at Cian.

That gray eye was staring at me.

No.

More than staring.

It was studying me.

It felt like that anyway.

His eye flicked down for a second, then slammed into mine again. I realized I must have been nervously playing with

the ring while I read.

I met his stare and raised my chin a little. I wasn't sure why he was studying me, but it made my heart pump faster and my stomach drop, like we'd hit a pocket of air and the plane lost some altitude before it leveled again.

A man had never elicited a physical reaction from me like that before. My body felt alive, like an electrical current ran between us. I wasn't sure what to do about it, or how to make it stop.

Neither one of us was looking away.

To add to the oddity of the situation, anger coursed through me too. I was this man's prisoner, and I hated it.

And to think, less than twenty-four hours ago, I was thankful for Cian Cillian O'Callaghan's name at the Craig's table. It had stopped Dermot's hand from roaming up my leg, along with all the wedding talk.

A flight attendant emerged from the back of the plane. I hadn't moved my eyes from his, but I heard her talking about breakfast. The only reason I broke eye contact first was because she went to set a tray of food down in front of Cian, and he held his hand up. She pulled the tray back a second before he could knock it out of her hand.

He nodded toward me. She looked between us, clearly unsure about what he wanted.

Keenan cleared his throat. "He'd like the lady—" he nodded toward me "—to eat first."

I shook my head. "I'm not hungry."

Cian nodded, as if to say, *you are and you'll eat.*

"I'm not." That was sort of a lie. I didn't have much of an appetite, but my stomach was about to start growling. I could feel it twisting and turning, gearing up to make some noise. The last time I'd eaten was at the Craig's.

Cian growled low in his throat. To retaliate, I crossed my arms over my chest. Maybe it was a small thing, but I was the only one in control of when I ate. He wasn't going to force

that on me. And why did he care if I ate or not? Was he going to try to fatten me up like a turkey before he killed me?

The panic on the stewardess face was clear. She had no clue what to do with the tray. Keenan had pity on her and told her to bring the tray to me. As soon as she set it down, I handed it to Fiona.

Cian stood up so fast in his seat, the stewardess gasped. I stood up too. He towered over me.

“Where are you taking me?” I didn’t yell, but my voice didn’t break either. It was doing a good job of hiding the panic inside of my heart. I had nothing to lose if this man was going to kill me anyway, right?

He was breathing heavy, his chest heaving, and I could feel his cool, minty breath on my face. He was tense, the veins in his neck swollen, and so were the ones in his arms and hands. His fists were clenched at his sides.

I looked at Keenan. Again, he was taking us in with a mixture of fascination and fear, but this time, it was more fascination. I sensed it when Cian gave a subtle nod. Permission for Keenan to speak.

“Éire,” Keenan said.

“Ireland?” I translated. My father spoke Gaelic Irish, and I knew some of the words.

“That’s what I said.” He tucked his cap over his eyes and relaxed in his seat.

This beautiful brute was taking me all the way to Ireland? For what? I wanted to ask, but I had a feeling I wasn’t going to get more answers, seeing as Cian’s mouthpiece was starting to snore. It didn’t seem like Fiona spoke for Cian like Keenan did.

I went to move around Cian, but he blocked me. “I need to use the bathroom.” I had to look up to meet his eye, and it was as hard as stone. It was such a shame for this man to cover his face like he did with all that hair. It was gorgeous, and tamed, it might suit him, but as it was...it wasn’t working for him.

He refused to move.

“You can check me for a parachute, if you want, but I swear I don’t have one. I don’t have hidden wings, either, just in case you were wondering. And since I don’t have either...I won’t be jumping anytime soon.”

Fiona chuckled. Cian and I both turned toward the noise. It sounded rusty, unused, but I was sure that was what I’d heard. Cian’s brow furrowed, but he moved some and let me pass.

I really had to go, and I was in desperate need of some alone time. Everything had happened so fast the night before, and even though I knew this was my reality, it didn’t feel all that real at times. It was like my mind was protecting my heart—which felt directly connected to my sanity. Because when small pieces of reality would sneak through, it hurt so bad I could barely breathe.

A few minutes later, a knock came at the door so hard, if my skin wasn’t encasing my bones, and my bones my heart, everything inside of me would have jumped out of my body. It couldn’t even be considered a knock. It was a bang. I flung open the door, and Cian stood on the other side of it.

What was his problem? Why was he being so clingy? We were on a plane, a thousand miles up in the air, not even halfway to Ireland!

He nodded toward my seat. Out of sheer defiance, I took my sweet time getting there. As soon as I sat down, he took over buckling my seatbelt, like I didn’t know how to do it myself. Our fingers fought some over who was going to do it.

He won—he got me buckled in before I could. He stormed back to his seat and grunted as he sat. It was almost a triumphant sound.

Fiona handed me the book she’d given me before with a tiny smile on her face. At Chapter Eight, I fell into a deep sleep. I wasn’t sure how long I was out, but when I woke up, the sky was dark, and the entire plane was being jostled around.

Keenan was still sleeping. Fiona was laughing some, but her hands had turned into claws, and they were digging into the arms of her seat. Cian's eyes were on me again.

The pilot came over the speaker and said we were going to have to land somewhere else—in Wales.

I gasped when the plane dropped and then came back up. Oxygen bags popped from the ceiling, but no one was making a move to put them on.

Fear had paralyzed me. I couldn't move.

Cian moved across the aisle. He towered over Fiona until she grabbed her bag and took his seat. He sat next to me, his big hand close to mine. His fingers were long and elegantly shaped for a man of his size, but not too thin. Even though we were in a hunk of metal with wings, caught in a storm, he showed no outward sign of distress.

It was like he didn't care if we lived or died.

The plane felt like it got sucked down again, and my hand shot out, clinging to his. I closed my eyes and held on. He started to move the ring around my finger, but other than that, he was as still as a stone statue.

CHAPTER 6

MAEVE

It was understandable that people who operated in criminal worlds probably had a more relaxed stance when it came to death. It seemed like a job hazard. But that was a harrowing experience on the plane, and I was the only one who wanted to kiss the ground when we stepped off it.

Fiona, Keenan, and Cian acted like it hadn't even happened. It was business as usual.

I couldn't seem to shake the feeling of being jostled. Maybe because something felt like it had been knocked loose inside of me, and it had nothing to do with the plane.

It was Cian O'Callaghan.

The feel of him turning my ring still echoed along my skin.

How could I even come to terms with whatever this attraction was toward him when he was the one who was going to end my life? And why take me all the way to Ireland to do it?

My thoughts circled around and around as we drove to wherever Cian was taking me. It felt like we'd been in the car for hours. After Wales, the Irish countryside passed in a blur outside my window, except for when we had to stop while a bunch of cows meandered across the road. We finally turned down a long drive.

At the end of it was a castle.

Even though the sun was probably about to set, the place seemed cloaked in darkness, like it hid too many secrets to

allow the sun to make it glow.

Still, it was breathtaking in a way nineteenth-century places usually are. Probably because they had the strength to stand all those years and not crumble under life's hardships.

Cian parked the car, and Keenan stepped out. He met a plump woman who wore a comfortable house dress with an apron over it. Her hair was pulled back and time was starting to fade the red in it.

She waved and I waved back. She turned and headed back inside.

She was the first person in Cian's crew who didn't seem to fit. She seemed too...friendly, like a sweet grandmother.

I felt the weight of Cian's stare on the side of my face. When I turned, I met his visible eye in the mirror. The entire drive, he kept stealing glances at me.

Maybe he thought I was going to be a flight risk and try to jump out of the car.

I held his stare until he stepped out and shut the door. Then I wilted in my seat some. I forced myself to grab Fiona's arm before she left me in the car.

"Why did he take me to Ireland if he's going to kill me?" I whispered.

She looked at my arm, and I moved my hand.

"What are you goin' on about? Kill you?"

"That was the deal. The payment. A life for a life."

"For your father. Not for you."

"I don't understand."

"What's there not to understand? He's not going to kill you. He's going to marry you."

"Ma—" Before I could repeat her words, she was out of the car and I was left alone.

Marry me.

Marry me!

The thought sent me into a panic. One much worse than when Dermot told me he was going to marry me. I wasn't sure why, but Fiona's news hit me harder for some reason.

Cian Cillian O'Callaghan was going to become my entire future.

The fear the thought caused went straight to my bones. Because even though I'd never been in love, I understood attraction. It was there between us, and it was strong. And the way Cian looked at me didn't feel normal. Maybe he was worried I'd run, but I couldn't shake the feeling it was because he didn't want me too far away.

When I was afraid on the plane, and he'd turned my ring, his touch had been nice.

No, more than nice.

It had soothed my soul.

Such an odd thing to feel, but I couldn't describe it any other way. He'd stolen all my panic and made me feel like I was going to be okay, but only if he was next to me.

He was strong.

Capable.

He'd take care of me.

Looking at him was like opening the first page to a love story written just for me. I could smell the scent of new pages, but the words were spelled out in ancient ink. He was thrilling, a grand new adventure, with all the romance a romantic like me could dream of.

Those butterflies with wings inked with my favorite quotes seemed to flutter the old excerpts off, showcasing their cream, pristine patterns, ready for me to start new canvases with my favorite lines from my own love story.

No.

Noo.

Nooo.

This was such madness!

Not falling in love had been a regret when I thought I was dying. Since that wasn't my reality, and marriage to the Beast of Boston was...

I was totally freaking out.

I wasn't afraid of him, but of my feelings.

Marriage meant love to me. A vow of eternity. He'd take my body, but what about the rest of me?

I'd considered death and what it had meant. I had to switch gears and consider life with him and what it would mean.

If eyes were the windows to soul, his were crusted over with gray ice and frozen shut.

How was a mere human woman supposed to pry them open?

The car door flew opened and Cian took me in, like maybe I had changed in the last few minutes, and he was searching for the difference. If he noticed anything different, it was going to be the panic crawling up my chest, about to seize my throat. I hoped my eyes hid the signs of strangulation well.

Even though I'd only met him, I sensed that he was about to reach for me. It was like he'd take a breath before hauling me up. I went to step out of the SUV on my own, but he blocked me.

What's the issue? I was about to ask. *I can't run. And even if I did, there's nowhere for me to run to.* The castle was set on acres, and the land backed up to mountains. It seemed like a water source was close, maybe on the other side. The fresh scent of water flowed through the chilled air. The castle was secluded and well-fortified against enemies. But the words stumbled around in my brain as I got lost in his stare.

How am I going to survive this?

Whatever was going on between us was so...intense, it was hard to breathe. It was like a constant tease of the moment before we'd kiss.

A whimper escaped my mouth. His eyes flew down to the sound. His head tilted and his nostrils flared. I was trying to understand him, how his mind worked and how his mouth seemed not to, and it seemed like...he was trying to understand me too.

There was something so primal about this man. It was like he was raised in the forest around the castle, and someone had plucked him out of the wild and set him down in a busy city bustling with people. I wasn't sure if he could talk or not. He'd responded to the noise I'd made—but maybe it was my lips. Could he even hear me?

It was like he could hear my thoughts, or maybe my eyes had probed too deep into his. His gaze flew to the side, a frustrated noise coming from his throat. It was close to a growl. He stared into the distance for a few seconds before he stepped away from the door and let me out.

“Come on.” Keenan gestured to the castle. “Let’s give you the tour.”

Keenan and Fiona went in ahead of us. Cian followed behind, but he wasn't far. I could feel his stare on my back. He was watching my every move.

“Castle Beatha.” Keenan nodded to nowhere in particular as we entered. “It has been in the O’Callaghan family since it was built in the 1800s. Cian O’Callaghan built it for his wife—Beatha. The castle has a lot of history, but it can keep for a while longer.”

It was exactly how I pictured an Irish castle would look—stone walls, massive rustic fireplaces, even sconces on the walls for candles. The furniture was antique, and the fabrics looked rich.

It was romantic.

Also...huge. It had *wings*.

“You’re welcome to any rooms except for the ballroom on the West Side.”

“Why? Is it being worked on or something?”

Keenan ran a hand over his face. “You’re just not allowed. No one is. But if ballrooms tickle your fancy, we have another.”

Cian came to stand next to Keenan. He crossed his muscular arms over his equally muscular chest. It was like he was daring me to fight him on this, to push the issue. It was his castle, though. I was just a prisoner who’d be shackled to him through marriage at some point.

I shrugged. “No ballroom on the West Side. Got it.” I wasn’t even sure whether I could decipher east from west, but I didn’t plan on exploring. I’d probably need a map.

“I’m sure you want to wash up,” Keenan said. “Beatrice—that’s Mrs. Sweetman—set everything up for you before we landed.”

Keenan led me to a bedroom. At the end of the hallway, doors were shut to another room. I wondered if it was Cian’s. It seemed like it would be the master suite.

Cian opened the door to the bedroom. It was lavish. The wallpaper was robin’s egg blue, and the entire room had gold touches. Little porcelain doe figurines were placed around on the furniture, and a four-poster bed made for a princess sat in the center. A desk was placed in front of a window. Green stretched as far as the eye could see. A murky lake—or was it a lough in Ireland?—broke it up. I wondered if, on a cloudless day with blue skies, would it still be that color?

Beatrice—Mrs. Sweetman—hustled up to us. She smiled at me and introduced herself, shaking my hand so vigorously, she shook me. “You have fresh clothes. I’m pretty sure they’ll all fit, lovey. I’m sure you’re famished from the long plane ride. Dinner will be ready in an hour.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, “but I’m not hungry.”

Cian stepped in front of me when I went to step into the room. I looked into that frosted gray window, and for a color so cold, I could’ve sworn a fire burned behind it at my defiance.

Keenan cleared his throat. “Mrs. Sweetman is a good cook, girl. You don’t want to miss her meals.”

“I’m not hungry,” I said more forcefully, refusing to move my stare.

A low growl trembled in Cian’s throat.

I crossed my arms over my chest.

This time, the noise he made was deep and angry, and he threw a hand up before he marched toward the room at the end of the hall and slammed the door. I marched into mine and shut the door behind me. I had my own bathroom, but I couldn’t find the energy to take a bath yet. I flung myself on the bed and closed my eyes, wishing for sleep to take me.

I wished I could wake up when this was all over.

A knock came at the door. It was like my bones weighed double what they used to, and I had to use all my strength to pick myself up from the bed.

Mrs. Sweetman smiled at me. “Mr. O’Callaghan would prefer if you ate with him, dear.”

I looked toward his room. The doors were still shut.

“I don’t mean to put you in the middle of this, but...you can tell Mr. O’Callaghan I’ll eat when I’m hungry.”

She looked down the hallway, her eyes lingering on his door for a few seconds. It was like she was preparing to say something she didn’t want to, but after she sighed, she only nodded and walked away.

I shut the door behind her and took a seat on the bed. A few seconds later, the door rattled, and I heard the lock *click*.

The brute himself had probably locked me inside the room.

Good.

Even though everything around me screamed riches, I was still in a prison, no matter how fancy it looked. I let my bones take me down and closed my eyes.

CHAPTER 7

CIAN

C haos.

It ruled inside of my head ever since she blew into my world.

Long, shimmerin', dark-brown hair that reminded me of chestnuts in fall. Electric blue eyes that were created from a storm. And a sweet but woody scent that was subtle enough to linger on my clothes and skin without bein' obvious about it. It was like the ticklin' of someone else's long hair on my body, and I couldn't seem to find it to remove it.

She was...intoxicatin'. Like her name.

Maeve Rose Bell.

I couldn't get her out of my head. I couldn't concentrate on anythin' else.

Like an endless ring, she kept drivin' me out of my fuckin' mind and straight back to her.

She was so fuckin' infuriatin'.

I didn't need this complication in my life. This distraction.

But I couldn't deny myself.

I wanted her.

I'd kill to have her. I'd kill to keep her.

I stopped midway up the hill. I was retracin' the steps I'd taken after my parents were killed, headin' to their final restin' place.

A reminder of all I'd lost and why I was still standin'.

For revenge.

That thing in my chest, though? It felt like it was stretchin', and I needed to get back to her before it snapped, and I lost the connection.

The thought of anythin' happenin' to her...I closed my eyes and breathed in deep, trying to control the feelings I'd buried for so long, but images started to haunt me.

Maeve screamin' my name in fear.

Her blood bein' spilled, runnin' along the floor in black rivers.

Her eyes closin'.

Feelin' her last breath wash over my lips.

Her body turnin' cold.

Havin' to give her to the frozen ground.

A noise tore away from my chest like it was bein' forced out, and I started back toward the castle.

So much fuckin' chaos.

I stopped and held my hands over my head, tryin' to drown out the noise. Tryin' to drown out life.

I turned and ran up the hill, only stoppin' when I came to the stone fence. The skeletons of wildflowers dotted the grass, and they waved with a gust of wind.

Three stone crosses were planted in the center. One for each of my parents, and one for the siblin' I'd never know. Fiona thought Mam would have wanted it that way.

We'd buried them in the same spot I'd run to.

We'd buried them with all that was left of that boy.

I came back to the spot often as a reminder, but I was bein' reminded of more than just a vendetta, and I didn't like it.

The memories, they were replayin' on repeat, but with Maeve's face.

It was makin' my head throb.

I started back for the castle. I needed to be close to her.

She needed to eat. She needed to stay healthy and alive.

Fuck.

What had I done to myself?

It was like she'd stuck a hook inside of me and was reelin' me in. And I couldn't seem to find it to pull it out. To set myself free.

The power had swung to the queen's court. She ruled me.

Keenan fell in step with me. "She's still in her room. Walk with me."

Instead of goin' back inside the castle, we rounded the property and walked to the lough. We stopped when we came to the bank.

He stared down at the water, his reflection swayin'. "I thought it was brilliant, myself, for Conor to hide the gold in the lough."

Oran's gold. The reason he sent men to kill my parents. To make an example of them. I hadn't heard of anyone stealin' from him since.

My Da had only stolen all of the gold after Oran reneged on the deal he'd cut with my Da. Oran had a lot of resources, and my Da was goin' to use them in return for givin' him a portion of the haul. It was a lucky day when a man cut a fair deal with Oran Craig, though.

"Ah well." Keenan sounded wistful and regretful like he always did when he brought up my parents. He looked me in the eyes. "I assume Dermot is havin' a conniption fit right about now. He really wanted the girl. This is a win for our side."

Maeve wasn't a prize of war. She had nothin' to do with the Craigs. And they would never have anythin' to do with her ever again.

I turned toward the castle and looked up at her window. It was fuckin' pathetic that a pain shot through my chest when I found it empty. I thought she'd love the view.

"You have many thoughts in your eyes, Cian Cillian O'Callaghan. None of them havin' to do with this war."

A minute or two passed. Keenan cleared this throat. "Some advice? Get to know the girl. She enjoys readin' and woodworkin'. Seems like a romantic soul, this Maeve."

I looked away from the window and at him.

He grinned. "I talked to Pauric. Asked him a few questions. She worked at The Belle of Boston bookstore. Loved her job. In her spare time, she created little wooden figurines. Perhaps I can talk Pauric into sendin' the ones she was still workin' on. Give her a piece of home."

I nodded.

Keenan was a loyal man, but I knew his interest in this part of my life was somewhat selfish. He, Fiona, and Henry believed in the old woman's curse. But I didn't believe in curses—they were the stuff fairy tales were made of. Everythin' that had happened to them was by coincidence.

Since I couldn't seem to tear myself away from Maeve, my feelings were workin' in their favor.

"Cian."

Keenan stopped me before I went back into the castle.

"You have a wicked temper, my lad. Keep it under control around the lady, aye? We don't need her tryin' to run off if you scare her."

Scare her? I made a sarcastic throaty sound. No one had ever stood up to me the way she had. She showed no fear when it came to her father. She seemed loyal. Her love was strong and unwaverin'. Or she wouldn't have traded places with him.

Her life for his.

The strike on eatin', though? Was going to fuckin' stop, even if I had to feed her myself.

Beatrice was whistlin' in the kitchen while she worked. Had she always done it? If so, I was just noticin' it. Beatrice was Henry's wife, and she had worked for me for years, helpin' him take care of the castle. But when Maeve entered the castle, I wanted her on full time. Beatrice was...normal.

Maeve would need it.

Fiona looked up, just with her eyes, when I pointed to a plate.

"Two plates." Fiona held up two fingers to Beatrice. "One for Cian and one for Maeve."

Beatrice nodded and made two plates. She set them on a tray with drinks, and even added a small crystal vase with a single red rose in it.

I carried it with me to Maeve's room. I set it on a table in the hallway and then unlocked her door. I banged on it.

No answer.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

"Go away!" she yelled at me. "I'm not hungry!"

"You—" The word was almost out, but it collided with the frustrated noise I made, and the sound ate it up. I grabbed the tray, pushed open the door to her room, and stormed inside.

She was gettin' to a sittin' position on the bed. She still had the same clothes on, and her glasses were askew on her nose. More long tendrils fell around her face. The bun was almost nonexistent.

For as soft as her beauty was, it was a constant shock to my system. It almost made me stumble. I held on to the tray even harder. Maybe it would even bend or snap from the pressure.

I shoved it at her when I got close enough. She shoved it back and stood.

"I'm. *Not*. Hungry."

She punctuated each word, like I didn't understand what she was sayin'. I understood words perfectly. Just because I chose not to speak didn't mean meanings were lost on me. I could feel out any man in a room and know his intentions before anyone else.

Listenin'. Watchin'. Learnin'.

It had made me an extremely smart man.

I stomped over to the desk and set the tray down. I faced the window, closed my eyes, pinched the bridge of my nose, and took deep breaths.

Keenan was right. I had to cool my temper, or she might run if I scared her. She didn't seem easily shaken, but I didn't want her to fear me.

I wanted to be her king, to earn her love and loyalty.

I also wanted her to eat. I knew she had to be hungry. She was just doin' this to prove a point. I wouldn't allow it to be at her expense.

Her footsteps were light as she moved closer. Her sweet woody scent breezed past as she came to stand next to me.

She crossed her arms over her chest, and thoughts seemed to move across her electric blue eyes. Then whatever she'd decided on made her sigh and relax her stance. She fixed her glasses and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Would it be possible to let my dad know I'm okay?"

In response, I slid the tray closer to her.

She shook her head, already sayin' no. She opened her mouth to probably say she wasn't hungry again, but before she could, I swiped up some mashed potatoes with a finger and stuck it in her mouth.

Her eyes grew wide and she stilled, not even takin' a breath, until I moved my finger in deeper and made her take the food. Her eyes fluttered shut. Her tongue swirled and her teeth grazed, and when I went to slide it out, her lips closed.

I hissed out a breath. I hadn't intended it to be sexual, but my cock was so hard, it was painful. Her mouth was warm and

wet, and her tongue stroked my skin.

Her eyes flew open, and she took a step back. She took a few deep breaths. “If I eat...” Her voice trembled. “Will you let my dad know?”

She was gettin’ the hang of talkin’ to me—in my own way.

I nodded and pulled out the chair for her. I took a decorative chair and set it on the opposite side of the desk and took a seat. She took everythin’ off the tray but the vase with the rose. She slid my plate and drink closer to me and took hers. I set the vase in the center of the desk, then put the tray to the side.

She ate slowly, her eyes risin’ to meet mine every so often. Maybe because I was almost inhalin’ the food compared to her. It had been hours since the last time I’d had somethin’ to eat. And food was nothin’ but fuel to keep me movin’. I never really tasted it.

Or maybe it was somethin’ else entirely.

Whenever our eyes collided, my chest tightened, and it was hard to breathe.

Dinner was silent, but words were worthless anyway. I couldn’t hear over the roarin’ of that thing in my chest. And if her heart was the same—neither could she.

CHAPTER 8

MAEVE

Love is a language, and it's universally spoken, even if with different accents. That was something I'd learned from reading so many romance books. That, and that love is always unique to each couple.

I wasn't sure if Cian knew how to speak any language, much less love. I'd been at the castle for a week, and for the entire week, he never said a word to me, just stuck close.

A few times a grin came to my face when I thought of Delaney and what she would have to say about it.

Looks like you have a stage-five clinger on your hands, my beautiful turtle.

She'd say that about Robert when he'd start to get clingy. *Stage-five clinger here!* Robert was a mood-clinger, though. The impulse came and went with him.

It seemed like it might be a permanent thing for Cian.

Maybe that was why I studied him as much as he studied me. I wanted to know who he was.

He was silent—by choice or not—but the people around him never had an issue understanding what he wanted. And for such an odd group, they seemed to work as a family. They all seemed to watch out for each other.

For a man who was dubbed the Beast of Boston, he had loyalty. I thought that said a great deal about his character. I just wished I knew what was going on. On a deeper level, something haunted the castle, and at times it felt dark and cold,

but everyone was tight-lipped, and it reminded me of how much of an outsider I was.

As far as I could tell, I was going to be with Cian indefinitely, and maybe I shouldn't have wanted to know more about him, but I did. I wanted to know what had happened in the castle to make it feel perpetually chilled. I wanted to know if Cian could talk, and if so, why wasn't he talking to me?

My curiosity wasn't exactly a choice. There was something inside of me pulling me toward him. Whatever it was sparked my hunger for information, even if my brain tried to warn me to leave him alone.

He seemed like a lonesome soul. Someone who could spend hours inside of his head, and without a book to root him there. Even though my initial thought had been that the lights were on but no one was home, I'd been wrong. I got the feeling his mind was a trap, and he was caught inside of it. But he'd made himself at home in the prison.

Yeah, he was silent, but by no means simple. There were intelligent thoughts behind that frozen-over gray window. Maybe because at times, he warmed enough to let me see through it.

It was momentary glimpses that I was starting to live for.

When Keenan talked to him, mostly by the lough, I could see his words filtering into Cian's head, and he'd make his choice based on whatever he was thinking and feeling. His brow furrow told me it was something he'd have to think about or something he didn't like. If he stared at me, his stance relaxed, I knew he either expected the news from Keenan or already had an answer.

Or like the first dinner we'd shared in my room, at the desk. It was only the two of us. No words had been spoken, but...it only made the intensity of the connection between us even stronger.

Especially after he'd fed me a bite of mashed potatoes. The moment kept replaying in my head more than it should have. It made my body feel things only my romance books had.

A man had never touched my body in a sexual way, but when Cian looked at me, it felt like he was.

His hands were huge, his skin taut, and I found myself staring at them when he did the simplest things—like pick up a fork to eat—or when he fixed something around the castle. Even the thought of him touching me like he did those things made me breathless.

I craved his touch.

I craved to see his face, to finally look into both of his eyes, like maybe that would reveal to me who he truly was. Maybe his hair hid that part of his face because it was the most vulnerable.

I craved to know all of him.

The thought of him made me stir in bed.

Ever since the dinner we'd shared, I felt restless. I couldn't wait for the night to be over so I could spend time with him.

The sun was just coming up over the castle, and the green grass and lough glowed from the early morning light. I twisted my hair into a messy bun as I went to the window and looked out. It was one of my favorite views in the castle. It was peaceful and gave me a sense that all was going to be okay. The only thing missing was...him. He was usually below the window when I came to it each morning, a cup of coffee in his hand, waiting for me to rise with the day.

I rushed to my door and flung it open. "Ah!" I jumped back a step.

He was standing next to the door, his back against it, his visible eye closed. Had he been sleeping standing up? He wasn't sleeping anymore. His eye was wide, like he wasn't expecting me to rush the door.

I looked down before I could meet his eyes. "I thought something was wrong..." I didn't want to admit that I'd missed him waiting for me below the window. It was embarrassing.

He tapped his wrist.

“Yeah,” I breathed. “I know. I overslept.”

He nodded at what I’d said, then nodded downstairs. He was reminding me we had plans. Mrs. Sweetman, who had insisted I call her Beatrice, had suggested a trip to Galway the day before, probably the biggest city close to wherever we were. She said I needed to pick out clothes of my own. Cian had nodded, and that was that.

“Ahh...” I hesitated. “I mean...” I couldn’t find the right way to say this. Words were tripping me up.

His eye widened.

“I know. I know.” I closed my eyes...*just spit it out, Maeve*. “Would you let me fix your hair?” My eyes popped open right after the words flew out.

His eye was lowered. He seemed to be thinking.

A breath.

Two.

Three.

He nodded.

“Really?”

He shrugged.

“Okay! I asked Beatrice to let me use the computer and I did some research. I don’t think I’m going to mess it up, but I thought this certain style would look so good on you.” He followed behind me as I headed toward the bathroom. He even stopped at the side table in the bedroom with me for the second it took to slide my glasses on.

As I pulled out the vanity seat, he turned and left.

“That was rude,” I whispered to myself. “He could have just not agreed.”

A minute later, he was back. He handed me a razor that folded, like the ones barbers use.

“Ahh...” I trailed. “Um, did Fiona give you this?”

He nodded.

“That explains a lot.” I bit the side of my cheek, worried he’d decide not to do it, since I really hadn’t thought it out.

A knock came at the bathroom door, and I sighed at who came through it. Beatrice. She had an entire haircutting kit, one that wouldn’t involve me cutting his scalp and causing him bodily harm.

She set it on the counter. “Thought you might need this.”

“I do. Thank you!”

She winked at me but didn’t let Cian see.

“All right.” I clapped my hands together. “Take a seat.”

He did, almost mechanically. He blinked at himself in the mirror and then closed his eye.

“Cian,” I whispered, my hand barely touching him as I set a towel around his neck.

His eye slowly opened.

“If I mess this up...”

He grunted, shook his head, and closed his eye.

“Okay then...”

I took my time, washing through his hair and then drying it, for no other reason than to make this special. I nudged him when I needed him to move, and he did, like I was the breeze, and he was a bird. Our movements were almost in sync, to a point where I’d call them fluid. I tried not to think too hard on it. I needed to concentrate and remember what the tutorial had taught me.

Just like a hair specialist, I moved around him, making sure I had all sides lined up, and the cut would look like it was supposed to.

He wasn’t sleeping. If anything, I could feel an electrical current almost moving through him, like he couldn’t sit still around me. One thing I’d learned about Cian Cillian O’Callaghan: on the regular, he was a very still man.

My hands trembled as I wet them in the sink.

I'd finally dug beneath the layers of his hair and found his entire face.

I didn't know what to do with myself.

I felt lost, like my heart didn't belong to me anymore and my brain was trying to figure out where I'd left it.

I'd given him a medium-length undercut with short back and sides, then made it look wet when I'd slicked it back. It was the hairstyle from the movie *King Arthur*, and...I took a deep breath...King Arthur had nothing on Cian O'Callaghan.

"There," I barely breathed, dusting some old hair from his shoulder. "I hope you like it."

His eyes had been closed during the last few minutes, and instead of looking at himself, he looked at me.

I set my back against the counter because my knees were suddenly too weak to carry my weight. Together, his eyes were piercing, but not cold enough to make me shiver. More like a pewter sky after the storm has gone and the sun is about to break through.

"You're not so much of a beast now," I whispered.

He made a strangled noise in his throat, and it seemed to mimic the sound my heart made. I wasn't sure why, but the way he was looking at me was breaking my heart.

He stood abruptly and stormed out of the room.

My shaky knees stopped me from going after him, but even if I could have, my breath was lost, and I was too unsteady to find it.



AFTER CIAN HAD STORMED OUT, and I'd recovered some of my breath and strength, I started to clean up his hair. Beatrice came in and tried to stop me. We cleaned it up together, and then I did the necessary things in the bathroom. I hurriedly fixed my bun, threw on a long, thin sweater—the weather was much milder in Ireland in winter—and a pair of leggings. I

stuffed my feet into a pair of sneakers and walked out the bedroom door.

Cian was in the same spot he'd been in before, but he'd trimmed his beard to match his new haircut. I grinned and nodded at him in encouragement. I found he reacted to actions more than he did words, like maybe it was easier for him to find the truth in those.

He grabbed me by the arm. We stopped on the steps, him one behind me, and I had to strain my neck to look up at him. He was uneasy. Maybe because this was the first outing since I'd arrived.

"You still think I'm a flight risk, but we made a deal. I promise I'm not going to run."

My breath got stuck in my throat when I thought he was going to respond. I'd never seen that look on his face before, like he had something to say, and he was going to explode if he didn't. My breath released when he grunted and nodded for me to keep walking.

"I'm not," I grumbled, going down the steps, "going to run."

He grunted again. It was in a way that made me think he didn't believe me.

Beatrice had breakfast ready, and I shoveled my food like Cian did. He stopped and looked up at me. I shrugged. I loved exploring the castle and the property—I hadn't even seen half of either yet—but I was looking forward to getting out. I was hoping I could pick up a few books.

If the trip was on Cian, I was going to buy a bunch of them and share them with Fiona. I wondered if she and Beatrice would want to start our own little book club.

The thought seemed to up my anticipation. I almost ran to the car when it was time to go. Cian kept giving me side-eye looks. Maybe he didn't know what to do with an excited me. It looked like he'd been dropped into a new universe when I turned the radio on and started to sing along. The singer, Ruairi (Rory) Merrick, was from Ireland, and he was one of

my favorites. Delaney loved him too, and she'd gotten tickets for us to see him in Boston the upcoming summer. Since it was going to be held at a smaller venue, I'd agreed.

Hearing Ruairi Merrick in Ireland, even on the radio...it soothed some of the sadness at not being able to go with her.

"How nice, Maeve," Beatrice said from the backseat. "You have a lovely voice."

I didn't, but I thanked her anyway.

When the song ended, Cian looked at the radio and then at me. He turned the sound up and looked at me again.

"Are you trying to drown me out?" I smiled at him, messing around.

The car swerved some before he righted it. He shook his head.

Oh, he wants me to sing. That had never happened to me before. I turned the volume down and tried to sing along, but I didn't know most of the songs. I was relieved when instrumental music started to play. By that time, though, we'd arrived in Galway.

It was a bustling city, and after we hit a few stores, I was ready for solitude again. People exhausted me. They seemed to do the same to Cian. He was constantly on guard at the castle, but being out in the public...it made him rigid with tension.

Beatrice was in her element, though. It didn't seem like she ever met a stranger.

"How about we look for dresses while we're in the city?" She nodded to a store behind me.

"I have plenty," I said. When I'd only picked out a few things, Cian started to pile things up on his own. Some of the outfits I would never have picked for myself, but I liked them.

"Not that kind of dress, dear."

I turned. We were in front of a bridal boutique. "Oh." I glanced at Cian, then turned to Beatrice. The look in his eyes was too intense to hold. I took a deep breath. "At the castle?"

I thought Beatrice would answer, but Cian nodded.

“A dress fit for a fairy tale then,” I said. “Gold touches, maybe? I’m not much of a shopper, though.”

“Leave it to me!” Beatrice’s body was already turned in the direction of the store.

“I’d like red roses,” I whispered. I’d never imagined my wedding, because it takes two to have one and I’d been solo, but my dad had told me they were my mom’s favorite. “For flowers.”

Beatrice squeezed my arm and rushed toward the store.

Cian and I stood in the middle of the street while people passed us by. They gave him a wide berth as they went around. I was pretty sure, like me, they sensed an untamed wildness in him, even though his haircut had transformed his face. It was like the entire world was seeing him as I did.

As a handsome man.

When men’s eyes would linger in our direction too long, though, a growl would tremble inside of his chest, reminding me that a haircut could transform his appearance, but what lurked underneath his surface hadn’t been touched.

The words tumbled out before I could stop them. “Are you marrying me because Dermot wanted to marry me?”

His eyes whipped to mine. He shook his head—*no*.

“Why then?” I barely got out.

He looked away from me, and I knew that was where his truth stopped. Whether the words were on his lips or not, he wasn’t going to share them.

I sighed. “Do you know of a bookstore around here? I’d love to buy some books.”

He seemed to relax at the change in conversation. He chucked his chin in the opposite direction, and we headed that way.



AFTER THE BOOKSHOP, which resulted in Cian carrying out two full bags, he took me to a pub for dinner. It was a quaint place with dim lights and two men playing live music. One played the tin whistle, the other the bodhrán. The music wasn't loud. The ambience was chill. It seemed like a lot of older men frequented the place.

I wasn't sure if Cian had ever been before, but the bartender, who might have been in his early thirties, nodded at Cian when he noticed him. His eyes only subtly gave away the shock of seeing Cian with a different haircut. The people inside the castle never allowed shock to show on their faces. It was either a hint of fear at what Cian would do next or fascination as they watched us together. The bartender, though, was on the outs like me, I could tell, but knew better than to openly stare, it seemed.

The bartender came to take my order only. I decided on a veggie pizza and a glass of Chianti.

Sometimes Delaney and I would walk across the street to the tavern and have a late dinner together. She always said a glass of red wine was good for the heart and soul. While we waited for our food, I told Cian that.

“Have you heard of it? The Bell Tavern?”

He nodded.

“Have you ever been to the bookstore across from it? I work—used to work there.”

His eyes were intense on mine, and even when the food was delivered (the bartender had brought him a burger), I talked. I told him about my parents, how my mom died before I was born, how people always wore me out, about my love of reading and woodworking. I wasn't sure why, but I was giving him my complete life story. Maybe because he seemed so into it. It was like he was hanging onto my every word.

When quiet settled between us, music filled the space, and we both sat back, watching and listening. Every so often Cian would take a drink of his Guinness. The yeasty smell was on his breath and clothes.

All I wanted to do was breathe it in.

Beatrice came into the pub and kissed the bartender who'd taken our order on the cheek. Apparently, they knew each other.

We left a few minutes later. This time Cian turned the radio on. The volume was low, and between the soothing music, a full stomach, and feet that were aching from walking, I fell asleep. I woke up when Cian lifted me out of the car. I stared at his face while he carried me inside.

God, he was beautiful.

I expected him to leave me at my door, but he took me to a different room and set me on my feet. The room was dark, but as he gradually turned the lights up, I blinked.

“No way,” I whispered.

He'd set me down in the library of the castle. It was like something out of a dream. It even had one of those ladders that rolled. I wanted to make it slide along the floor like they did in the movies.

It even smelled like a well-used library—crisp paper and dust.

I went to a lower shelf and ran my fingers along the rows of spines. I wondered if there were any romance books, and if so, if this was where Fiona found her stash? Or could I add the ones I bought to the shelves? Every library needed a little romance.

“This is...beautiful,” I said, turning to Cian.

It was the first time I'd ever seen him look...pleased. His face was relaxed and his eyes softer.

“I love this room.” I grinned. “Can it be mine?”

He nodded and my grin turned into a smile. He pointed to a long desk. It seemed like the scholarly kind with lamps for ambiance. A box was on it. I opened it and my eyes started to burn.

It was all my woodworking tools, sketches, and figurines from home. I lifted the last one I'd done, Beauty, from the box and turned it over in my hands. "I was working on these before I left. I still have the Beast to do... I was still trying to *see* him before I carved him."

Cian came to stand behind me. I could feel the warmth of his body. And I had to resist the urge to rest my head against his chest. It felt so natural to be with him, talking or not. The silence wasn't awkward, and when I did talk, he made me feel like I said the most interesting things.

I turned and looked up at him.

I had a pretty good idea of what the beast would look like then.

He came to life in my life before he did in my head.

Cian Cillian O'Callaghan.

"Thank you," I whispered, "for this." I lifted the figurine.

If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't need anyone to bring them to me, but if it also wasn't for him, I'd be married to Dermot, and who knows what I would've been allowed to take from home?

He lifted my chin, and my eyes found his. I held my breath, anticipating his lips on mine, but he only nodded before he left me alone.

CHAPTER 9

CIAN

She'd been movin' in front of the window and away from it all mornin'. When she moved away from my view, Beatrice was always behind her. Beatrice and Fiona were doin' weddin' things with her.

She'd be my bride in a week—a June weddin'.

Keenan was anxious about spendin' so much time in Ireland and not Boston. Payin' attention to it now, time seemed to run there, where it crawled here. I was soakin' up every season and minute with Maeve. And since Beatrice said this should be special for her, that was the only reason I was bein' so patient when it came to a date.

I wanted her as my wife.

The thought satisfied a cravin' inside of me that I had no fuckin' clue existed until she lit the flame of life inside of me again, though she felt like a storm when she blew into my life. It was like she'd brought a fire with her, strong enough to light a candle. Even though mine still flickered—my desire to live had always been measured by revenge—each breath with her was makin' it stronger.

She was only a few steps away, but if I couldn't see her, it made me feel unsure—about the entire fuckin' world. She was solid ground, though on the inside, she rocked me to my core.

Maeve appeared in front of the window. I could tell from the look on her face she was ready to be outside. She told me people exhausted her.

We didn't exhaust each other. If anythin', she jolted me. Made me pay attention. Made me notice the small things.

Keenan said I was startin' to see the forest for the trees.

Right. Because my entire focus wasn't just on destroyin' the Craigs anymore. Though when Maeve wasn't around, it was back to business as usual.

I looked down at the two rings restin' on my little finger. One was a simpler band, and one was what Fiona called a rock. Mam wore the simpler band when we lived in Boston. Da gave her "the rock" after he'd stolen the gold and we moved to the castle.

Simpler band.

Simpler times.

"The rock" signified harder times, but it was a stunnin' piece of jewelry that hadn't been touched by bloodshed. Mam's finger had been too swollen to wear it. Same with the simple band. She'd stopped wearin' it after "the rock."

I was tryin' to decide which one to give Maeve for our weddin'. I wanted her to have a better part of my life to carry on her finger.

Keenan walked toward me with a cup of somethin' hot in his hand. He sipped on it while he studied the land. He always took it in before he came to talk to me.

"Mornin', lad." He looked at his watch. "I should say evenin'."

I nodded and tipped my head to him.

He looked up at the window. "Maeve seems to be gettin' along fine with Fiona and Beatrice." He took a sip from his mug. "I'm sure she misses her Da, though."

If I brought Pauric to Ireland, he'd have to stay until after this war was over. Oran Craig would kill him if he tried to return to Boston. It was somethin' to think about.

Keenan sighed. "It's been much too quiet from the Craigs."

True. Both Keenan and I knew they were plottin' and schemin'. Our side was growin' with men who wanted to join us, but with my name being what it was in Boston—associated with a man Oran had branded a cheat, my Da—no one wanted to do business with us. Even though Keenan worked as my mouth, word had spread that Conor O'Callaghan's son had returned and was headin' up a war that would dethrone Oran Craig. But no one wanted to do business with the cheat's son. Even though Oran Craig reneged on deals he made with lower-level men, his word was good when he was makin' deals for guns and such.

I might have had money to spend, but he'd been the Butcher of Boston since he was eighteen. He'd earned his spot. And it was always safer to side with the devil you knew. Unless it was personal.

"I'm takin' that as Oran is bidin' his time," Keenan continued. "Decidin' on his next move. He doesn't truly know our numbers right now. And Dermot is probably in his ear about Maeve. Even though she's not a pawn in this war on our side, she is on theirs. The six men we killed of theirs are nothin' compared to where she's standin' now. In your court. She's not enough for Oran to rush or risk this war, but Dermot is not agreein'."

Maeve moved toward the window again, and our eyes met. The war with the Craigs seemed to disappear. I was anxious for her to come down. I wanted her to smile at me. I wanted to hear her voice. I wanted to hear her stories.

"Ach." Keenan made a dismissive noise in his throat. "The war with the Craigs will keep. A man should live before he dies, aye?"

I met his eyes.

He cleared his throat. "Conor chose life for you and Mona. It's about time you start choosin' the same for yourself for a while. You won't be the first man to know how it feels to truly breathe and go to war with a singin' heart, my lad." He squeezed my shoulder and left me standin' beneath the window alone.

How it feels to truly breathe.

Those words always took me back to the time I remembered openin' my eyes for the second time in my life. It almost felt like the first.

Keenan and Fiona had found me buried beneath the ground two days after the slaughter of my parents. My memories were a bit fuzzy, but I remembered hearin' his hands diggin' in the ground. The sound of Fiona's rushed whisperin'. The clawin' seemed as panicked as the sound of her voice. It came back to me in dreams at times—openin' my eyes and meetin' theirs for the first time.

I didn't feel saved.

I felt yanked from a comfortable place.

A safe place.

My grave.

I'd overheard Keenan and Fiona whisperin' one night. She'd said I was like a zombie, but one with a sharp brain.

"He'll breathe again," Keenan had said. "One day. He'll find life again—if it doesn' find him first."

"The way Mona found Conor."

The way Mona found Conor.

That was like sayin' the way life found death.

My Da had been abandoned when he was a lad. He had nothin' or no one in this world. He was the bastard child of Cian O'Callaghan. He'd been left behind to fight for everythin' he ever needed, while his half-siblings lived a lush life in Castle Beatha. He was never welcome on the property until he bought it. It was going under, and the O'Callaghan family was forced to sell.

Mam and Da met when Da had hit rock bottom, and his world had changed after. He'd always said life finally found him.

It was Mam.

She was his life, and she belonged to him.

In the end, she was also his death by urgin' him to leave Boston with the gold.

They had lived together. They had died together.

Then I was turned into the thing that made my Da do desperate things—a child who'd been abandoned. If it wasn't for Keenan and Fiona, I would have been an orphan. But they were in the foster home with Da and had made a blood pact—Keenan was his brother, and Fiona was his sister. They considered me blood through Da.

They were an odd two, Keenan and Fiona, but they fit in my life. I wasn't an ordinary lad. I'd been turned into a killer before I was a teenager. Instead of hangin' out with friends and playin' games, I was settin' traps for Craig's men and plottin' my revenge.

I walked over to the lough and watched as my reflection rippled. My Da had called it Lough Leane, meanin', "lake of learning." The name was fittin'. Secrets were still buried beneath the surface. What was left of the gold shared the water with salmon and brown trout.

When my Da had said I'd never starve, he'd meant it both metaphorically and literally.

It never slipped past me that my life and my father's at times mirrored each other. I'd never thought about it before, but I wondered if he'd ever stood where I was, and had this same thought...

I see the man starin' back at me, but up until this point, he was just a body who had dead eyes that didn't care to see the livin'.

I'd seen myself plenty of times, but I'd never taken notice of the small things. How I looked a lot like my Da, but Mam was there in the reflection too—even if the resemblance was subtle.

Footsteps sounded from behind me. They were solid when they fell, but there was an airiness about them. Like she was rushin' to get to me.

Usually, my body was stiff, but the thought of her made it take a breath and relax.

I turned at the same time she made it to me. Her hand was up, like she was going to tap me on the shoulder. The other was tucked behind her back. She rocked on her heels, her free hand joinin' the hidden one.

“I brought a book!” she rushed out, then she pulled it from behind her back and showed it to me. “It’s a romance, but it also has pirates. Do you like pirates?”

It seemed like we fell in step with each other at the same time. I never seemed to have a destination in mind for our walks. The property was vast. It bordered mountains on one side and a forest on the other. There was always somethin’ to see. The only place I avoided with Maeve was the cemetery on the hill.

She continued, my silence never breakin’ her stride. “I think you’re going to love it! It’s set in modern day, but the feel of the book is older. Like when pirates were really pirates and they boarded boats and seized cargoes. I loooooove how the author took something from long ago and modernized it but was able to keep the romance from that time and preserve it between the pages.”

I glanced at her from the side of my eye.

“I know!” She held the book up. “I’ve read it like a million times, but it’s my favorite—a classic for me. It’s so romantic, but it has so much action and suspense. It has some humor too. And the places they go? So vivid! I’m there with them when I read the story.”

She took a breath and laughed it out. “You know, I’ve mentioned before how people exhaust me. I’m an introvert. I’d rather spend time with fictional beings because they seem to recharge me. But...I don’t mind talking to you. You don’t... tire me out. You make me forget commas should be implemented, even in speech.”

Maybe because, as in her books, she was hearin’ my dialogue without me havin’ to speak my lines out loud. Like

Keenan and Fiona, she gave me a voice without me havin' to utter a word. But there were times when she'd ask me questions and then wait for me to respond—a nod or shake of the head.

“I didn't even think...” She used the book to fan her face. “I could have brought some food. Are you hungry?”

I shrugged.

“When I get excited about a book...” She glanced at me, and when our eyes met, they held for a second before she turned them forward. “I sometimes forget the real world exists. Through the stories I read...I feel alive, like I'm living a thousand lives.”

She must have been my story then, because she made me feel the same fuckin' way.

I'd never wanted anythin' but vengeance before, but suddenly, I wanted to be the face of the pirate in her story. I wanted to be the face in all her books. The man she imagined while readin'. The king of her lives. Because there was no doubt.

This woman was the queen of mine.

“We can go back. I can—”

I stopped her by wrappin' my hand around her arm. I shook my head and nodded my face forward.

A breath trembled out of her lips when my hand slid down her arm and barely touched her hand. She was sensitive to me. Just a touch and her pulse sped up. The one in her neck fluttered like the heartbeat of a doe just gainin' its legs.

My hand refused to leave her arm. I kept my skin on hers as we ventured deeper into the property. Mountains created a backyard for the castle, and the closer we came to it, the more wooded the land became. I nodded to a sprawlin' oak tree.

Her eyes grew wide. “My dad told me stories about oaks in Ireland! He said they were home to spirits—even fairies, elves, and other mystical beings. I feel like I need to read *The Lord of the Rings* now. I've never read it before.”

My eyes mirrored hers, and she caught the look at the same time I caught her from going down. A fallen branch was hidden under what winter had left behind, and she almost fell. She'd been watchin' me.

"Every reader knows that look!" She pointed to my face, completely ignorin' the near fall. "It's the *I can't believe you haven't read*—whichever title. You've read it? The Lord of the Rings?"

I nodded.

"How many times?" She adjusted her glasses.

My face hurt at how serious she was bein', because somethin' I hadn't felt since I was ten years old came over me. The urge to smile. Her eyes narrowed, like she was tryin' to figure out the new look I'd surprised her with. I'd stumped her. I'd fuckin' stumped myself with the reaction. I shrugged.

"If you can't remember how many times you've read them, then it must have been plenty."

My Da had given me the entire series. They had been his. I'd read them before he died. He'd been impressed at how many times I'd read them for my age.

"Maybe we can read those next?" she suggested. "I'll do all the reading. I don't mind."

Her hair was in its usual messy bun, and she was wearin' some kind of band T-shirt, jeans that rolled at the ankles, and Converse sneakers. I never had to tame urges. I always acted on them. Because they always centered around Oran Craig. But I had to control the impulse to release her hair from the bun and watch as the thick, dark strands tumbled down her shoulders. I needed to bury my fingers in her hair and pull her mouth to mine, savagely takin' what was mine.

Her.

I wanted to tease her soul out through that kiss and entangle it with mine.

Standin' here with her, though, I wasn't on steady ground. I'd never been here before. Instead of followin' my instincts,

damn the consequences as usual, I was hesitant with her. She seemed breakable. So small in comparison to me.

A growl idled in my throat for a second. I was frustrated. My still-buried voice left me fuckin' frustrated.

“Okay, we don't need to read them—”

I shook my head.

“You want to read them again?”

I pointed at her, and she looked down. I could have been pointin' at her heart or at her jugs. They filled out the T-shirt perfectly. Two small mounds I wanted to touch, suckin' the stiff peaks until she lost control. I knew she was goin' to be sweet to taste. I licked my lips, my mouth waterin'.

“Are you sure you're not hungry?” she whispered.

She gasped when I lifted her up and set her down on a sweepin' lower branch. Sunlight filtered in through the top of the tree and brightened her face. Her eyes were such a vivid blue, even without the sun. Her dark hair pulled out the color. She stared at me for a second before she ran a hand over her head, tryin' to tame the flyaway hairs around her forehead. They were frenzied from the humidity.

I pointed at her again, this time reachin' out and touchin' the area over her heart.

“Oh. You want to read the books *with* me?”

I nodded.

She moved her face to the side some, studyin' me. She bit her lip, then released it. “When you think, does the voice in your head have an Irish accent?”

I studied her like she was studyin' me. Openly. Without harnesses or awkwardness. No one had ever asked me anythin' like that before. I had to *tink—think*—about it and listen. The voice inside of my head had dropped the 'h'. Then I realized what she really wanted to know.

If you spoke, would you sound Irish? I nodded.

She patted the spot next to her. “This branch is wide enough for you to sit too.” She opened the book to the first page and grinned at me. “Are you ready for this adventure?”

No confirmation was needed from her. She started to read. She kicked her runners off tree—*three*—chapters in, bringin’ a knee up to her chest, lettin’ the other leg dangle. She became a narrator as she read the book. Her inflections were fuckin’ grand. I stood at some point, snatchin’ a stick from the ground, copyin’ the moves the pirate made with a sword.

She stopped readin’, adjusted her glasses, and watched me. Her breath hitched up, and her lips parted.

Maybe my face was morphin’ into the pirate’s inside of her head. If not, I was goin’ to set the book on fuckin’ fire—because that was what it felt like inside of my chest when I thought of her fantasizin’ about anyone else.

She closed the book so hard, it made a *whap!* noise. I grunted some, wantin’ her to continue.

“It takes time to finish a book.” She hopped down from the branch, steppin’ into her runners. “It’s getting late. Want to get something to eat?”

There was a sense of urgency comin’ from her, like she wanted to run away from me. Her back was turned, and I tapped her on the shoulder. Her shoulders rose and fell with the deep breath she took. I turned her toward me at the same time music started playin’ from behind us.

Her eyes flew to mine. “Is that...?”

It sounded like the same music from the car that she’d turned up on the way to Galway.

She looked around me, tryin’ to figure out where it was comin’ from. I took her hand and led her deeper into the woods. It wasn’t that far. We stopped behind a bunch of trees surrounded by stones, and I pointed to the little shack beyond them. It was made of decayin’ wood, worn by years and weather. Smoke billowed out of the chimney.

Fiona’s private place.

I'd found it not long after we'd arrived at the castle. Da told me to let it be. *You don't want to make her mad by snoopin'*. I hadn't. Fiona had always seemed a thread away from snappin'. As a lad, I had thought maybe she was a witch. She butchered all our meat for the castle. Blood drippin' down her apron hadn't weakened the imagery of a sorceress.

Years made me see things more clearly. Fiona needed her own space—her own time—away from the rest of the world. I often wondered if somethin' had happened to her in a shack somewhere. She shed blood in them because it represented somethin' to her. Somethin' she had never gotten over.

Fiona's voice rose over the sound of the singer's voice. It was almost shrill. When I looked at Maeve, she was watchin' the place with a smile on her face. I'd never seen anyone smile at Fiona that way. Most people didn't make eye contact.

A second later, Maeve's eyes widened and her neck went back a little, like she was shocked by what she was seein'. Me fuckin' too. Fiona had spun out of her place, dancin' with a broom, still singin' the song. She had on a long-sleeve black top and a long, frilly black skirt that landed right above her combat boots. Every time she'd turn, the skirt swished.

Maeve and I met eyes. Her cheeks were puffin'. She was about to laugh. I clamped a hand over her mouth, pickin' her up and rushin' her toward the oak. As soon as I set her down, she started to twirl like Fiona, singin' the song. She was pumpin' her arms in the air.

I looked around—what the fuck was happenin'? It seemed like the entire place was suddenly entranced.

“I was supposed to go with Delaney to Ruairi Merrick's concert next week!” She did this weird arm move I wasn't sure what to call. Her fists were balled, her arms were tucked close to her breasts, and it was like they were tryin' to fly, like chicken wings.

Next week she was marryin' me instead.

“He's Irish too! Can you dance, Cian?”

I turned some, wonderin' if she was talkin' to another Cian.

She laughed, dancin' over to me, takin' my hands. She lifted them and went under my arms. We got tangled.

“I don't really know how to dance either.” She scrunched her nose. “Delaney danced all the time at the bookstore—she loves music—and I just do what she told me to. Feel the music and let it carry me away. It's easier if you relax and get spaghetti arms.”

She started movin' her shoulders and turnin' in circles, doin' the thing with her arms again. Then she made it back to me. She took my hands and started to give me instructions.

Literally, step-by-step directions.

There was no true routine. She was just—goin' for it.

I wasn't really movin', but I could handle the under-arm move. She went underneath again and somehow made it back to my front without gettin' knocked out.

“This is fun, Cian!”

She was fuckin' fun.

She was everythin'.

It sounded like the sky was tappin' against the top of the trees. As Maeve looked up, rain rushed down, making it through the gaps in the branches. Heavy droplets slid down her face. She closed her eyes, like she was absorbin' them.

I took her face in my hands and brought my mouth close to hers. Her breath washed over my lips, and I closed my eyes, breathin' her in like the first sweet hit of air. When I opened my eyes, hers were wide, but anticipation burned deep in their depths.

She reflected me.

The entire world went silent. Not dead. Silent. Except for the two of us. A desperate noise escaped her lips—the noise that escaped mine was much deeper, and almost pained.

Rain crackled against the forest floor, but my instincts were strong. Footsteps sound different from splashes of water.

Someone was comin’.

Maeve’s body tensed when I hauled her up and ran into the copse of trees, barely makin’ a sound, takin’ shelter behind another oak. I pointed up, and her eyes followed. Keenan called this tree the ladder oak. Its branches were almost stacked, making it easy to climb.

Men rarely looked up. It was a good place to keep the advantage.

She nodded and mouthed, *I can climb*. I hoisted her up and watched as she made it to the fourth branch. I had swords and knives buried in the ground all over the property. Only the hilts were visible if a man knew where to look and recognized them for what they were. Usually, leaves covered them. I came to this tree a lot when I was young. Even killed one of Craig’s men by sittin’ in the tree and droppin’ the knife straight down onto his head. It cracked and split open like a crunchy melon.

We had guns, too, but it was more personal to get close. To look his men in the eyes and to think my parents’ names while they died. But I had a gun tucked into the back of my pants too. It was best to come prepared for all situations.

I swiped a bonin’ knife from its burial spot and moved from tree to tree. When I got close enough to the oak where we’d just been, I held my breath and waited.

“It’s just me, lad!” Henry boomed. “I’m comin’ out with my hands up.”

He came into view, doin’ what he’d said. When I stepped out, he wiped sweat from his brow.

“*Wheew*, never know what’s comin’ when I step foot on this property. Between you, Fiona, and Keenan, I’m lucky to still be alive! One of these days I’m goin’ to get a megaphone to start announcin’ myself. Then again...I don’t always mind the *thrill*.” He smiled at me. “Didn’t me wife tell ye I was comin’? I heard there’s goin’ to be a weddin’.”

I caught the widenin' of his eyes a second before I turned at the sound of footsteps comin' from behind me. Maeve carted a sword that seemed almost heavier than her.

She took my side and looked up at me. "Just in case."

Henry's laughter boomed. "Well, looks like you met your match, Cian O'Callaghan. I can't wait to get to know her better."

Same went for me.

CHAPTER 10

MAEVE

It was a tepid Irish day. The sun shining. A slight breeze in the air. The flowers around the castle in bloom. Emerald grass for miles.

And I was still trying to process what had just happened on such a perfect June day.

Our wedding ceremony.

I was married to the man they called the Beast of Boston.

Cian Cillian O'Callaghan.

My name was no longer Maeve Bell but Maeve O'Callaghan.

And I, Maeve Rose O'Callaghan, tried to remember to breathe when my husband was told to kiss his bride, and the intensity in his eyes as he stared at me made me go weak in the knees.

This would be my first kiss.

Judging by the intense and focused look in his eyes, I knew he intended to be my last too.

Slowly, he moved a little closer, like I was an anxious creature he might scare off.

My breaths were coming even faster, and my stomach felt like a deep circle filled with small, fluttering things that seemed to suck in all my air, as his body grew close enough to warm mine.

He reached out and eased his fingers into my hair, like he didn't want to mess it up, but when he had a firm grip, he pulled me to him, and I gasped.

It was a possessive move, a claim I felt in the center of my chest.

As he stared at my lips, then lowered his head, his lips not even a breath from mine, I closed my eyes.

When his mouth touched mine...my hands instinctively reached out for his shoulders.

There was no denying it. I'd ached for this kiss since he'd *almost* kissed me in the library and by the oak tree. There was also no denying the attraction that sparked between us after one look—the moment I stepped foot in his house in Boston and our eyes met.

This moment felt like an accumulation of all those moments. A crash in time that fused us together and would make a mark on our shared history years from then.

We were both hungry for it.

Almost starved.

My dad always said magic isn't just a word. It exists in the small things most people overlook. Sometimes it's in the things we take for granted, or in a moment that moves too quickly, and as cliché as it may have sounded...

My first kiss felt like magic.

Either I was extremely attracted to my husband, which I was, or he was extremely good with his mouth. I had a feeling it was both.

The kiss was soft, tingly almost, but there was a hard claim to it that made itself known underneath the gossamer layer. He tasted so good too. Like...an entirely new world filled with adventure and danger and most of all...romance.

This, I thought. This. This is how a first kiss should taste. How it should be.

Goosebumps puckered my skin, and I shivered as we pulled apart.

The moment we'd just shared seemed to dry the ink on the paperwork even more than the air. It said: *This is mine forever. I claim it*, without using the words.

Just like our wedding vows.

We hadn't repeated them.

We'd gazed at each other and then nodded when the time was right.

The kiss would forever linger in my soul—like being hit with lightning for the first time, it was a memory that would never fade into the darkness.

In *that* moment, it seemed to zap me with an overflow of anxious energy.

After we turned to face the intimate crowd, and we were met by light applause, Cian led me to a room in the castle and left me there to wait. It seemed like he had something to check on. It was hard for me to sit still, but the train of my wedding gown kept following me around, like it was reminding me of what the day meant.

The first day of the rest of my life with Cian.

At the thought, half of my heart twisted in fear. The other half lifted its wings and was about to courageously take flight.

The courage came from how settled I felt. Yeah, it all seemed to happen so fast. I'd gone from a forced marriage to Dermot Craig, to marrying a man I barely knew, but somehow, it felt like I'd known him forever.

How else could I describe the immediate connection between us?

That part of life felt simple—true.

The other part—had me uneasy.

There was something going on beneath the surface of this castle—of Cian's life. Everyone was still too tight-lipped

about certain things. Like why Cian never breathed a word. I got the feeling he could talk, but he chose not to.

What trapped his voice inside of his head?

Why wasn't I allowed in the other ballroom?

What happened to the man to turn him into the Beast?

A definite line existed, though, between the man and the beast. I'd witnessed his temper in Boston, when I'd first met him, but he hadn't reared his head since then. Cian seemed to hide behind the beast when the rest of the world faced him, but with me, the man was slowly revealing himself. He trusted me. I saw it in the way everyone in the castle reacted to how Cian was reacting to me.

The castle was such a dark place, and I just wished some brightness would fall on it, chasing all the dark shadows that seemed to cloak it away.

Delaney stepped into the room and shut the door behind her.

That had been a shock. Cian had flown in my dad, Delaney, and Robert before the wedding. I didn't find out until the morning of. I was just thankful I had no makeup on. My tears would have made a mess of it. Especially when my dad told me he was staying indefinitely. Which was why he was off exploring the castle. He was fascinated by it. I almost wondered if he believed it was going to come alive and tell him secrets.

"Looks like you have a stage-five clinger on your hands... your *husband* is waiting outside the door."

"He doesn't like to...leave me." I gathered the long veil and lifted it, plopping down in a seat after, not all that gracefully, considering I was wearing a beautiful gown.

Beatrice had done an amazing job choosing a dress that fit me. It was a ballgown with sweetheart sleeves made of lace, bodice top, and more lace appliqué on the dress itself. The heels were gold with an intricate pattern.

The entire thing was a nod to a fairy tale where the hero isn't exactly a prince, and I knew she'd done it purposely.

It was all so romantic.

The golds.

The deep reds.

The candlelight.

The magical feelings behind every touch.

“Does he think you're going to run?”

“I thought that in the beginning, but I was wrong. He just doesn't like to be far from me.”

She nodded, then took a deep breath. “We didn't get a chance to talk earlier. It's honesty hour. I was almost prepared to steal you from the ceremony, but the look in your eyes stopped me. The look you had before you even walked up the aisle. You're in love with him.”

She didn't pose it as a question. She knew me too well.

“That's weird, right?” I whispered. “That I fell in love with the man I should hate? He didn't give me the choice to stay in Boston or leave. He didn't ask me to marry him.” How to explain this without sounding mad in the head? “But it's almost like he didn't have to because he knew. He knew it was right between us.”

“The no-talking thing. That's not an issue?”

I shook my head. “Not at all. It's like...I know him, Delaney. He doesn't have to say a word, and it's like I just know. There are times I wonder if I'm right about what he wants or feels, but it's not an issue. If I'm unsure, I just ask, and he answers in his own way.”

“He's gorgeous as hell, but it doesn't eliminate the sense of danger around him.”

“I agree.”

She walked toward me and got down on her haunches, placing her hands on my knees. “Can I go back to Boston with

a peaceful heart? Knowing you're okay here? I've been worried sick."

I could tell. She had dark circles underneath her eyes, and she'd lost a lot of weight, which she didn't have to lose in the first place.

"With a peaceful heart," I whispered.

She lifted her hand and barely touched the veil. "My beautiful little turtle." She smiled. Her eyes were watery.

"You wouldn't even recognize me when it's just the two of us. He brings me out of my shell."

"He makes you feel safe?"

It was the first time I'd really thought about it, but he did. After he realized turning my ring was a security thing, and he did it when I was afraid on the plane, I had started trusting him.

I told Del about it, and she took a deep breath, like it was the first easy one she'd taken in a while. "He saved you from a life with Dermot."

"Yes, and not because he's using me as a pawn. He really wanted this—to marry me."

"Did you want this?"

"No. Yes. I was—am afraid of it. It all happened so fast."

"I agree. But sometimes life does. It just happens to us when we least expect it."

A burning need to tell her about the castle, about my suspicions, seemed to be melting the box made from wax I was keeping all the secrets in, but I decided I'd talk to Cian about it. He was my husband, and this place kept *his* secrets. The truth should come from him. All Del and I could do was speculate.

Maybe Cian would give Keenan permission to tell me. Or maybe one day he would tell me himself, if he was able.

Delaney sighed and stood. "Guests are starting to arrive—"

“Guests?”

“Seems like the village?”

That was odd. The castle was as locked up as Cian. I’d never seen anyone but Keenan, Fiona, Beatrice, and Henry step foot on the property.

Delaney seemed to notice the puzzled look on my face. “It seems like your new husband wants to let it be known he’s married, and he wants everyone to see how drop-dead gorgeous his wife is. It’s very romantic, if that’s why he’s doing it.”

It was, if that was why he was doing it, and I could see him doing it. I was almost positive he had a romantic streak. His face when I was reading him the novel...it was like he was absorbing every word. Like he was taking pointers from the pirate on how he was seducing the heroine. The pirate even said if the heroine was his fiancé, he would invite the entire island to the wedding to let it be known...

That was why I’d closed the book. We were close to the first sex scene.

“It’s a good thing you’re sitting down for what I’m about to tell you next.”

“Hmm?” I really looked at her. What happened *after* the wedding, the wedding *night*, was sending my stomach in a frenzy and my attention fluttering like a hyped-up butterfly.

She grinned. “Don’t scream. I don’t want your new husband to rush into this room and behead me if he thinks you’re in danger. But...guess who’s here?”

“I can’t even take a guess because I honestly have no clue.”

“Ruairi Merrick!”

I blinked at her. “*Nooo!*”

“*Yes!*”

“You’re joking.”

“Would I joke about this?” She balled her fists and did an excited dance in place. “He’s here! But the thing is...he’s blindfolded. Robert thinks your man took him.”

“Took him?”

“Abducted. Snatched. It’s like they don’t want him to know where he is.”

Okay, if that was the truth, it was romantic in a twisted way, but still romantic.

She moved to the window in the sitting room, looking out. Never taking her eyes off the glass, she waved me over. I stood carefully, not wanting to trip. The dress was heavy, and I wasn’t used to walking in heels.

My heart fell into my stomach when my eyes met Cian’s. He stood across from the room, like he was waiting. He looked so fine in his black suit.

Keenan broke the connection when he walked past with Ruairi Merrick, his hand jabbed into his back. It had to be a gun.

“He didn’t...” I breathed.

“Oh, it appears he *could*, and he *did*.”

It wasn’t funny, but Delaney and I looked at each other and laughed quietly. It was the same when someone tripped or fell. We had to tame our reaction.

I was almost positive Cian wouldn’t hurt Ruairi. Since he was going to sing at our wedding, it felt normal to call him by his first name, even though I’d never met him. Cian must have taken him for me. I couldn’t come up with any other reason.

The thought sent a warm surge through my veins, and I stepped out of the room in a rush, Delaney a step behind.

Cian’s eyes fell on mine, and we stared at each other for a second before I took his hand. His eyes softened and he led me to the empty ballroom—the one I was allowed in.

Candles were lit, and red roses graced the entire space. Keenan had Ruairi on the stage, the blindfold still over his

eyes. A band, none of the member's eyes covered, was set up behind the two men. It seemed like most of them were older.

I let go of Cian's hand, and he followed behind me to the stage. I motioned to Keenan that I wanted to talk to Ruairi. Keenan had to help him down the stairs. I whispered something in the singer's ear, and he shrugged. Keenan helped him back up the stairs, and it seemed Ruairi told Keenan what I'd told him.

A grin came to Keenan's face before he told the band. I turned to Cian and held out my hand. He took it as the band started to play the song.

We swayed to the music, but our eyes locked in place.

My chest felt hollow. My heart raced.

I'd never known attraction like this before. Just our hands touching was consuming me. It was like the kiss broke the barrier to more, and I almost...needed it.

After our dance, and Keenan led Ruairi out, guests with unfamiliar faces started to trickle in. They looked a little uneasy, like they were unsure about being inside the castle but couldn't resist checking it out. I hadn't seen any of these people before. I was pretty sure Delaney was right. They lived in the village.

Keenan came back, and as the band discussed something, Keenan took the microphone. He thanked the crowd for coming to witness the marriage of Cian and Maeve O'Callaghan.

He lifted his glass and asked everyone to toast to us.

"To true love!"

A stir in the back had me straining my neck to see what was going on. A bunch of people were almost booing, and when Cian raised his glass to them, they stormed out, knocking people out of the way. I wasn't sure what was going on, but it seemed like they were either mad or insulted about the wedding.

So odd.

I wondered if Cian was going to be mad, but his eyes told a different story.

They were almost...pleased with the reaction.

Something was for sure going on around here. It was like Keenan, Fiona, Beatrice, and Henry were almost glowing from the negative reaction, like they wanted it.

Cian lifted my hand and kissed it, then set it over his and took us around the room, like we were royalty or something.

It was even odder not to acknowledge any of these people, so I either smiled at them or thanked them for coming. I wasn't sure what else to do.

My dad and Beatrice seemed to make the situation better. My dad was asking endless questions, it seemed, about everything Irish, and Beatrice was encouraging the crowd to eat and drink.

This a celebration! Plenty for everyone!

Even though Ruairi had left, the music continued, and guests started to relax and have a grand time, as Keenan had said.

Delaney had never met a party she didn't dance at, and she was flushed with a megawatt smile as she pulled Robert over and kissed me on the cheek. She took my hand and looked at Cian, raising her chin.

“You'll take good—no, better than good—care of my beautiful turtle. I won't accept anything less than her being treated like the queen she is.”

I thought Cian would give her the brow furrow and nothing else, but surprising me, he stood taller, looked her in the eyes and nodded.

She returned the nod and squeezed my hand. “It's been hours. Bathroom break? I'm sure you need help with the dress.”

I did, and with Fiona in tow, we headed to the bathroom. I could tell Cian wasn't comfortable with me wandering off, but Keenan started to talk to him, and Fiona was with us.

Delaney kept giving me side-eye glances. She wasn't comfortable with Fiona. I could tell not everyone was. She was so quiet and lived inside of her head a lot, but it was her eyes that seemed to make people uneasy. She didn't trust. It was only our love of romance books that had bonded us together.

I casually brought up how much I missed the bookstore, and that Fiona was a reader too. The conversation seemed to relax Delaney and Fiona, and after using the bathroom, Fiona ran to grab a book Delaney was going to get signed for her. The author was going to be doing a signing at The Bell.

We planned to meet Fiona back in the ballroom, but we took a wrong turn somewhere along the way. This side of the castle was extremely cold and dark. I'd never been before.

I felt uneasy suddenly.

"We should turn back," I whispered. Though my heels were lightly clacking on the floor, the noise was too loud. It felt like this side of the castle was almost...dead.

"What's wrong?" Delaney whispered, probably picking up on my tone or feeling the same thing I was.

The feel of my cold hand suddenly in her warm one almost jostled me. I had no clue how chilled I'd become.

"I don't think we're supposed to be on this side." My voice was deathly quiet.

"Why? Is something wrong?" Hers was too.

"I don't know," I breathed, half expecting cold vapor to blow out in a puff.

We turned to go back when she stopped at two ornate double doors.

"Does this look like the same ones we left through?" She didn't wait for an answer and opened them. The doors made a yawning sound, and I froze.

It was the forbidden ballroom.

“Oh my God. Why didn’t you have the reception in this ballroom?” Delaney whispered. “It’s beyond beautiful. Like something *straight* out of a fairy tale.”

It was. A few sconces were lit, the flames throwing shadows over the floor, and the stained-glass windows shimmered.

Delaney went to take a step inside, but I put a hand on her arm. “Will you find Keenan and tell him we’re lost?”

“You’re not coming with me—”

“No. I don’t want to walk all around if I don’t have to.” I lifted the dress and showed her the heels.

My feet were starting to ache, but my curiosity about the beautiful ballroom was why I wanted to stay. If Delaney told Keenan we were lost, no one could get mad, right?

“Stay right here. I’m not even sure if I can find my way back. This castle is like a labyrinth!”

After she walked off, I almost took off behind her. Something in the air felt...haunting.

I was being ridiculous.

How could a room so jaw-dropping beautiful be haunted?

I took a step inside the cavernous room and just stood there, looking around. I stepped deeper in, my dress sweeping the floor, nothing but a whisper in a completely silent room.

Too silent.

Like it was a tomb.

As cold as one too.

The candles in the sconces danced over my form and threw my shadow along the floor, making it stretch and bend. That was when I noticed the stains—dark stains that were old and dried but unmistakable.

Blood.

Lots of it.

Pools and smears, like someone had been dragged out.

Goosebumps puckered my skin. My heart started to beat overtime. It was stuck in my throat, my pulse roaring in my ears.

Clenching the soft fabric of the gown in my fists, I took another step back, realizing I was stepping over it. It coated most of the floor.

It felt like I was standing on someone's grave.

I turned to leave and smacked into a hard body.

A hard body that had wild, dilated eyes and a heaving chest.

In the glow of the candlelight, my new husband's eyes were possessed. Especially when he looked down and noticed where I stood.

A roar tore out of his chest like someone had ripped his heart out.

Me.

He lifted me up by the arms and set me by the door. It happened so fast, I hadn't even taken a breath.

Then the Beast inside of Cian O'Callaghan seemed to emerge, and he started to destroy the room. He was going to take it apart inch by inch, destroying himself in the process.

I tried to say his name, but my voice was lost inside of his. I went to grab for him before he shattered the stained glass, but he was in motion and knocked me down.

He didn't even notice.

I'd never seen him look that way.

He terrified me.

Promise or not, I couldn't stay.

That side of him—the one they called the Beast—was real. And what if it turned on me?

I scrambled back some before I lifted myself up and ran.

CHAPTER II

MAEVE

I wasn't sure where I was running to, but I could sense life in the direction I was heading.

Voices. Laughter. Warmth.

People.

Why couldn't we have gone this way in the first place?

I had a feeling it was because whoever still existed in that room was directing our steps. It was like he or she wanted the door to be opened so they could be set free.

It wasn't my place to do it, though, and I could tell it had caused Cian extreme distress. But I was too afraid in the moment to realize the truth.

He wouldn't hurt me.

I'd wounded *him* without meaning to.

I flew through the open door, dodging people, and then slowed my steps as that truth caught up to me. My chest burned, and I was shaking. The dress swept the ground, and from the torches that has been lit outside, I could make out the slightest smudges of blood on the hem. Even though it had been crusted to the floor, some of it had wiped off.

What had happened in there? I had no doubt someone had been killed. That amount of blood...it seemed like an entire body's worth, or more.

Why was it still there?

Was Cian trying to preserve the pain and memories of it?

Why?

I realized I was walking too far away from the castle. The grounds were just as vast and almost like a labyrinth too. I'd never walked alone. I was always with Cian or someone else. I took a few deep breaths, then decided to turn back. I'd hurt Cian, and my heart felt unsettled because of it.

Whatever had happened in that room had wounded him deeply, and I didn't want him to think I'd done it on purpose. Even though the scary part of him existed, I didn't think it was the deepest part of him. It was a mask he wore to protect himself. And I was starting to wonder if it was from the memories created in that room.

Two men stepped out of the trees.

I jumped, almost falling over my heels.

"Don't be frightened, Doe. We're here to take you back to Boston. Your dad is waiting for you there, and so are the Craigs."

My eyes darted around when five more men stepped out. These men were trying to get me to believe my dad was back in Boston. He'd only arrived an hour or so before the ceremony. Maybe they didn't know he was gone yet. They were going to try to use him as leverage to get me moving.

"My dad?" I whispered, trying to buy some time. I assumed Cian had knives and weapons planted all over this property, but unless I noticed a handle sticking out of the ground some, I didn't have anything to grab for.

One of the men nodded. "He'll be happy to have you home. Mr. Craig and his son too. If you don't cooperate..." He made a slicing motion across his throat. "I'm afraid that's what's going to happen to dear old dad Pauric."

"We need to move," one of the men in the back said, his eyes ten times more frantic than mine. "We get the girl and go."

They were all keeping a hand underneath their coats.

“I agree,” another one of the men spoke up. “I don’t have a good feeling about this. It feels like ghosts are moving through the trees. It’s June, but it feels like February.”

At the exact moment the man said the words, the trees rustled. One of the men crossed himself. Another one took a step forward and took me by the arm. I tried to wrestle out of his grip, but it was too strong. It was like he’d cuffed my arm to his hand, but it was just his hold. I was going to have a bruise.

“Keep moving,” he said. “I’m not dying for this. I know the Beast is probably close.”

The Beast was tearing apart the ballroom, too lost in his memories to know I was gone. No one else saw me leave. These men were going to take me back to the Craigs.

Then what? Would I have to marry Dermot after I’d just married Cian? The thought sickened me. I’d refuse to do it, even if they threatened me with death.

We walked ahead, the cuff keeping me close, while everyone else created a circle around us.

One of the guys must have stepped on the train of my dress, and I stopped short.

He lifted his hands when I glared at him. “It’s hard to see in the dark.”

After a few more steps, the leader held his hand up and we all stopped. He put a hand to his mouth. I didn’t hear anything but the rustling of trees and grass. The weather was sweet, and so was the scent in the air.

It was turning out to be a gorgeous night—as beautiful as the day, if it hadn’t ended this way.

A whistle sounded through the air, then it sounded like a watermelon cracked, and the man next to me dropped like a sack. I could barely control the moan that came from my mouth when I realized his head had split in two from a sword impaling it. I looked up, expecting to see someone in the tree, but it was empty.

Everyone around me started to move closer. The guy holding me set me in front of him, holding my arm even tighter.

“Oh hell—” The guy’s words were cut off when his head was.

I couldn’t move my eyes away as it rolled, the eyes still open.

The guy holding me made an *ung* noise as he let me go. Fiona’s knife was stained with fresh blood as she held it in her hands, her teeth bared. She blinked at me, then clasped my arm and pulled me back, taking a knife from her belt and handing it to me.

It was the oddest thing to bond over, but in that moment, I felt like I was a part of the family.

An arrow sliced through the air and hit another guy in the chest. But the rest—the rest the Beast was destroying with a sword.

The last guy standing had a gun and was shooting backward as he ran. It didn’t take long for Cian to get close enough to snatch him by the back of his shirt. He turned the gun toward Cian and pulled the trigger.

My entire body froze, preparing for the blast, but nothing happened. He was out of bullets.

The moment the truth made it to the last man standing’s eyes—he was about to die—all the blood drained from his face, and he held his hands up in trembling surrender.

There was no mercy in Cian’s eyes. He stabbed the sword through the man’s heart and let him fall to the ground with it.

It didn’t even seem like Cian was breathing. He was completely still, like death itself. Then he twitched, and I could imagine his heart starting to pump again, the first taste of air bittersweet.

He turned around slowly and met my eyes. He made a pained noise in his throat, swayed on his feet, and fell to the ground.

CHAPTER 12

MAEVE

Between Keenan, Fiona, Henry—who had walked up right after Cian had collapsed—and me, we got Cian to his office and sat him down in a chair.

It looked like he'd been drugged. His eyes were lowered, but his pupils were dilated, drowning out the gray. Blood was splattered on his skin, especially his forehead, and on his clothes. Fiona got a fire going, and the flames danced over his face.

It was June, too warm outside for a fire, but the castle kept a chill, and I was feeling it. I stood off to the side, turning the ring on my finger. I didn't realize it wasn't the one I usually wore. It was the wedding ring Cian had given me. A gold band that was in the shape of a V, a diamond at its point. It wasn't gaudy, but it wasn't simple either.

It fit me, and I loved the way it felt on my finger. I knew it was there, but it was subtle—not a heavy burden to carry around. Just a reminder of the connection we now shared.

The diamond caught the soft light of the fire and shimmered. So pretty.

Henry came back with Beatrice a minute or two later. She was holding what looked like a shower caddy but was filled with medical supplies. Keenan took it from her and set it down on a table next to the chair Cian sat in.

“All right, lad.” He motioned for Cian to sit up some. “Let's see what's goin' on.”

Cian had lost the jacket to his suit, and it was the first time I'd noticed a blossom of red blood on his shoulder. It had soaked through the white fabric of his button-down shirt. After I noticed it, I could smell it in the air. Like the heat from the fire was making it stronger. Cian didn't move, though. His eyes turned up to meet Keenan's, and something passed between them.

Keenan looked between Cian and me. He sighed. "All right, lad," he whispered. "Maeve knows where to find me if you need me." He looked at me. "That'd be at the bar."

I nodded, but I wasn't sure if I wanted them to stay or go. I wasn't sure what to say, how to break the ice between us, but maybe if we were alone...

Keenan nodded toward the door, wanting Fiona to move. She was hesitant to leave us alone. She stopped before she was fully out the room, and the black bow headband she wore fell to the side of her face. It was chiffon and looked like something from the '80s. It matched her dress. As usual, she wore combat boots underneath the chiffon and tulle. She went to fix the headpiece, but Keenan reached out and fixed it for her.

For a moment, I forgot about my unease and fixated on what had just happened between Keenan and Fiona. She had jerked like she'd been electrocuted when Keenan had touched her, but only because other eyes were in the room, it seemed like.

She rushed out a second later. Keenan followed behind, closing the doors.

I sighed out a heavy breath, deciding not to plan my next steps. I was just going to go with what felt natural, so maybe some of the awkwardness between us would thaw.

Those two gray storms—Cian's eyes—followed me around the room. Watched me as I went to the table with whiskey and poured him a glass. I held it out and waited with bated breath to see if he'd take it.

Our eyes held for a second, long enough for me to get caught up in his, before he took the glass from me.

I kept the relief tucked inside as I said, “I need to make sure it looks okay.” I nodded toward his shoulder.

He didn’t give me a sign of permission, but I went in anyway, keeping my eyes away from his. It was hard to breathe when he looked at me with his entire focus. It was like I was the only other person in existence, and it was the first time he was interacting with me. But he was going to try to force me to look at him, because after I undid his buttons, he refused to sit up.

“Sit up some,” I whispered, keeping my eyes averted. “Your shirt needs to come off.”

He gave me just enough room to maneuver the shirt from his back and get it off. I tried to not to stare, but it was nearly impossible not to.

The man was *fine*.

He had the body of a warrior. His skin was so taut over every muscle, they created valleys and peaks, the veins roads. It was like a map to battle grounds.

His stomach rippled in the firelight, and so did two tattoos that started below the belt and reached his ribs. Stag antlers. In Celtic culture the stag represented the power of the other world—the realm of the dead. It also stood for the wildness of nature, how untamed it was.

The stag, in *this* realm, was powerful, agile, elegant even, and sexually...it had stamina.

The last one—stamina—seemed to flow through his veins like plasma. He seemed to emit a masculinity that made the woman in me respond in ways I wasn’t used to. My insides seemed to swell, and it felt like my skin was suddenly too tight. The fire felt like it was blistering me.

I was starting to get overheated.

It wasn’t only me.

A glistening bead of sweat ran from Cian's throat down his chest. I had to tame down the urge to follow its trail and dry it with my finger. Maybe if things had been good between us, I would have acted on impulse and done it. But cold awkwardness lingered between us, and hot anger lurked in the depths of his eyes.

I forced my eyes to the wound on his shoulder. It had bled over, and rivulets of blood ran down his arm and dried to his skin. The wound had clotted too. It looked like some kind of weapon had probably grazed him.

"It doesn't look bad," I whispered. "You were lucky. It's too far away from your heart."

He grunted, like lucky was the last thing he was. I sighed and went to the caddy with all the medical supplies. The wound needed to be cleaned. I grabbed some sterile cleaning strips and liquid antibiotic ointment. I noticed items for sutures but decided if he needed those, I'd call for Keenan.

I didn't think so, though. The wound had clotted on its own.

Cian's stare was on my face as I moved closer to dab the soaked cloth against his skin. A tendril of my hair fell and skimmed his face at the same time my fingers brushed his shoulder. Even though my skin felt hot, his was even hotter. and my fingers were cold in comparison.

He almost convulsed at my touch. A mixture between a painful and pleasurable noise escaped his mouth. Goosebumps puckered his skin.

Taking a slow breath, I dabbed the cloth over the wound. His hand gripped the chair like a paw with claws, and he flung the glass of whiskey at the fireplace. It went up in a ball of fire. A growl erupted from his chest. He glared at me.

I glared back, about to set my hands on my hips, prepared to chew him out. But in a lightning quick move, he moved my arms away from my body.

It took me a second to understand what he wanted. He didn't want me to touch my dress. Maybe so I wouldn't stain it

with blood?

I pointed the cloth at him instead. “I have to clean it, or it might get infected.” I moved closer to him, dabbing it again. He hissed out a breath but didn’t throw a fit this time. After a few more touches, I cleared my throat. “I didn’t mean to find that...ballroom. We got lost and went through the wrong door.”

He turned his face away, refusing to look at me. I finished cleaning the wound in silence, wrapping his shoulder in bandages until Keenan could properly look at it.

Even though Cian was always quiet, it never felt silent around him. Looking back, it seemed like we had both participated in conversations. In that moment, I heard everything but him—the crackle of the fire, the noises of the castle, even the sound of his breathing.

I walked over to the fireplace and turned to the mantle. An antique portrait done in oils hung above it. Maybe it was of the first owners of the castle.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I really didn’t mean to hurt you. Whatever—” or whoever “—exists in that room is yours, and it wasn’t my right to let it out. It belongs to you.”

He said nothing. He usually acknowledged me in some kind of way. The silence between us was consuming me. A few breaths later, I decided the tension was too thick and started for the door. As my hand touched the handle—

“Maeve.”

I froze.

The voice that had called out to me was almost whispered, raw enough to be bloodied.

“Don’t. Leave. Me.” Each word was punctuated, like he was making sure his words came out right.

I couldn’t move for a few seconds. His voice was deep and so beautiful, it was hard to comprehend it came from the same man who hadn’t talked to me since I first met him. And the way he’d pronounced my name? MAYV. Perfectly and like it

was made for his lips... I had to gather the courage to turn and face him. I didn't want him to see how hard hearing his voice and using it to say my name had affected me, because I didn't want him to feel self-conscious about it.

Our eyes met.

He nodded, as if answering the breathless thoughts running around in my head. "I. Can. Talk."

"You haven't. Not to me."

"Not. To. Anyone." He cleared the sand from his throat. "Only you."

"Only me?" I released a strained breath, having a hard time even imagining what would make a person with a voice refuse to talk. Then I remembered the blood in that room...

"Only. You."

"This is your first time talking to someone in...how long, Cian?" My voice was soft.

"It's. Been. A. While."

Again, I didn't want to make a big deal of this—of him talking—because he seemed almost skittish. On the inside, though, I was freaking out.

He was talking to me. *Truly* talking to me.

I took a couple steps toward him. "I shouldn't have run from you—"

He moved out of the chair so fast that I lost my breath. He caught me by the arms before I could move away from him. He looked down at me, his forehead dotted with sweat, his eyes frantic.

"*You*. Promised."

"*You* scared me."

His face seemed set, but in a burst of movement, he moved it away from me. He closed his eyes. "I. Would. Never. Hurt. You."

"Promise?"

He nodded, then maybe remembering he was talking to me, turned his face back. His eyes were solid on mine. “I swear it on my parents.”

His parents. No one had mentioned them. I wondered once or twice who they were, but I never brought it up. I wasn’t going to. Cian would tell me in his own time.

What we were doing—communicating with words—was huge enough.

“I won’t run again,” I whispered. “I swear it on...my mom.”

I had a feeling whatever happened in that ballroom might have happened to his parents, so it felt right including my mom in our pact.

The mood was suddenly darker, more tense, and I wanted to lighten it. I lifted a finger. “A caveat. I won’t run away from you unless you’re chasing me.”

His brow furrowed, and I had to bite my lip from laughing. “That was supposed to be a joke, Cian.”

His forehead relaxed, and so did the set of his face. I’d get him to smile if it was the last thing I ever did.

His eyes searched mine. “You’ll tell me everythin’ I want to know now.”

“Yes.”

“What are you thinkin’?” The question almost flew out of his mouth, like it had been on the tip of his tongue for centuries.

It was so...curious, nosy almost, and I had to stop myself from laughing again. I didn’t want him to think I was laughing *at* him. It just made me so happy that he trusted me enough to share his voice with me.

“How I think you should smile—and I’ll get you to.” I twisted my wedding band around my finger. I was curious about him too, but a little anxious to ask. “Will you tell me everything I want to know now too?”

“Aye.”

Confirmed. He most definitely had an Irish accent.

“What are *you* thinking?” I returned the question.

“I need to make you mine, Maeve O’Callaghan.” His eyes heated, the same way they did when I thought he was hungry last week.

A trembling breath whispered past my parted lips. He wasn’t hungry for food at all. He was hungry for *me*. I turned my eyes to the floor, giving myself a second to work up the courage to be honest.

“I need that too,” I whispered. My eyes slowly rose to meet his. His irises reflected the fire around the sides, and I was in the center—in his pupils. It was the perfect way to describe how I was feeling. “I’ve never...I’ve never had a man, so...I’ve never been with one.”

“One less man for me to kill then.”

Nothing on his face showed a hint of kidding. He was being dead serious.

He took my hand and wrapped it in his. It engulfed mine. I felt completely at ease, at home, and never safer.

“You will be my first as well.”

I kept my face even, but deep down...*what?!* How could that be true? He was so fine—I’d lost track of how many women I’d noticed watching him when we’d gone to Galway.

Then it hit me.

Really *hit* me.

He’d cut himself off from almost everyone and everything. It seemed like his sole focus had become...fighting. Surviving this world. It didn’t seem like Cian O’Callaghan had truly learned how to live, how to trust enough to let life and all its little pleasures in.

Somehow, without me realizing it, I had become someone he trusted.

I squeezed his hand and nodded. “It’ll only ever be us then.”

He leaned down and kissed me, like he was making an unbreakable promise. His lips were warm against mine but not all that soft—like him. It started out slow, then our tongues touched for the first time. I made a noise of deep pleasure in my throat, and he growled into my mouth. A second later, he scooped me up in his arms and carried me upstairs.

CHAPTER 13

MAEVE

It threw me some when Cian carried me to my room. I thought we'd be going to his. He set me down on the bed and took a step back, staring at me.

My heart was pounding in my ears, and my breaths were hard to catch.

Anticipation was clawing at my chest.

“Are we not going to your room?” I breathed out.

He tilted his head. “I don't have a room.” His voice was deep, raspy, and his words came out slow.

“I thought...” My voice trailed off.

“I didn't have a room until now. My room is wherever yours is.”

All those mornings he was standing outside of my door, sometimes sleeping, he'd been there the entire time, orbiting around wherever I was.

A sadness so profound that it made my eyes burn suddenly overtook me.

He'd aimlessly walked these halls like a ghost, only living for the hunt—of what though? To rule Boston? To take it from the Craigs because he wanted it? Or because there was a deeper, more personal side to the story?

I believed the latter, but it wasn't the time.

Hiking my dress up higher, I revealed the garter around my thigh. Beatrice had given it to me. My something blue. She'd

even attached a book charm to it.

“You’re not dead, Cian O’Callaghan,” I whispered. “I see you standing right in front of me. I can feel how warm you are from here.”

And I was about to prove it to him.

More than anything, I wanted to feel him come alive beneath my touch. I wanted to feel his breath wash across my lips and his heart pound against mine. I wanted his blood to rush in his veins, and for him to feel high without having to kill to do it. I wanted him to feel so human that he felt... vulnerable, but still safe with me.

A pained sound reverberated in his throat, but it seemed like my words wrapped around him and pulled him forward, closer to me. He ran a finger from my knee to my thigh, circling the garter.

My breath rushed out, and I shivered from his touch. But my eyes were still locked on his as he took a knee in front of me and slowly inched the lacy fabric down. He slid it over my foot before setting it on the bed. He removed both of my heels, setting them to the side.

He stood to his full height and disappeared into the bathroom. I heard the shower come on, and steam billowed out once the water got hot enough. He appeared in a cloud of it, nodding to the bathroom. He waited for me to walk past him before he stepped behind me. I faced the mirror, his body behind mine.

“I’m going to need some help with the dress. Beatrice strapped me in pretty good.”

His eyes turned down to the back of the dress, studying it before he started to release me from it. My breath rushed out as it fell to the floor. He picked it up right after, almost reverently, and hung it on the hanger it had been on before.

With his back to me, I had a feeling his eyes were taking in the gown. It was confirmed when they stilled on the hem. Where the blood stains were. It was clear they were not fresh, but from long ago. It was almost rust colored.

“Cian,” I whispered.

Stay with me, stay with me, stay with me, I almost chanted.

He shook his head and turned to face me. All I had on was the lacy white garments that went underneath the dress. His eyes lowered and heated when he took my body in. They caught fire when I fully undressed and stood before him naked.

I felt okay in my skin. Delaney had always told me I was perfect as is, and if a guy couldn't accept me, flaws and all, *away with him anyway*. But I felt a little different when Cian stared at me.

I wanted him to want me—want me as much as I wanted him. So much I could barely stand it. Like my heart wanted to claw out of my body so he could have it.

He took one step, two, until his body almost touched mine. The steam from the shower made the blood on his skin turn to liquid again, and it was dripping down his face. It made him look animalistic, feral, but it still couldn't touch his eyes.

How lost he was inside of mine.

His hand came up and loosened my hair. It cascaded down my shoulders in soft waves. He set his hand underneath and buried his fingers in it. His hold wasn't painful, but I felt it... how much he wanted to devour my mouth.

“Maeve,” he ground out. “Intoxicatin’”

It could have been the humidity in the bathroom filling my lungs and making it hard to breathe, but I knew it was him.

No, it was *us*.

This moment.

Especially when he undressed the entire way and stood naked in front of me.

We couldn't take our eyes of each other.

In the office, when I'd gotten his shirt off, I'd only uncovered half the art. He was all bold bones and strong muscle—and his face? It was gorgeous, but there was

something wild about it. Like his spirit. It was untamed in a way I noticed Ireland was.

I sighed. No book had ever captured what I was seeing in person.

My eyes were steady on his until he took me by the hand and led me into the shower. It had two heads, water spraying from each side, and he stepped into one as I stepped into the other.

Our eyes couldn't seem to let go.

I could tell, though, that he was eager to wash the blood off.

Me too.

He turned and my eyes narrowed. One of those Celtic crosses was done in ink and covered almost his entire back. But what caught my attention was the date at the bottom. It reminded me of a gravestone.

There was so much I still had to learn about the man standing in front of me.

I tilted my head back, letting the water rush over my hair as I tried to relax some. It felt like my anxiety was cornered in my lower stomach, and it was making my nipples ache.

A slow breath slipped past my lips when he ran a finger down my stomach. His fingers were calloused, like he'd been doing hard labor. I loved the contrast between the softness of my skin and the roughness of his.

"It's okay," I barely got out. "You can touch me... wherever you want."

His hand slid up my body, and I trembled when his finger slid between my breasts, up my throat, to my chin and then lips. He traced the shape of them and then stuck his finger in my mouth. I opened my eyes and met his as I circled my tongue around it and then sucked a little. He made a strangled noise in his throat, pulling his finger out and sliding it back in.

The breath left my lungs when he dug his hand in my hair, pushed me against the wall, and started kissing me. His tongue

reached out to mine, and mine reached out to his. He tasted so good, like whiskey and mint.

I lost all control of myself and let go completely.

My hands reached out for his shoulders, and I held on while he seemed to transport me from this world and into his with a magical kiss.

Everything seemed to melt.

His free hand skimmed down my waist, my thigh, and when he touched me between the legs...I jerked into him, moaning.

“Fuck.” His erection pressed against my stomach. “I can’t wait. You smell so sweet...and your mouth, it might kill me.”

He kept kissing me, though, despite the danger.

Our tongues swirled, the sweet taste of the water coming between our mouths. Our scents seemed to dance in the humid air, and our bodies craved an even deeper connection.

He lifted me up and urged my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. He carried me to the bed, and pushing the duvet aside, set me down.

My chest burned like I’d run laps. My lungs felt like I’d been underwater too long and needed air.

Still, my body ached for more.

More of him, for what felt like forever.

His body dripped water, and so did my hair. It was sticking to me, but it felt like each droplet running down my skin only made me feel more sensitive.

I reached for him, and he climbed in next to me, our mouths coming together again. His hands started to explore, and when he touched my nipple and set his hand between my leg, I pushed against his fingers.

“That feel good?”

“Yes,” I breathed.

His hands started to move faster, and I was making noises I had no clue I could. Pressure was building between my legs. I had no control over it. And when it reached a crescendo, I went off, convulsing.

When I opened my eyes, Cian was studying my face. He leaned in close and kissed me. It didn't take long before I got lost in him again. My hands gently explored his skin, up and down his ribs, and he shivered. I broke the kiss when I needed to take a breath.

"I can't stop myself from this," he barely got out. "My cock is leadin' me." He situated himself between my legs, and I had to part my thighs to accommodate his size.

He stared down at me, and I nodded. I sucked in a breath when he entered me slowly. He made a noise deep, deep in his throat. I tried to relax my muscles, but my body almost seemed feverish. My nails were digging into his trembling arms.

He was trying to hold back.

"Don't," I whispered. "Don't hold yourself back. I want this. I'm giving myself to you too."

He inched in even deeper, and I bit my lip at the sharp pain. He'd breached me. He stopped for a second, but I encouraged him to keep moving by moving my hips some. Especially when he started to make wild noises in his throat.

He closed his eyes, tilting his head back, when he'd fully entered me to the hilt. I ran my hand down his throat, stopping when I came to his heart. It beat against my palm like a frantic drum. Sweat beaded on his temples, and a light sheen of it coated his skin.

I leaned forward some, biting and sucking on his neck, and it spurred him to move faster, harder, until he jerked underneath my hands and spilled himself inside of me.

Silence consumed us after, but this time, it took both of us.

CHAPTER 14

CIAN

I 'd stared at her for so long after she fell asleep, a voice inside of my mind told me she was dead. I kept watchin' the rise and fall of her chest. Kept stickin' my finger underneath her nose to feel the warmth of her breath.

It was like she was so far underneath my skin that she was as permanent as blood. As vital as it too. Even though I knew it was normal for her to bleed the first time, the memory of it kept fuckin' with my head.

The thought of losin' her...

I stood from the bed, pacin' the floor. I had no fuckin' clue what to do with myself. I needed her awake. Smilin' at me, warmin' me like the sun. Laughin' in that carefree way she had.

My cock ached to be buried inside her again. I knew what to do with it when I was alone, but I wasn't. And a fist couldn't compare to being inside of her.

Tight. Slick. Warm.

A mindless bliss that also kept me rooted.

A perfect chaos only a woman could cause.

My woman.

The thought of it was drivin' me mad.

What if she needed the sleep, though? What if she got sick because I was a selfish bastard? She was such a wee thing. Even the bed ate her up.

Maybe she needed somethin' to replenish the blood? Red meat to get her iron up? I'd find somethin' in the kitchen. If we were all out, I'd kill somethin' for her.

“Cian?”

At the sound of her soft voice, my feet stopped like she controlled them.

“Yeah.” My voice came out ragged.

She sat up, rubbin' her palms against her eyes. Her hair cascaded down her shoulders, covering her breasts, and I never wanted her to take it down for anyone but me. The woman was beautiful when it was pulled up, but she turned into somethin' else entirely when her hair flowed down.

A mystical creature from one of the books she loved so much.

“What's wrong?” she whispered.

Words were lost. Couldn't find 'em to tell her all the thoughts runnin' through my head and makin' my chest tight.

Her eyes held mine until they moved down my body. They landed on my stiff cock. It jutted out like a sword. Swung like one, too, when I moved.

“Oh,” she breathed out. She met my eyes, and hers seemed to burn, and it made me feel like I was cookin' on the inside. She patted the spot next to her. When I took it, she pulled me down to her mouth and started to kiss me.

Her mouth was so fuckin' sweet. I had to tear my lips away from hers to clear my head.

“Hungry.” That wasn't what I wanted to say. I cleared my throat. “You need to eat.”

Her eyes searched mine. “You're worried about me?”

I nodded and set my hand between her thighs, squeezin'.

“Because of the blood...” She bit her lip, and I easily read the look on her face—she was tryin' to choose her next words carefully. “I'm better than fine, Cian. I'm a little sore, but

that's it. I don't need to eat food to feel better. I just need... you."

"Why. Are. You. Hesitant with me?" I forced the words out.

She sighed. "Your eyes—they're wild. I'm not afraid of you, but I don't want to say the wrong thing. I want to put you at ease."

"Never," I rushed out. "I love the sound of your voice. It... eases me."

She looked down at her hands. I tucked my finger underneath her chin and moved her face up so she would look at me, but she kept her eyes to the wall.

She breathed out, like she'd been holdin' her breath. "I love the sound of your voice too. I love that you talk to me. And when you kiss and touch me..." Her eyes finally met mine. "I love that too. I want you as much as you want me."

"No fuckin' way."

The way she looked at me, with stars in her eyes, made me feel like the sky.

With her chin still in my grip, I leaned in and kissed her. Her mouth was sweet, but so was the scent of her skin, the taste of it. It was like smooth honey as my tongue explored her neck, down her chest. She laughed a little when I circled my tongue around her navel. She sucked in a breath when I licked her thighs, getting close to her center. My honey. Her thighs started to tremble, and my cock twitched when she parted them.

I'd never been face to face with it before—it reminded me of an open rose, her delicate rosy lips soft like petals against my skin, but the center...honey.

The scent...intoxicatin' as the perfume of the flower on a hot summer's day.

All the blood rushed to my cock and it made my head hazy.

The same sort of madness took over my brain as it did before a kill, but this time it felt much lighter, but more potent. I was in the moment, but already so deep inside of her.

I groaned when my tongue licked up her center. Her legs clamped shut and she moaned deep inside of her chest before she relaxed and parted for me again. She was drippin' wet for me.

As my mouth started to devour her, she started to buck her hips, rubbin' against me.

I fuckin' loved it.

How mad she was becomin'.

Ridin' my face. Makin' feral noises. Pullin' my hair and beggin' for more.

She trembled when I slid my finger inside of her, my tongue as wild as my breaths. When I reached up and started to tease her nipple, she went off like a comet in the sky. I was rewarded with her pleasure, drinkin' it all to the last drop.

She convulsed a little when I licked her again. She clamped her legs shut, and my head was caught between. A trap I wanted to stay in forever. I was breathin' in her scent like air.

"That was..." Her breath was comin' in pants, and her eyes were closed. "I'm so sensitive now, but..."

She reached for me, and I took my place beside her. We started to kiss. My cock skimmed her leg and I growled. My cock was ragin', like it was about to burst through the sheath it was in from that light touch alone.

She went to pull me on top of her, but I shook my head.

"You're sore." My voice was rough.

"Just a little." Her voice matched mine. "And it's...a delicious ache. Like you made a mark on my bones. Cian O'Callaghan's mark."

Before I could move, she turned over and climbed on top of me. She sat on me like I was her king, and my cock was her

throne. She came down, her hair fannin' around me in chestnut waves, and kissed me so deep, it felt like she took somethin' vital with her when she rose and started to move.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I grasped her hips in my hands, barely able to keep myself from comin' so soon. She looked into my eyes like she knew how much pleasure she was bringin' me, and it was makin' her high.

Her palms against my chest, she lifted some, almost takin' herself away from me, and came down. I had to fight the urge to flip her over, pull her hair, and fuck her until she screamed out in pleasure.

“Do you like this, Cian?”

Words were stuck in my fuckin' throat. I gripped her hips harder and brought my hips up, slammin' into her. She hissed out a breath and started to move faster. Beads of sweat dripped down her skin and splashed against my chest.

We started to find a rhythm between the way she swirled her hips and the way I surged up. Our bodies were slammin', and my balls were slappin' against her gee.

“Feels so good!” She made a garbled noise in her throat, and even though I was still learnin' the ways of her body, I knew she was about to shatter around my cock.

The pressure in my balls had grown into a storm, and at the exact moment she let go, so did I. We exploded into each other, shakin' and shiverin', gruntin' and screamin'.

Her head fell to my chest, and her soft breath breezed across my skin, like a tepid wind over the lough. I set my hand on her back, gently movin' my fingers up and down the nubs of her vertebra. She shivered and lifted her head some. Our eyes met before she closed hers and kissed me on the lips.

The night grew silent as my heart beat slower and my breaths came easier. She tucked her head underneath my chin and sighed.

“You know how Dermot Craig was going to force me to marry him?”

I held her tighter, and she made a strangled noise. She wiggled some, to let me know I was probably puttin’ too much strain on her ribs, and I released her some.

“Pauric told us the night he came to the house in Boston.” My voice was shredded and cold. Not at her, but at the thought of the devil’s son havin’ my wife. “You didn’t want him in return, seein’ as your Da came lookin’ for me for help.”

She shook her head, the small tendrils of her hair ticklin’ my nose. “Marriage to Dermot Craig felt like a death sentence.” Our eyes met in the glowin’ darkness.

“We were forced to have dinner at Oran’s house the same night he went looking for you. Oran told me to start planning the wedding—it was going to happen the next week. I was uncomfortable. Didn’t want to be there. I just wanted to leave, but it felt like the evening was timeless in an endless way. Then...”

She took a breath. “One of Oran’s men interrupted dinner. He said, *Cillian, now known as Cian, O’Callaghan is trying to buy guns in Boston*, and...the dinner was over. My misery was over, for the time being. I guess what I’m trying to say is... Even before I knew you, you saved me, Cian.”

She grew quiet for a minute or two. Then she reached up and set her palm against my neck, over my pulse.

“Even though our marriage isn’t conventional, if I knew you under different circumstances, I would have picked you. You’re mine.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but the words were stuck in my throat. I had to clear it to set them free. “I was there with you, Maeve O’Callaghan. I’ll always be with you. You’re mine.”

“We belong to each other,” she whispered.

“What’s mine is yours.”

“And what’s mine is yours.” She took my hand and entwined our fingers together. “Not just materialistic things either. I’m talking everything. What happens to you happens to me. Yesterday. This second. Tomorrow.”

She didn’t make a sound when I sat us up and went to the closet, setting her on her feet. I dug in the closet for something for her to wear. I found a white silk slip and pulled it over her head and arms. I grabbed a blood-red cloak with fur trimming. It was warm outside, but she might get chilled if it was windy. I dug in the other closet, where all my things had been brought. I slipped a T-shirt over my head and stepped into a pair of sweats.

I picked her up and carried her downstairs. I stuffed my feet into a pair of boots, not bothering with the ties, and started for the hill.



WHENEVER WE WENT for walks around the castle, Maeve would keep her attention on the property and me equally, but the entire walk up the hill, her eyes were on my face. She was probably wonderin’ where I was takin’ her.

Maybe she had an idea. Maybe she didn’t.

She kept quiet, though, as we climbed higher and higher, the full silver moon our light. The wind grew stronger with the elevation. The fur on the coat rippled, and her hair slipped free and waved around the hood. When I started to slow, I felt the weight of her stare move away from me and forward.

The stones were still stacked as they were, but Keenan and I had stacked them even higher, creatin’ a fence around the crosses. There were three, two full size and one a lot smaller, names and a shared date engraved.

Conor O’Callaghan

Mona O’Callaghan

Baby O’Callaghan

Instead of climbin' over with Maeve in my arms, I set her down on the other side, then used my hands and hopped over. My feet were silent as always, as silent as the thing inside of my chest had become. Enterin' this space was a reminder of who I would never be.

A man conquerin' normal goals and dreams. A man who had a normal past that shaped a normal future.

I was a dead kid who walked around with a beast-sized vendetta. My future was shaped by a past that had killed me.

Maeve's feet were bare, and her footsteps were quiet in the waverin' grass as she moved toward the three crosses buried in the ground. Close enough, her eyes narrowed, maybe tryin' to read the names and date in the darkness. Even though the moon was bright, it was still hard to see.

I saw the tears, though, when they slipped down her cheeks. They glinted in the moonlight like diamonds. She bent down and picked wildflowers that grew around the stone markers. She placed them in front of Da, Mam, and the baby. The only one who ever did the same was Fiona. She'd come up and visit sometimes. She'd give them flowers, and I'd see her mouth movin'. She talked to them.

All they got from me was silence, but that was to be expected. I'd been buried in the fourth spot next to them. The weight of that patch of grass was still on top of me. I could still smell the dirt in my nose and my own vomit. I still felt the bite marks from the bugs and could swear they were eatin' away at my flesh—second by second.

My body moved about the world with the reminders, but my soul was buried six feet under. I'd left it there, knowing one day I'd be back to collect it.

Some men claim there is no heaven or hell. Just where our feet happen to land in this reality. I couldn't accept that belief, or any, because lookin' up from the ground was all I could remember.

All I had was that moment.

This one.

The next one.

To seek vengeance.

On a wintry night in Boston, I found the truth.

There are two levels to this world.

Hell would be where she didn't exist.

Heaven—I glanced at Maeve—was her.

She gave me hope that my parents and my brother or sister were drownin' in the love they had for each other.

Quietly, as if she didn't want to disturb anythin', Maeve stood. She barely brushed my hand when she moved around me, comin' to stand behind my back. Her touch was softer than the wind's when she lifted my shirt and traced the cross on my back.

She realized the truth, and she tried to move me from my spot, but I refused to be moved. I stood where I'd hid that night—where the fourth cross would have been if Craig's men would have found me. It was the one tattooed on my back. It had no name. Just a matchin' date.

“You. Are. Not. Dead.” Each of her words were whispered but punctuated by anger tinged with anguish. “You. Don't. Belong. Here. You belong with me.” She started to cry.

No one had ever cried for me like that. And for the first time, I felt somethin' I hadn't remembered feelin' before.

Guilt.

I never wanted to see her hurt. I'd kill to stop it. But I didn't know how. I gave her this because what was mine was hers, and she needed to know the truth about me since she'd be spendin' eternity with me.

Her forehead rested on my back and her arms came around my chest. “You're not dead, Cian. Please believe me. I feel you.” She held me tighter, placin' her hand over the spot where my heart should be. “You're with me. Right here. Right now. No matter what happened here—and, oh, God, I can only

imagine, even if it *kills* me to—you're safe with me. I love you, Cian.

“You know what that means? You get to live while we still have life to share, and even after it's over, we still get to have each other. That's what love means. Our souls get so tangled, we never have to let go. But until that day, we're here, together, and you're going to *live* with me.”

She cried as she kissed my back. I entwined our fingers together like she'd done earlier. Everythin' I was learnin' about love and life, I was learnin' from her. Because I was so fuckin' lost, and not knowin' how to make her better was killin' me all over again.

“You fight in a war for what you need to heal—and I'll fight for you, Cian O'Callaghan. I'll fight to keep you here with me. That's *my* vow to you.”

I'd never uttered a word on this sacred ground until then. “I am dead, have been for years. But you, Maeve O'Callaghan, you are my life. I live as long as you do.”

Keepin' her arms around me, she moved to my front, lookin' up into my eyes with her doe ones. The hood had blown back from the wind, and her hair was as wild as a spinnin' tornado. Her eyes glowed from the light of the moon. Her face was pale against the darkness of her hair. Tears rolled down her cheeks. I used my thumbs to dry them.

“We understand each other then.” Gone was the weakness in her voice—she'd taken her anger and anguish and turned it into steel.

“We do,” I agreed.

She took my hand, leadin' me away from my spot, and we walked back to the castle, our pulses as in sync as our bodies.

CHAPTER 15

MAEVE

It had been two weeks since our wedding.

Two weeks and a day since Cian had brought me up the hill to see the crosses. I couldn't help but stare in that direction when we were out on the property. The days were warm and humid—sometimes it would even rain when the sun was shining—but I still felt cold when the memory took me back.

It was like it traveled with me from the haunted ballroom to the source. Where Cian's parents and his brother or sister would forever rest.

He never told me exactly what had happened, but I'd pieced most of the story together when I stepped over that stone fence. And when he stood next to the three markers, the tattoo on his back made sense.

That was his marker.

It stood as a reminder.

He was a dead man walking.

I shivered, even though my clothes were soaked with sweat.

“Be mindful of snakes!” Beatrice shouted toward Fiona and me.

I lifted my head from the bramble around the hedgerow and dropped the wild blackberries I'd just picked into the basket. Beatrice had invited Fiona and me to pick berries while we had our book-club meeting.

It seemed like Beatrice just needed extra hands. We hadn't discussed the book once. She hummed while she worked. Fiona was being quieter than usual. She wore what looked like a beekeeper's outfit, hat with net and all, but all black, steadily picking berries. She reminded me of an undertaker for bees.

I'd read the book many times before—it was my favorite, the pirate story—so it didn't matter to me if we discussed it or not. Even if it would have been a new story everyone was hyped about, I wouldn't have had the time to read it.

Cian was keeping me...occupied lately. It felt almost impossible to disconnect from him. And being outside, distance between us, seemed to make us both anxious. Every few seconds, we'd look for each other, and our eyes would meet.

My breath caught when he felt me watching him as he fished in the lough with Keenan and my dad and looked up.

The heat streaming between us wasn't just the weather.

It had just been an hour or two, and I couldn't wait to be near him again.

Setting a hand on my wide-brimmed sun hat, I gave him a wave and a smile. He lifted his hand but didn't return the smile.

I was more determined than ever to get one from him.

To get him to live again.

I just wasn't sure how to get him down mentally and emotionally from that hill. As long as the reminder was so close, he kept returning to it.

The constant uncertainty in his eyes, even if we were only this far from each other, broke my heart.

He was afraid of losing me to an extent I'd probably never know. But I didn't mind being near him. We just...fit, and the world was a better place when he was close. I just hoped the paranoia that pushed him so close to me all the time would ease.

What he carried around wasn't light. I wanted to take some of that burden from him. I couldn't promise everything would be okay, because I knew how uncertain life could be, but I could help him bear it.

"Good lookin' lad, isn't he?" Beatrice nudged me with her elbow and set her full basket down next to mine.

I laughed a little. "*Good* is not a strong enough adjective."

She smiled. "Could've used a stronger one, but I wouldn't want to give you a swollen head, seein' as he's your husband and all."

I laughed even louder. Cian's eyes snapped up.

"Never thought I'd see the day." Beatrice wiped sweat from her brow. "Cian O'Callaghan in love. You are his life now."

The truth hit me square in the heart. I knew it was true, but the reminder was powerful. And maybe since Beatrice and Fiona were becoming women I trusted, they would trust me some too, just like Cian had when he'd taken me to the crosses that belonged to his family. But I wasn't sure if he could ever put into words what had happened to them. It seemed like it was too tragic for him to articulate. He'd buried the secret and himself with it.

Maybe if they trusted me enough...

Watching as the two women continued to forage, I built up the courage to ask. "What happened to Cian's parents and his brother or sister? I know...they're no longer here, buried up on the hill." I nodded toward the area. "Cian took me there. But... I don't know what happened."

Beatrice and Fiona both froze.

A warm wind stirred around us. It was so strong, I had to keep a hand on my hat to keep it from flying off. My heart thundered in my chest. I was anxious about their reactions, but I had to know why Cian was who he was.

Beatrice moved first, setting her spare basket down, sighing into the wind. She stared at Fiona until Fiona blinked

and met her eyes. Beatrice nodded, and Fiona looked at me through the black netting.

“He’s not going to tell her, Fiona.”

Fiona took a seat and looked off into the distance, aimlessly picking grass while she seemed to be thinking. After a minute or two, she whispered, “He can’t.”

Beatrice nodded. “But you can. She should know. She’s his wife. And he took her to the hill. He trusts her.”

Another minute or two passed, and I didn’t think Fiona was going to move. But, finally, she did. She got to her feet and nodded toward the hill, beckoning me to follow her. Beatrice stopped me by taking my hand. She squeezed, hard and fast, then let me go and looked away.

I hurried behind Fiona, trying to keep up with her steps. I didn’t realize until halfway up the hill that she was moving so fast because she didn’t want Cian to follow.

Halfway up the hill, I couldn’t control the impulse to look down. He was staring up at me. I was about to go down when he held a hand up and nodded to Fiona. He took a seat on the ground, grabbing for a long blade of grass, looking away from me.

Fiona was already over the stone fence when I climbed to the top. She lifted the netting and set it over the hat, making her look like a widow in mourning. Her eyes were hard to meet, so I started to pick wildflowers to leave for Cian’s parents and Baby O’Callaghan. It felt right to leave them.

Fiona must have approved. She seemed to relax some, taking a seat in front of the crosses. “Mona was the odd one out. The three of us, Keenan, Conor, and me, were orphans, you can say. Henry’s father, Robin, used to visit us, and we became friends with Henry. Robin had been an orphan at the home before us. He’d give back and that sort of thing. We all found each other in the home. Conor used to say we were the ‘no phone gang.’ We had no one to tell us to phone whenever we got where we were going—no one worried about us like that.”

I took a seat next to her, bending over some to leave the flowers in front of Mona and Conor's markers.

"I would have killed her."

My eyes snapped back to Fiona. She met them straight on.

"If I hadn't felt Mona was right for Conor, I would have. But she was. Sometimes we would give her a hard time, call her Moanin' Mona because she would go on somethin' terrible if she didn't get her way, but she was what Conor needed, ya know? She pushed him when she had to and was gentle when she needed to be. She loved their wee boy more than life. Used to call him Cillian, ya know? He decided on Cian after, wrote it down for us. I think he did it to spite this place." She waved a bug away from her face.

"I would have killed you too, but you fit with us—even more than Mona." She gave me a semblance of a smile, which on her was more like a grimace, and turned to face Mona's grave. "You know it's true, Mona. Don't even try to deny it. She's not much of a complainer." She looked at me. "You're not."

I shrugged.

"Before you came, Mona came to me in dreams, always cryin' about her lad. She stopped after you found him. She found peace." She looked back at Mona's spot. "Haven't ye, Mona?" She closed her eyes for a second, then nodded and whispered, "You have."

"What about Cian?" I whispered. "He hasn't found peace."

"Life has found him—you. Life is *not* peace. Life is a storm, and in the eye, we get momentary glimpses and touches of all the good things. But peace? Peace is somethin' good folks dream about, hopin' to find it when they die."

Fiona turned her face and looked over the hill, toward where the lough would be. "If you don't know it by now, Conor made a deal with the devil. You might know him as Oran Craig. Mona didn't like it. She missed Ireland, and she was unhappy with the way things were goin'. Oran would use Conor for his ideas, tell him he'd give him a certain

percentage, and then give him barely nothin'. Conor got sick of it. He had Mona in his ear, a new babe on the way, and this castle on his mind...he wanted it. He'd always wanted it. He was the bastard son of Cian O'Callaghan, and his entire life, the family rubbed their riches in his face.

"When Conor found out the family was losin' the castle, he found a way to buy it. That was why he was so hellbent on gettin' the gold. Conor had found out that a man had found plenty of it in the sea, like sunken treasure, and if he could get his hands on it, even some of it, it would set us up for life. He involved Keenan and me, but he didn't let Oran know it. Ah, but the castle. It was important to buy it on his own name. He was driven by it. He wanted the family to know he'd bought it from underneath them. And the gold was goin' to be his last go with Craig so he could."

She wiped her hands, like she was done.

"This time, though, Conor was smart. He had plans in play if Oran tried to renege. We had the real gold. The bags Oran had was fool's gold. HA!" She barked out a laugh. "Conor made a fool out of *him*, all right. Oran had one of his men hold a gun to Conor's head as they loaded up the bricks of gold-plated shit and whisked them all away.

"Musta been a sight when Oran went to sell and they told him he was full of shit, aye?" She winked at me, then sighed. "After that, though, Conor couldn't put the castle in his name. Some people run from the law. Conor would spend the rest of his life on the run from Oran. Because where the law brings you in in handcuffs, Oran would make slices all over your body, tie shackles to your feet and legs, then dump you in shark infested waters. We all thought Conor and Mona, along with their wee family, would be safe here, though."

She grew quiet, and the wind whistled softly between us.

"I didn't want to leave that night, but Conor was up in arms about his father's wife puttin' a curse on the castle. She's gone now, and back then she was a bag of rattlin' bones, but everyone around here knew she could cast a good curse. Conor didn't believe in such things, but the bastard part of her tirade

got to him. Perhaps he just wanted a normal night with his family. Time to heal wounds that this place had caused for him growin' up. Here stood all this richness, and not far from here, a boy wore tattered rags and had no one, all because he was the bastard son of Cian O'Callaghan."

She turned toward me. "Oran's men found them that night. Slit both of their throats in front of Cian. Then chased him up the hill here." She nodded toward the cross markers. "His Da had dug out a piece of land for him to hide under. For play, you know? He was goin' to wedge a stick underneath it so Cian could play military. I don't think he could remember anywhere else to go when it was time to run. If it was day, the men would have found him. Seein' as it was night, though, they probably didn't notice.

"We found him three days later, still hidin' underneath the patch. He was breathin' in dirt, but slowly, like he was timin' his breaths. Barely takin' any. He was a child zombie after. Smart as a whip, like Conor, but all the life had drained out of him."

That fourth spot. Where he'd stood the night he'd brought me up here. He wasn't planning on the spot being his grave. It had been. And it kept pulling him back because...it was his safe spot.

Oh God, an anguished voice inside of my head cried. I wanted to reach through time and pull that little boy close. Tell him he wasn't dead. That he had so much life to look forward to. I wanted to tell him monsters do exist, but we could fight them off together. We all had them.

I went to open my mouth, but I couldn't talk around the pain in my heart. Tears fell down my cheeks, cool against my overheated skin. I had to take a few deep breaths. "He stopped talking," I barely got out.

She shook her head. "He stopped livin'." She squeezed my hand so hard it felt like she would break my bones. "Until you."

CHAPTER 16

MAEVE

I ran down the hill so fast, Cian had to catch me before I lost my footing and rolled the rest of the way down. After what Fiona had told me, there was an urgency to get to him. It was like nothing else I'd ever felt before.

Day by day, night by night, I was becoming as attached to him as he was to me. And when *all* the pieces clicked, just those few seconds ago, I couldn't stop the need to be close to him. To protect him. To make him feel better.

Maybe some would call it unhealthy, our need for each other. He was afraid to lose me, and I was determined to protect him from those fears, but in my heart there was nothing unhealthy about it.

It felt right.

Like we were created for each other.

I didn't want to be his grave, but I wanted to be the safe place he could bury himself and hide from the world. My husband could find his shelter there, like I did in his arms.

His eyes were a bit wary, though. Like he was trying to gauge my reaction to him. Then it hit me. He knew Fiona had told me what had happened, and I had a feeling he was waiting for me to agree with him. To tell him all those horrible things defined him, and his life was over, because—how could anyone live after that?

I touched his face. "Even warmer than you were yesterday."

“You’ve been cryin’.” He set his palm against my check, his thumb stroking my clammy skin.

“I’m so sorry, Cian. About what happened to your parents. Your baby brother or sister. I’m so sorry about what happened to you.” I took a breath. “But my heart...it’s not sorry that you lived. And your parents are not sorry either. That’s what they would have wanted for you. To live. That’s what I’d want for my son.”

I took his hand and held it tight. “My dad is eccentric. Sometimes he makes no sense, while other times he’s so quiet, I wonder if he’ll ever talk to me again, but...I believed him when he told me I honor my mom by living. She lives through me. Your parents. Your brother or sister. They live through you too.”

He brought my hand to his mouth and kissed my fingers, then he led me away from the hill. We were quiet as we walked the property, heading toward the same oak he’d taken me to when I first started reading to him.

I had asked Beatrice to set up a picnic for us. A blanket was spread out on the ground, and a basket full of food and drink was left on the branch I’d sat on before. I smiled when I saw my copy of *Moonlight over Rum Sea* tucked in next to it all. Beatrice thought of everything.

It felt much cooler in the shade of the big oak. I took the basket and set it beside us on the blanket. I handed him a cold drink and a sandwich and took one of each for myself.

Words still hadn’t found us, but it wasn’t awkward as we ate in silence. This felt like the eye of life for me. A little peace amongst the outskirts of chaos. I also noticed he was eating slower, almost...mimicking me. Really enjoying the taste of all the foods and fizzy drinks.

I pulled out a small bowl of berries Beatrice had added to lunch. She had rinsed them with water, and they were as warm as the day and as sweet as the air around us. I fed one to Cian after I realized how good they were, but my mind was elsewhere. Still with that little boy buried on the hill.

Cian set *Moonlight over Rum Sea* on my lap. “Will you read to me again?”

“You like when I read to you?”

“It’s a thrill.”

I grinned at him. When he said *thrill*, it came out as *trill*. He could read the dictionary to me and keep me riveted.

“Okay,” I said, “But first, I have something for you.” I’d asked Beatrice to pack them with lunch. Digging around, I found the two boxes and handed them to Cian.

He turned one over in his hand, then the other.

“Open them,” I encouraged.

He looked unsure but did. His eyes studied every facet of the two hand-carved figurines. I’d finished the Beast, and finally, he was together with his Beauty. I’d carved our wedding date at the bottom of them with our names on each one.

“I know they’re kind of childish—”

“No,” he said. It didn’t seem like he could say anything else. He was too overcome by emotion.

“All right,” I whispered. “I just...wanted to give you a gift for our wedding.”

He looked up at me, the emotion making it to his eyes, and I lost my breath. He didn’t even have to say anything. I could tell by his look alone how much they meant to him.

“Thank you, Maeve,” he whispered.

I nodded, the emotion inside of me turning thick in my throat so the meaningless words couldn’t slip through. Words could never convey how I felt. I took the figurines and set them next to us. They belonged in a place like this. To switch gears, because I did not want to cry again, I opened the book, but I went back to the last chapter I’d read. The one before the two characters get intimate for the first time.

“How about we make a deal?”

He looked intrigued, and my grin turned into a smile. He traced my lips with a finger, and I closed my eyes at the feel of his soft touch. His fingertips were calloused, though, and the contrast between my skin and his was delicious. I took a deep breath before I opened them.

“How about I read a chapter to you, and you read one to me?”

He seemed to be thinking about it while he removed my sneakers and set them on the side of the blanket. I wiggled my toes at the freedom, and he watched before he rested on his elbows, settling in. He pulled me down a second later, situating me in front of him. I rested my weight against his chest and brought my knees up to keep my feet on the blanket.

I looked at him. “Deal?”

“What’s the catch, my darlin’?” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. I’d worn my hair in a braid because of the heat, but I could never seem to control some pieces of it. They always escaped, even from my buns.

I opened and closed my mouth. There was a catch. I hadn’t wanted to read the chapter with the sex scene. I thought it would sound much, *much* better coming from his mouth. “Are you accusing me of trying to bamboozle you?”

“Bam-boozle.” He pronounced the word with care, almost like he was tasting it for the first time. “I know what it means, but it always sounded colorful in my head.”

“Was it as colorful speaking it?”

He nodded and lifted the book, fanning me with the pages. “The catch.”

I took it back from him. “There’s a spicy scene coming in the next chapter.”

He studied my face. “I want to hear it.”

“So you’ll read it?”

He opened the book to where the bookmark was. He picked it up and examined it. It was a picture of Ireland.

“Why do you enjoy readin’ so much?” he asked.

“I suppose it’s the same reason everyone does. To live a thousand lives.”

He shook his head. “Why does Maeve O’Callaghan read?”

I took a second to gather my thoughts so I could articulate them. “Boston felt like a box to me. I had walls all around me. My dad. He couldn’t be left to his own devices. And I didn’t want him to be lonely after my mom died. He needs me to help take care of him. Oran got a hold of him, and that worried me all the time. Then...Dermot. He had men watching me. He didn’t want me to try to leave. Books gave me an escape. Introduced me to a much bigger world than I could imagine.

“I meet all kinds of different people through the pages. I visit places I’ll never go, but somehow after the book is over, I’ve been. I experience foreign situations and emotions and... romance. I get to live lives I’ll only ever slip on in books. Up until you *whisked me away* to your castle,” I said, grinning, “I’d only left Boston once—right before Dermot told me I was going to marry him. I went to New York with Delaney.”

He lifted the Ireland bookmark and raised his eyebrows.

I took it from him, turning it over. “On my bucket list. Now...I’m here.”

His brow furrowed, causing deep indentation lines on his forehead. I smoothed them out, and his eyes rose to meet mine.

“Yeah. I’ll read.”

I smiled at him. “Ready?”

I picked up where we’d left off last time. But unlike last time, he wasn’t this close, and he was distracting me some by concentrating on my lips as I read. It was hard to concentrate on the story when he was the *real* story. There were no restraints stopping me from touching him, talking to him, breathing him in. But as before, he was into the story. Even more so than before.

Maybe because he knew the spice was coming?

From the side of my eye, I noticed he was doing something with his face. It looked almost like a wince, but he wasn't wincing... Maybe exercising his mouth muscles? He was lifting his cheeks to smile, but he wasn't smiling either. His eyes crinkled when he did, and his nose scrunched.

"*Aye,*" I read. "*Jack smiled at Grace—*" I stopped reading, noticing he was doing it again. *Oh my God.* Was he...? He was. He was trying to smile! Or maybe getting a feel for it? I didn't know whether to cry or hug him. I didn't do either, because I didn't want to freak him out, but it was extremely hard not to do both.

Come on, baby. Come on, my heart chanted. *You can do it.*

His eyes met mine. He was wondering why I'd stopped. I reached for the fizzy drink and took a hard gulp of it. It was flat and warm, but it helped wash my emotions down. I cleared my throat and started again. "*Jack smiled at Grace, bending over and tipping his feather-plumed hat to her. 'Ladies always come first—in society and in pleasure.'*" I handed him the book. "Your turn."

He scanned pages, taking his sweet time, until I almost asked him why he wasn't reading. He took the bookmark and set it between the pages, then set the book down and stood.

"Wha—?" I hadn't even gotten the entire word out before he left me alone under the oak tree. I wasn't sure if I should follow him or not. Maybe he went to take a quick bathroom break? We'd drank a lot of the fizzy drink.

He came back holding a dagger-looking knife. He flung it at the tree when he was close enough, and it stuck in the branch not too far from me. I looked at it and then looked at him. He was pulling his T-shirt off by the collar. It messed up his hair when it went over his head. He flung it to the ground and got down on his knees before me.

"*He crouched toward me like a feral cat about to devour me,*" I breathed out as he did it.

He was reenacting the scene from the book.

What kind of lady would I be if I didn't *somewhat* put up a fight first? That was what Grace—the heroine—had thought and did until she gave in to the unbridled passion between them.

I scooted back some, but he crowded me. When I set my hand against his chest, I felt his heart pounding against my palm. “Careful,” I breathed out. “You’ve experienced danger before, but none like this.”

He looked at my lips and licked his. He moved toward me achingly slow, until our breaths were tangled, and I could barely stand the anticipation. I shivered when his lips finally reached mine and our tongues touched.

“Touch me, Maeve,” he said in between kisses.

I reached out, and my hands danced over his warm skin. It was slick from sweat. His muscles trembled at my touch.

My heart felt like it was about to jump out of my chest.

I knew what happened next.

Still crowding over me, he reached up and took the knife from the tree. He lifted my chin, and I watched as he slid it down my throat, all the way down to my T-shirt. He hooked the knife in the fabric and sliced down. Then he sliced right through the hook of my bra.

He growled low in his throat when my breasts were exposed. A bead of sweat ran down my chin, and before it ran between my breasts, he leaned forward and licked it up with his tongue. He licked all the way up to my mouth, claiming it in a kiss that had me whimpering when he pulled away.

The point of the knife ran down my stomach until he got to my shorts. He cut straight through them, flinging them to the side after they fell away like nothing.

Freeing myself of the tattered shirt and bra, I got to my knees, looking up at him, reaching for the waistband of his jeans. His skin convulsed at my touch.

“You’ve always pleased me first,” I whispered, letting the story between the pages exist on its own—and letting us

write our own. "I'm going to do this for you."

He became very still as I started to kiss and suck on his neck, my hands fluttering over his body. He tasted like salt and something entirely his. His scent rose in the humid air around us, and I breathed him in while my tongue searched and discovered every inch of his skin. He was making a noise deep in his throat. When I licked the deep V that his abs made, then came back up, close to his mouth but not making contact, he made a fist.

When I moved back down, he convulsed, breathing out when I undid the button of his jeans and slid the zipper down. He still seemed overdressed, so I pushed his jeans down and he stood, stepping out of them.

He wasn't wearing boxers.

His erection sprang free, and before he could meet me on the ground again, I took his thighs in my hand and pushed him closer to me. When my mouth wrapped around him, he growled deep in his throat and buried his hands in my hair, trying to untangle the braid. Once he did, my hair fanned around me, and he looked down at the same time I looked up.

I moaned, and the vibration seemed to set him off. He started to move his hips.

Giving him this much pleasure...my breasts were aching, and it felt like the sensitive nub between my legs was swelling and beating like a hot pulse. I wasn't sure if it was possible for me to shatter like this, but I felt close. So close.

He was grunting and moaning, getting louder and louder. And the more he lost control, the faster I moved. I was still learning how to do this, but...judging how wild it was making him, he was loving it. When I reached up and took a handful of his balls, he tilted his head back and made a noise so feral, I thought an animal was going to emerge from his chest.

It was like he was mindless, only inside his body. This was nothing but a primal need.

In a move that was hunter quick, he pulled out, got to his knees, and flipped me over on all fours. My ass was facing

him, and after he ripped my underwear off, he entered me from behind. I was already soaking wet—all over—and it felt like he slid in all the way to the hilt.

We both stilled while the pleasure seemed to consume us whole.

He pushed my legs open a little wider, and it felt like he was touching my womb. My head hung some, my arms trembling, trying to adjust to the size of him and this position. We'd been having a lot of sex, but this was the first time I felt him this deep. Where there was a thin line between pain and pleasure.

He gathered my hair in his fist and pulled my head up. He leaned over me and breathed in my ear, "How does this feel, my darlin'?"

"So good," I breathed out.

He started to move. Slow at first, where I felt each stroke along my sensitive inner walls, and when I started to sound like him, wild, he started to move faster, harder. His free hand gripped my hip, hard enough I knew he was going to leave a bruise.

I wanted him to bruise me down to the bone.

Pressure was building inside of me. It was so intense, I could feel myself cracking, about to shatter and let the light of the high flood in.

He reached over and started to touch me between the legs. My entire body seized before it rushed with scalding heat, and I cried out. My cries were met by his animalistic grunts as he spilled himself inside of me.

Once my heart calmed and real life returned, the woods around us almost seemed too silent. My eyes started to droop.

The atmosphere. The food. Our time reading. What we'd just done. It all seemed to slam into me at once.

Cian slid out of me and pulled me down with him on the blanket. He grabbed for his shirt and helped me put it on. He pulled his jeans on but didn't bother buttoning or zipping them

up. He set me close to his chest, and even though the weather was warm and muggy, a cool wind blew, and I basked in it. The branches rustled and sunlight broke through the leaves, softly falling on our faces.

“Maeve.”

It took a second for his voice to reach me. I blinked up at him.

“You are my love.”

“I love you too,” I whispered, my voice raspy.

I scooted even closer to him, as close as I could get, and his arms around me felt like reality, but at the same time, the exact opposite. They were an escape. All those characters and worlds and experiences—he was every one of them and even more to come.

He set his chin on my head and we both fell asleep.

CHAPTER 17

CIAN

I ripped the tarp from Da's ancient off-road vehicle. I wasn't even sure if it had a proper name. No one ever told me if it did. We always called the hunk of metal the "Thing," because it looked like some kind of off-road vehicle but had no real title.

Keenan took care of it. Kept it in pristine condition. He'd told me years after my parents were killed that my Da had taken my Mam out on their first date in it. Da had left Keenan to take care of it after we'd left for Boston. He couldn't wait to get it back so he could take Mam for rides around the countryside in it.

He'd said she was a much happier woman out in the country.

Keenan had showed me how it worked years ago, but I'd never wanted to drive it before. Somethin' in the center of my chest hurt when I thought about ridin' in it without Da. What Maeve had told me a couple of days ago weighed heavily on mind, though.

How I should be honorin' my parents by livin'. All I'd done since I'd been exhumed from that small hole was live as a ghost. I was with them, but my mind and limbs worked in this reality. If I'd been disrespectin' them all this time, I refused to do it any longer. They deserved peace. I'd give it to them by tastin' all my breaths *and* by avengin' their deaths.

The motor cranked over as soon as the key turned. I slowly backed out of the garage and took it for a spin, gettin' used to

how it handled. It was a bit odd sittin' in my Da's seat and handlin' his wheels, but the longer I drove around, I started to feel more comfortable.

His throne was becomin' mine.

Keenan stood on the side of the road when I pulled back into the castle's drive. Right about where the old witch woman had cast the curse. His arms were crossed, and he had a pinched look on his face. I could read Keenan as well as he could read me. Nothin' was wrong at the castle, but he had somethin' on his mind.

I stopped, and he used the overhead bar to lift himself in and take a seat. When I pulled off, his head rammed the back of the headrest, and he gave me a dirty look as he placed a hand over his cap. I figured I'd practice my smile on him because he looked funny when his head bumped.

"Yeah," he grumbled. "I'm grimacin' too at the way yer handlin' her, lad. She's not to be abused. Treat her like a beautiful mistress."

He thought I was grimacin'? Fuckin' great. Maybe the muscles in my face were broken from not usin' them. I moved them around some. A little stiff, but they worked. They weren't petrified like wood or anythin'.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Keenan asked, watchin' me.

"I think my face is broken."

"You think—*Holy Mary, Mother of...*" He crossed himself and scooted so close to the open door, he was about to fall out.

I went to grab for him, but gravity was quicker than me. He fell out and rolled. I slammed on the brakes, puttin' Thing in park, and ran toward Keenan, who was on his back, hands on his chest, starin' up at the sky. Fiona ran toward us, her boots poundin' against the ground, Henry probably chokin' on her dust.

Fiona stared over Keenan. Henry was a good minute behind, and he took out his handkerchief, moppin' his head

with it while he stared at him too. He smelled like onions and red meat and had a mashed potato stain on his shirt.

“What the fuck is goin’ on?” Fiona screeched.

I’d never heard panic in Fiona’s voice before. It was more foreign than aliens. Henry and I glanced at each other before we turned back to Keenan.

“He fell out of the Thing.”

“That’s what’s goin’ on.” Keenan pointed up at me.

Fiona slowly lifted her head. Henry looked at me, looked at Keenan, and then looked at me again. Fiona took a few steps back, and Henry smiled at me.

“’Bout time, lad. ’Bout time.”

I met Fiona’s eyes.

She stopped movin’, took a step forward, and shook her head. “No wonder you almost killed him. You scared the shit out of him!”

“Aye.” Keenan lifted his hand, and Henry helped him to a sitting position. “That he did.” He wiped some of the road off the palms of his hands. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I just did.”

Fiona rolled her eyes, but after they settled on me again, they softened some. “When?”

“My weddin’ night.” I offered Keenan my hand, and he took it. I hauled him to his feet. “Time was right.”

Keenan and Fiona exchanged a look. Henry was still grinnin’ from ear to ear.

“I suppose it was.” Keenan looked around for his cap. He spotted it some distance away and went for it. He returned, punchin’ it a bit to get the dirt out, then set it on his head. “Will this be a normal thing for you then?”

“You will still speak for me,” I said. “I’m not a people person. That’ll never change.”

Keenan nodded, but whatever had been on his mind when I'd first picked him up still weighed on it. He paced a bit while the three of us watched.

"I know you as well I knew your father, Cian O'Callaghan. What's on your mind?" He stopped and looked right into my eyes.

"I'm takin' my bride on a honeymoon."

Even though Fiona and Henry had been quiet, it seemed like the entire world went silent after I spoke. Henry wiped his face with his handkerchief, and Fiona squeezed her black skirt. Keenan stared at me with no expression on his face.

"You plan on takin' us with you?" Keenan finally asked.

"No."

"Cillian—"

Sometimes they still called me that, but I held a hand up when Henry went to lecture me. I looked at Keenan. I'd known him for as long as I'd been alive. His concern sounded like a racin' pulse to me. He was anxious.

"I know the dangers," I said. "I'll take care of them."

"By yourself? What happened to—"

Fiona took his arm and squeezed. "Are you sure?"

I nodded and left it at that. Maeve wanted to experience the world, so we were goin' to do it for a while. I wasn't sure if I was gettin' out of this war alive, and if I didn't, I wanted her to have this of me. The memories.

Like never before, I understood why my Da had sent Keenan and Fiona away that night. He was just lookin' for a night with his family. To be alone. To feel normal. But his false sense of security would never be mine.

Without another word, we all climbed into the Thing and rode in silence to the castle. Maeve was out walkin' the property with Pauric, and when she heard us comin', she held a hand to her forehead and narrowed her eyes. A smile came to her face when she realized it was me, and she waved.

My wife and Pauric came to meet us once I parked. He was studyin' the car, askin' endless questions no one was answerin'. The man didn't seem to mind. He was fascinated by mostly everythin'.

“What kind of...car...er, vehicle is this?” Maeve tapped it.

I shrugged. “It belonged to my Da. What do you think of it?”

“What do I think of it?” She smiled. “I think it looks like fun!”

“How about we give it a go then?”

“Give it a go? Like go for a ride?”

“A ride around Ireland.”

She tilted her head and studied my face, tryin' to understand.

I made it easier on her. “I'm takin' you on a proper honeymoon.”

She looked at everyone around us, but I took her hands and squeezed. *Eyes on me.*

“Is that...safe? To leave right now?”

“You're safe with me, Maeve.”

“I know,” she breathed. “But I'm worried about you.”

“Listen to the girl,” Keenan mumbled.

I'd found my voice, but I hoped that Maeve could read my intentions this time. Sometimes words still felt useless in the face of what I was feelin'.

A few seconds later, she nodded. “When do we leave?” she whispered.

I took her hand and led her into the castle. “As soon as our bags are packed.”

CHAPTER 18

MAEVE

The Thing was the perfect way to describe the vehicle we were driving in. It looked like a Jeep, or something similar, but Cian said there was nothing to confirm what it was.

It didn't matter what name it went by. It was perfect for traveling all over Ireland. We had no direction in mind. The road took us wherever it was going to lead us.

I'd heard there was no such thing as being lost in Ireland, which felt like the truth. However, I was lost.

For two weeks, we got lost in each other, the scenery just a bonus.

I'd probably asked him endless questions.

What's your favorite music?

Favorite color?

Favorite food?

It seemed like he had to think about each one. Dig down deep and find out who he was. I felt like it was an exercise in not only me getting to know him, but him getting to know himself. Beyond destroying Oran Craig, he didn't seem to think about much else before I stormed through his door.

He had questions for me too. Mostly about my childhood. I told him some stories my dad had told me about my mom. And I told him all the things I enjoyed doing as a kid. How my dad had taught me how to woodwork, and that all my toys were carved by him.

Looking back, it was kind of odd, but I could never remember wanting things other kids had. Like plastic dolls. Maybe because my dad had read children's stories to me. And if those didn't do, he made them up. Then he'd carve the little figures for me to play with.

The only thing I'd ever missed having was a mom. My mom.

I asked Cian if he ever thought up wild stories. He'd stopped talking for so long, and I wondered if that had led to him having a vivid imagination. Maybe he used to dream of a different life to cope with the one he had.

It seemed like I might have hit a sore spot. His eyes grew distant for a while. Then he shook his head and said, "Before their deaths. Yeah. After. Loneliness comes to mind—if that's what I'm feelin' when I think back."

"What does it feel like?"

"An ache." He touched his chest. "Here."

I never wanted to let his hand go after that.

He didn't seem to mind. There was something different about him out on the road. It was like he wasn't caught up in the tragic sadness that waited in the shadows of the castle.

I understood why he didn't sell the place—it had meant a lot to his dad—but I almost wondered if Boston wouldn't be a better place for him. It didn't hold so many dark memories. It seemed like a beacon. If he could conquer it, and Oran in the process, he'd have his revenge, and the entire city would be his.

Because of how fast everything had unraveled for us, then started to come together in a different shape, I hadn't given much thought to what this meant for me.

I was the Beast of Boston's wife.

What role would I play in his story?

I refused to be Shay. She didn't fit me. I refused to suck myself in to fit a version of her. I'd just have to figure out a way to make it work—on my own terms. I didn't mind

existing in the shadow of Cian's life. And maybe that was for the best, given the kind of life that accompanied the lifestyle.

It was going to be hard. I could be his gentle.

He was going to need the reminder that he was a man, not a beast. That he was human, not a ghost. That the sun would always come out after a storm.

"You've been quiet." As loud as he could get when he roared, he always kept his voice down when he spoke. It was low and gruff and had a hint of gravel to it.

It made goosebumps appear on my arms.

His eyes were on the road, but his brow was furrowed. He was always worried about me. If I kept quiet for too long, he thought something was wrong. I could see how he'd assume that. I'd set the tone for our relationship in the beginning by talking so much. Because he never said anything.

A slow smile spread on my face. "I'm just thinking about what a great time I'm having." The future could wait. I wanted to concentrate on the present. "All the places we've been, all the things we've seen and done...I never thought I would. Thank you. I'll never forget it."

His brow eased, and he nodded once. He glanced at me and returned the smile—in his way. It was almost like a grimace, but he was trying. I'd even caught him in the bathroom massaging his cheeks, like his smile was broken and he was trying to fix it.

There was a piece of my heart that would forever be broken for him and all he'd missed.

There was also a special place in hell for Oran Craig and the men he sent to do his hellish bidding. The men who stole it all away from him.

My stomach made an obnoxious noise, and his eyes whipped to mine.

I shrugged. "It's been a while since we last ate."

We'd been driving for hours. Usually, we just stopped whenever we decided to, then we'd explore until we decided

to leave. It was bliss. The freedom in it. I'd never had that before. I was always stuck in a box so deep, crawling was my only way out of it.

Cian had told me we were in Derry, in the North of Ireland. Night had fallen, and the stars were out. The weather was somewhat tepid, and it was windy. I fixed the silk scarf around my hair and burrowed into my light sweater, staring out the open window for a place we could stop.

“There’s a pub.” I pointed. “It’s off Waterloo!”

Cian slowed some, but he looked wary. Maybe because it looked busy. People were hanging around outside, maybe enjoying some fresh air before they went back inside. We’d mostly been keeping to ourselves. I’d never seen Cian in a crowd before. Not like this, where he didn’t orchestrate it. I wasn’t sure how he’d do.

“We can find another place—”

He shook his head. “It’ll do.”

It didn’t truly sound like it would do, but he had never lied to me. He’d only recently started talking to me. But something in his voice set me on edge a bit. As he found a place to park, I took the scarf off, wrapping it around my shoulders, and fixed my bun and added gloss to my lips. I’d just worn a light gold sweater, cuffed jeans, and my Converse sneakers.

He found an empty spot, and as a breeze drifted past us, I noticed him sniffing the air around me, like he could scent me in it. I smiled a little and turned to him.

“Ready?”

“You’re beautiful, Maeve,” he whispered, running a hand down my cheek. “I could spend the rest of my time buried inside of you.”

If it was someone else saying it, I might have thought it was an odd comment, or compliment, but I understood what he was telling me.

I was his safe space.

I squeezed his bicep. “You protect me with this. I keep and protect you here.” I took his hand and set it over my heart. “You’re already buried inside of me. No one can reach you but me.” I leaned in and kissed him.

My stomach grumbled and he pulled away, stepping out of the Thing. He came to the other side and lifted me out, then took my hand and kept it in his while we walked to the pub.

Waterloo was alive with nightlife. It was the first time I’d experienced anything like it, except for when I went shopping and out to eat with Cian in Galway. Music poured out of pub doors, and the scent of food lingered in the air. The street was packed with people, and I noticed how Cian’s eyes were jumping around. He wasn’t comfortable, but he was doing this for me.

“Are you sure you don’t want to find a quieter place?”

Either he didn’t hear me or he was determined, because he pulled me close to his side and kept me there while we barreled through people to get inside the pub.

Everyone seemed to move out of his way, just like they always did. They probably sensed the wildness about him and the danger that came with it. If I didn’t know him, I would have moved too.

His eyes scanned the inside of the pub and then he directed me to two seats at the bar. He took the one closest to the door. Probably so he could monitor who came and went.

All eyes were on us. No, not us. My husband. He was so fine, most of the ladies were having a hard time looking away.

The barmaid came to take our orders. She had black hair and stunning blue eyes that shimmered in the dim bar. “Howaya! What can I get you?”

Cian said nothing, just stared toward the area set up for live music. I ordered bar food and two Guinness beers. She nodded and said she’d be back.

My eyes followed the direction of Cian’s. It was a makeshift stage, but it looked like a ramp was on the side. A couple minutes later, I found out why. A striking man in a

wheelchair rolled himself up on it and parked in front of the microphone.

He tapped it, and once he knew it was live, he introduced himself as Killian Kelly, and said he was going to sing a few songs.

“He has the same name. Well, his first name is the same as your middle name.”

Cian grabbed for his Guinness when the barmaid set it down and took a drink. “His is spelled with a K.”

“Oh.” I looked around. “How do you know?”

“He’s my cousin.”

I set my beer down slowly. “I didn’t think...”

“He has a twin. Cash Kelly. He lives in New York. He’s known as the Marauder of Hell’s Kitchen. Their Mam was cousin to my own. That’s the only family I know of, besides the ones who always called my Da a bastard.”

“Do they know about you? The twins?”

“Cash knows me by name and face because of business. I’m not sure if Killian remembers me. I’d only met them the once. Our mams got a good laugh about Killian and I sharin’ the same name. They didn’t keep in touch much. Not until we moved back to Ireland.”

“You lived somewhere else?”

“Boston.”

That was how his dad got mixed up with Oran Craig.

“Were you born in Ireland or Boston?”

“Ireland. We lived in Boston a few years until we moved back.”

We grew quiet as Killian started to sing. He was good. Really good. His voice was earthy, like it had sprung up from the countryside, and it was full of grit and gravel. He was even better than Ruairi Merrick.

The barmaid set our food down without a word, and I picked on it as I watched him sing. Cian only drank his beer, his eyes almost far away. I wondered what he was thinking about. Maybe his mom, because Killian brought back memories for him? And what about Cash Kelly...did they keep in touch more because of business?

Cian's attention moved from his cousin to a few men who walked in the door. They were older, maybe in their fifties or sixties, and dressed impeccably. Caps, long jackets, and suits. Attire from a different era when men dressed the part.

The barmaid greeted them with a big smile on her face. Cian took a slow pull of his beer, watching them until one of them looked at him.

The man tipped his cap to him. Cian nodded back. Then they both looked away.

"Do you know them?" I whispered.

I wasn't sure if he even heard me over the music, but he nodded. "Through Keenan. They call themselves bithiúnach. They're a bunch of overaged gangsters who are tryin' to start an old thin' up again. Back to the golden age of gangsters, you could say."

"Do you trust them?" I asked.

"I trust you. I trust Keenan, Fiona, Henry, and Beatrice. I trust no one else."

"Not even your cousins?"

"Not even them."

Killian Kelly looked genial enough. He had light hair, close to the same color as Cian's, and his skin was lightly touched by the sun. I was pretty sure his eyes were green. He had a nice smile, and if I was right about his voice, he sang from the heart, which told me it was true. And for a man who was confined to a wheelchair at such a young age...he was singing about fighting on.

After about thirty minutes, the beer was hitting my bladder.

I leaned in close to Cian. "I'm going to use the bathroom."

He stood and walked me there. There was a line of women waiting to get in, and I saw the indecision in his eyes. He wanted to come in but didn't want to deal with a bunch of women bitching at him.

Not that I thought they would. They were all stealing glances at him, whispering to their friends.

When it was my turn, I put my hand on his arm. "I'll be right out. This part of the pub doesn't seem to have windows or any way out but this door." I didn't give him a chance to react. I really had to go. The girl behind me told me how sweet he was to look so concerned for me, and how hot she thought he was.

He was, but she had no clue why he was so protective over me and what he was capable of. The memory of our wedding day, when he'd sliced that guy's head off, was something I'd never forget.

I did my business, washed my hands, and checked my reflection in the mirror. It looked and felt like I'd swallowed the sun. All glowing and warm from the inside. When I stepped out of the bathroom, Cian was facing me, but a woman stood in front of him. She was swaying some and had a drink in her hand.

He looked so lost. She was running her mouth at him, wanting to know if he was looking for a good time. When his eyes connected with mine, he visibly relaxed, and she noticed.

She turned some and then back to him. "I told you to get lost!" she screamed at him. "And you already have a woman. So low!" I watched as her hand came back with the drink and knew what her intention was. She was going to throw it in his face.

Before she could, I took my crossbody purse and whacked her in the head with it. Her drink went flying into the wall. She was stunned for a second before she hit me back.

We started fighting, and she was all over me like a strong, obnoxious perfume. I couldn't seem to get her stink off me. But then she was, and it was Cian who had pulled her off, and

the barmaid was coming between us. She had to push her back because she kept coming for me.

Before I could open my mouth to tell Cian to watch out, a guy came up behind him, but he was too quick. Cian ducked before the guy could land a punch.

I remembered the look in my husband's eyes before he killed that guy who had "cuffed" me with his hold. It was disconnected from everything and everyone. I could see Cian slipping away from me, and the Beast was taking over.

This was much different from fighting Craig's men. If he killed this guy in a bar fight...

Panic rose in my chest, and I reached out to him and mouthed the word, *no*.

Cian caught the word before he was totally consumed. I saw it the moment it seemed like he changed course.

The guy came at him again, drunkenly screaming about him putting his hands on his girl, but Cian sidestepped, and the guy ran into the wall. He turned around, probably about to go at Cian again, but Cian stopped him by knocking him out cold.

One punch. It didn't even seem that hard.

Killian rolled up next to the barmaid, who was watching the entire fight unfold. "No fightin'." He chucked his head toward the door.

Cian met his eyes, and I saw something dawn on his cousin's face. Maybe recognition. Killian shook his head, like maybe he was doubting it, then chucked his chin again.

My husband gave him a curt nod, took my hand, and we left.

CHAPTER 19

MAEVE

My husband was walking like a man on a mission. His eyes were laser-focused, and I couldn't tell what was on his mind. He stopped at the Thing and paced.

“Cian,” I whispered.

It took him a second, but he stopped.

“You did really good back there. That was a regular bar fight. Kinda normal. You were able to stop before it got out of hand.”

“As long as he didn't touch you. But it was still a fight.” He balled his fists and then opened them.

“What happened that night...our wedding night...with those men...you collapsed after.”

“Bloodless. I feel bloodless after.”

“Is that what you're feeling now?”

He stopped and looked at me. “When I come to, the blood is all in my cock.”

I looked down at his pants. Tented. His was as hard as stone.

“Oh. You get...”

“I usually take care of it myself.”

“You don't have to...take care of it by yourself now.” I took a step closer to him. “I'm here.” I set my hand on his

cock and stood on my toes, whispering in his ear, “You can be a beast with me. You won’t break me. I promise.”

He growled low in his throat. Before I could move, he had me by the throat, lifting me off my feet, and it was like I’d floated on a cloud to the Thing. He set me down, and I had to grip his shoulders to keep my legs steady. The way he’d carried me like that sent a rush between my legs. It didn’t hurt; it made me feel how powerful he was, but he hadn’t abused me with it.

He didn’t give me much time to dwell on it. He started to devour my mouth. Making noises like a wild animal being fed.

When the kiss broke, I was breathless, but I wanted more of him this way.

Feral.

Before he could expect it and catch me, I took off running.

I wanted to give him something to run after.

To desire.

To conquer and consume, but in a different way than he was used to.

My chest burned and my breath came fast and hard.

I’d never felt so alive.

In about five steps, he caught me, hooking an arm around my waist, bringing my feet off the ground. He buried his face in my neck, his lips against my pulse. “You want the beast?”

Even though I could feel his heart pound against my back, I could hear the playfulness in his tone. I turned my face some to meet his gorgeous grey eyes, and he...smiled at me.

Teeth and all.

And oh my...it was good that he was holding me, because my knees gave out.

If I wasn’t in love before....God help me. I would have been then.

I wasn't sure if there was such a thing as falling in love with a person when you were already in love with them, but if it wasn't possible, Cian made it so.

Or maybe it was just falling harder.

Deeper.

The kind of depths that are only found in the ocean.

His teeth nipped at my neck and he growled into it some, messing around. I took a deep breath and growled back. A moment passed between us, and he started laughing. The kind of roaring laughter I'd expected out of him.

It was glorious. The most beautiful sound in the world. And it didn't sound torn or forced. It sounded as natural as it should have.

Our eyes connected and I started laughing, too, but tears slipped out the corners of my eyes. My heart felt like it was about to burst.

He growled into my neck again and I growled back. We started laughing even harder, almost howling, and then we started to kiss. He kissed the sense out of me because I had no clue we'd been heading toward the Thing until my back hit it.

I broke the kiss to take a breath. I felt almost delusional. Nothing felt real but him. Like we were both swimming in that ocean on a bright, hot day, and it was entirely ours.

He turned to cover the Thing, and I was clawing at his back, desperate to get his shirt off and feel his skin. It didn't take him long to get the cover over it, but it felt like forever because I couldn't wait. I was almost desperate.

He was too.

We were kissing like the world was going to end, grabbing for each other, trying to break the barrier between our clothes and get to skin, taking longer than necessary to get inside.

Finally, we were in, and our clothes were flying from the back to wherever they landed.

Cian lifted me up, wedged my body between the front seat and back, and told me, “Open your legs for me.” I had to balance my arms on each headrest, and when I parted for him, he came at me with his lips and tongue and teeth.

All I was capable of was incoherent mutters as he devoured me. I was pulling his hair, maybe even his ears, and grinding against his mouth. It seemed like all my blood flow was concentrated to one area, and it needed release.

My entire body convulsed as he gave it to me.

I didn't have time to take a breath.

He sat me on top of him but angled my back some. I could feel the front seat pressing into it. When he entered me, we both groaned. He was as deep as he could go, and he was stretching me, the pressure so intense, sweat started to slide down my body.

I couldn't control the urge to move, to feel him move deep inside of me and sliding against the hot, sensitive pulse between my legs.

His hands squeezed my hips as he looked between us, watching as he slid in and out of me. “You're my fierce she-hunter when you're with me like this.”

I wanted to bite him.

Claw him.

Maybe there was a beast—or She-hunter—inside me of me too.

After I'd whacked that woman with my purse, I became wild with need. Maybe feeding off his feelings.

This was so much more than that, though.

We were exploring those depths, seeing how far under we could go before we needed to resurface for oxygen.

I'd turn blue before I let go.

His hips were pulsing up, ramming me, and I was coming down, so our bodies were slapping. Our breaths were coming

out as pants, and it seemed like we both were dying to give in but holding out at the same time.

“Fuck!” he roared, hissing out a breath when I clenched around him.

It was unintentionally done. I was trying to hold back, not willing to give in just yet, but it was a move I was going to remember for later. His body made a traitor out of mine right after, though. I snatched onto him while my body took over, and I had no choice but to let the racking waves of pleasure take me under. Cian followed a second behind, and even after he'd spilled himself, he kept moving inside of me until we both stilled.

Suddenly, the night was too quiet, like we'd been the loudest beings in it.

I tucked my face into his neck, breathing him in. He pulled me back some so he could meet my eyes.

If my face mirrored his, it was flushed and drunk looking.

At the same time, our grins stretched, and then we were kissing again. This time it was almost like a game. He'd come forward and I'd move back. Finally, he made a frustrated noise after I nipped his lip, and I let him catch me and kiss me.

“Maeve.” His voice was deep and satiated, but there was always an edge of hunger to it. “Your name means intoxication, and that's exactly what you are to me... intoxicatin'.”

The kiss we shared made a sound when it broke, like it was breathless but still begging for more.

Cian's eyes were like melted pewter in the dim light, and after he stared at me for a second, he traced my lips. “Time we find a place to stay for the night, or I won't be able to drive, I'll be so drunk.”

“You must get drunk easily,” I whispered, doing what he'd done me, traced his lips.

He released a deep breath. “Nothin' in a bottle can touch me,” he said. “Only thing seems to be you.”

“Good,” I breathed, reaching between us and grabbing his cock. “That’s the way I want it.”

He called me bewitchin’, and after he helped me dress and slipped on his jeans, he set me next to him in the front seat. He hit the pedal and we found a place to lock ourselves in for the night, the rest of the world melting into the pages, becoming nothing but ink.

CHAPTER 20

CIAN

It had been one day since we left Derry and arrived in Belfast.

My wife had been sleepin' for hours.

Maybe because of all the travel.

Or maybe it was because she was sick, and I was going to lose her.

The thought made me sit up straight, the panic in my chest rushin' through my veins, and I wasn't sure what to do with it. How to get rid of it.

Her body had become an extension of mine, and whenever I needed to bury myself in her, the look in her eyes told me she understood. Wanted it as much as I did. When she was beneath me, on top of me, in front of me, her pulse was loud, and she was alive.

So was I.

Her breath was mine. Her blood rushed through my veins. She shared her life with me.

I felt like a stag during matin' season, lookin' for a mate to create life with. I was possessed and would do anythin' to have her. Her scent drove me wild, and when she'd even touch me on accident in her sleep, my cock would get hard. Even if it had only been a few minutes since I'd tasted her last.

I licked my lips. Her sweetness was still on my tongue.

It made me hungry—but in a place much different and deeper than my stomach.

It wouldn't just growl but roar for her.

Pacin' the room, I ran a hand through my hair. The night in the Thing came back to me. How fuckin' reckless it had been to take her like that. How vulnerable we were.

I'd started this war with Oran Craig. I planned on seein' it through, but there was also a part of me that wanted her without the bars.

It was an internal battle between the two sides.

My head was full of warrin' thoughts, and my chest felt tight. I'd never felt that before. A pullin' so strong, it directed my body wherever she was. It only eased when she was close to me. Close enough to feel the warmth of her skin.

The ball of covers moved, and she sat up, rubbin' her eyes. Her hair fell down over her breasts in unruly waves, covering them, and her slight form was haloed by the dim light in the room.

“Got ants in your pants?” She grinned at me. She was warm with sleep, and I could smell her perfume in the air, even though she didn't wear any.

I looked down. I wasn't wearin' any pants. And I didn't see any fuckin' ants in the room.

She laughed quietly. “I just meant...too anxious to sleep or something?”

“Or somethin'.”

“Want me to tell you a story? That's what my dad did for me when I couldn't sleep.”

“In these stories, does the prince always win?”

She thought about it for a second. “Yes,” she whispered.

“I'm not the prince in our story, Maeve. I'll always be the beast.”

“I know.” She turned to the side table and grabbed her water. She lifted it towards me. “Long live the beast then. The king of villains in my story.” She took a long drink of water and set it back. “But why tell me this now?”

“A war is comin’. I don’t want you to forget who I am.”

“You mean...the beast who took me away from my father, the only home I’d ever known, forced me to Ireland and into marriage, and the *man* who is different with me than he is with anyone else?”

“That’d be the one.”

She smiled and my pulse kicked up.

“Come lay with me, Cian.”

I took my spot next to her, and she pressed her body close to mine, settin’ her head on my chest, her arm draped over my waist.

“I changed my mind.” She yawned. “You tell me a story.”

“I don’t know any.”

“You know at least one.” Her doe eyes looked up at me. “You mentioned *Sadhbh* to me once. Irish mythology, right?”

She pronounced *Sadhbh* as *Sive*, which was how it was supposed to be pronounced. I wasn’t in the mood to tell it right then, but I knew she was askin’ this of me to distract me. She knew how to change the direction of my thoughts.

Quietly, I told her the story of *Sadhbh*. She’d been enchanted to take the form of a doe as punishment for refusing a dark druid. It was a sordid and complex tale, one that even included hounds.

Before I realized it, the sun burned through the windows, and Maeve was talkin’ about breakfast before we explored Belfast.

Maeve’s eyes were bright as we took in the new city. They grew wide and excited when I surprised her by taking her to the library there. It was like she was inside a museum.

“Delaney is going to freak when I tell her about this,” she whispered, her hands glidin’ along the surfaces in a reverential way.

After a couple hours, she was ready to go. I took her hand and we started to explore. A woman and a young boy sat on the side of the street with a large box. Four ears attached to two separate heads popped out of it.

“Cian!” Maeve stopped, even though I tried to get her to keep walkin’. “Look at them! Hi! Hi, babies!” She was tryin’ to pet both of the Irish wolfhound puppies at once.

I took a step back, crossin’ my arms over my chest.

“Siblings,” the woman said. “Last two left in the litter. Can’t afford to keep them.”

“They’re so cute!” Maeve seemed to gush out, like she was overflowin’ with emotion or somethin’. “Aren’t you, babies?”

“All we ask is fifty dollars—for both. Just to make sure they go to a good home. My boy here is worried about them.”

Maeve picked up a wigglin’ puppy and brought it closer to me. I took a step back. I had to kill the impulse to close my eyes and steady my breathin’. It was like the past was back and smellin’ like dog breath.

“It would be so nice to keep them, Cian. You have so much room at the castle.”

“Castle?” the kid said, his brows furrowin’. “You have a proper castle?”

“He does!”

“*We* do,” I barely got out.

Maeve nodded. Then her eyes lowered, studyin’ me. I wiped sweat from my brow. She was inchin’ inside of me even deeper.

“Are you afraid of dogs?” she whispered.

Only what they represented in my memories.

She took a step closer. I took a step back.

The puppy's tongue hung out, and its tail was waggin'.

"Sir," the kid said. "If you don't take them...we'll be forced to take them to the shelter. I don't want to see that happen. And if you have a proper castle...I know they'll love it."

His mam took him by the shoulder and pulled him back. "Manners!" she scolded. Then she called him by my middle name.

Maeve's eyes widened. "Spelled with a C or K?"

I held my breath.

"C," the woman said.

I couldn't tell if this entire situation was a blessin' or a curse.

Maeve looked at me and then at the family. She bent down to put the dog with its brother. She started laughin' when the male started to jump and lick her.

I was about to tell him to get his ball-lickin' tongue and filthy paws off my wife but was sidetracked by Maeve politely tellin' the kid we couldn't take them.

It was the first time I'd ever heard disappointment in her voice. It punched me in the chest like a heavy weight.

"You truly want them, Maeve?"

She stood and shook her head. She was about to tell me a lie to protect me—she knew the dogs made me uncomfortable, even if she didn't know why.

"Tell me the truth or be silent," I said.

She stilled. She seemed to think about what I'd just said. "I do. I want them. *We* have the room. And I've always wanted a puppy. My dad carved me one. But it's definitely not the same."

I looked at the woman. "My wife wants them. They're hers."

The woman looked at my wife. She seemed uncomfortable with me. “They’ll have a good home?”

What she really meant was—*your man, he’ll be good to them?*

I stepped forward and the woman took a step back. “I’ll give you two thousand for them.”

“I only want—”

I dug in my pocket and handed her kid a wad of cash. His eyes widened before he stuck it in his pocket.

“Do I really get to keep them?” Maeve bent low to the box, lettin’ the dogs attack her.

I nodded, wonderin’ where my balls had gone. Probably in the box with the dogs.

“Do they have names?” my wife asked the kid.

“Naw.” He bent down next to her and started pettin’ them too. “Ma wouldn’t let me name them. Said I’d get too attached.”

“Understandable. We still have time to think about them.”

The woman and kid handed Maeve the leashes and we left. I kept Maeve close as we walked. I kept tryin’ to picture the two dogs at the castle, but all I kept comin’ up with was the same scenes I imagined as a kid.

An uneasy sensation sat in the pit of my stomach. Was this a continuation of what happened in the past or a new a start?

“Cian?” Maeve broke through my thoughts. “If you really don’t want them, maybe I can find—”

“Fine.”

She looked at me as if she didn’t believe me.

“Same goes for me, Maeve. I speak only the truth to you.”

“I want them to be ours.” She didn’t say anythin’ for a few minutes, the dogs pullin’ her some. “What happened? Did you get attacked or something? Or...please don’t tell me you had a soul dog and it crossed over the rainbow bridge and you swore

never to have a dog again because it hurt too much to replace him or her?”

I'd never heard her talk so fast. It felt like a deduction of her beauty to call her cute, but she was being fuckin' cute.

I squeezed her shoulder. “Neither.”

She stopped walkin', and the dogs were tuggin' on her. They were goin' to be monsters. I took them from her, and they both sat at my feet.

“Huh.” She looked at them and then smiled at me.

“Huh,” I repeated.

She laughed. “Look how well behaved they are for you already. It's like they want you to like them and accept them.”

“When I was a kid, I wanted a dog.” When the world was filled with sneaky trolls instead of killer men.

She studied my face. I wiped more sweat from my brow.

“Oh.” She looked down at them for a second, then back up at me. “And then...”

“The want was takin' away from me.”

“Now you have it back,” she whispered. “Times two. Did you have any names picked out?”

“Argus for a boy. Grania for a girl.” My Da had helped me pick them out.

“Argus and Grania.” Maeve nodded. “Perfect. Fits them. Let's go with those, or we can go with the names from the story you told me. What were they? Bran and Sceolan? We can call her Branee or something.”

“Argus and Grania will do, if you like 'em too.”

“I do!”

A warm wind picked up. My entire body went rigid when I smelled his cologne in the air. It was that distinct. Embedded into most of my memories.

Keenan came to stand next to me a minute later. He looked down at the dogs and then at me. “Argus and Grania?” He held

his hands up. “I’ve kept my distance.”

“You’re standin’ mighty close now.” My eyes scanned the street. The telltale black tulle whispered in the wind from the doorway of a new-age apothecary shop. Fiona. “I see your sidekick is not far either.”

“Still can’t believe I’m hearin’ your voice so clear.” He shook his head. “Couldn’t let you go out on your own, knowin’ what you’re standin’ against. You wrecked my nerves. Since the two of ye left, my gut hasn’t been right. Same for Fiona.” He squeezed my shoulder.

We stood that way for a second before he pulled his hand back. He’d never tried to replace my father, but he’d always been that figure for me, even if he didn’t always know how to be. He looked down the street and nodded. Fiona left her spot and met us.

I looked between them. This wasn’t a cordial visit.

Keenan nodded down the street. He wanted to talk to me alone. I handed Fiona the leashes, and she and Maeve started talkin’ about the dogs while we walked a few paces away.

Keenan stopped, took his cap off, and wiped a hand down his head. “A few things have happened. First thing. Murphy agreed to a meetin’ back in Boston.”

Tom Murphy was an arms dealer. He dealt solely with Craig and had been loyal to him. He wouldn’t even see me. Somethin’ had changed with his loyalty, or they were plannin’ to try to catch the beast in a trap.

“When does he want to meet?” I asked.

“As soon as possible.”

“What’s the problem then?” Even after Keenan had delivered the news—which should have been good for us—his shoulders were still rigid, and I could tell by his eyes he was guarded.

“Nothin’ that has to do with Murphy. At the moment.” He sighed. “This is a separate situation. Pauric had a heart attack this mornin’. Beatrice and Henry rushed him to the hospital,

and he's in stable condition. But he's goin' to need surgery to survive."

My eyes found Maeve's. Hers narrowed, tryin' to read the look on my face. She knew somethin' was wrong.

Our honeymoon was over.

CHAPTER 21

CIAN

When I'd first set eyes on Maeve O'Callaghan, I knew I wanted her, even if my purpose and my time had been at war over it.

Lookin' back, even through such a short lens of time, my gut knew. I didn't just want her. I needed her.

I hadn't wanted or needed anythin' for so long, the feelin' was superior to anythin' else. Even logic.

Ever since that night, my future ran from my past. But my past was fast and couldn't be tired. My future stopped to take breaths, and they would both collide before the chase would start again.

They were crashin' in that moment.

My wife sat with her father, who looked pale and fragile in the hospital bed. Keenan stood with his back against the wall, starin' at me.

"The hourglass is runnin', Cian. We've hit Craig enough to make him feel it, but we need to start cripplin' him. We have men who are salivatin' for this. For the chance to get back at him. But they're impatient. We need weapons. We need to start turnin' the city our way."

I looked at my wife, holdin' Pauric's hand.

It was like she was in an entirely different world. A world that had a wider view than the one I stood in. My side was narrow, concentrated on a certain point. Her side was open and full of people dealin' with all sorts of problems. It was like

sittin' in an emergency room full of people, realizin' you're not the only one.

“We need to get back to Boston, Cian.” Keenan’s voice was still buzzin’ in my ear. “Or we’re going to lose the slight grip we have. The meetin’ with Tom Murphy must happen. He’s the only man who agreed to even see us.”

I’d heard him, but my thoughts were movin’ in a different direction.

My past was dead and I was still thrivin’ in it, but that storm of life she brought into my world was still shakin’ me awake.

I was fuckin’ torn.

Maeve wasn’t going to leave her father. I didn’t want to leave her. But everythin’ I’d done to get to this point was on the line. My position in Boston was precarious, at best. The rumors Craig had spread about my Da had tarnished the O’Callaghan name in the eyes of the dark underworld and had made things almost impossible for me.

He didn’t want anyone on my side of this feud.

He knew how dangerous I was alone.

With an army?

Unstoppable.

I had the army, a group of men who had been wronged by Craig, but without weapons—we had nothin’.

I’d left Boston on a whim when Maeve had stormed into my life. It was the only selfish thing I’d ever done. I had no control over it. I wanted her away from the city, any connections, and with me. Ireland was the perfect place to bring her. It severed all her ties while strengthenin’ ours.

She was the most secure thing in my life. But with Pauric taken sick...it put me in a tough situation. I’d been away from Boston for too long already. The only reminder of my presence was the army that was left behind. They were doin’ petty shite to get back at Craig. But Keenan was right. It wasn’t enough.

And without us there, they might disband, thinkin' we were not serious about takin' the city.

"I don't trust, Murphy." I touched my stomach. "My gut is gripin' at me about it."

Keenan crossed his arms. "It's a chance. I agree. But what other options do we have?"

Other options. I knew what he was getting at.

My cousin, Cash Kelly, the Marauder of Hell's Kitchen in New York. I knew there was bad blood between Cash and Oran. It had existed ever since Cash's Da had run Hell's Kitchen. But unless it was a deal that balanced on both of us dependin' on the other, I didn't want it. Owin' him was not somethin' I cherished the idea of.

The last time we'd met was still fresh in my memory. He never showed up for the second meetin' we had planned. That says a lot about a fella, even at ten years or so.

"It comes down to this, lad. We either go or we stay. Either way, a decision must be made."

Maeve's eyes flashed to mine. Tears slowly streaked down her cheeks. Her hand was turnin' white from holdin' Pauric's. He was her only family, beside me now, and I saw the fear in her eyes. I also felt how much she needed me.

Maybe this would break the battle plans into hundreds of pieces, never able to recover them.

It also might break the bond my wife and I'd forged. A bond that had become my anchor in this life.

Two words—a fork in the road—and only one path could be taken:

We stay

Or

We go.

The answer came as easily to me as the choice not to meet with Tom Murphy.

My eyes locked on my wife's. "We stay."

CHAPTER 22

MAEVE

The mood around the castle was tense.

My father was fine—out of surgery and home with a good prognosis for the future—but something was going on between my husband and Keenan. They never argued, but I could tell Keenan’s patience had been worn thin, and Cian was more reflective than usual.

Cian and Keenan stood by the lough, as quiet as they used to be with each other before Cian started to use his voice. But there was true silence between them. Not like before when Keenan could read him.

The wind blew, and I held on to my father a little tighter. We were in October, and the fall weather was crisp. The cool air seemed to help my dad when we walked around the property like this, though. The doctor said he had to start off slow, then build his stamina gradually.

It was never food I had to worry about with my dad. His appetite had always come and gone. But if his curiosity crashed, I had something to worry about.

His color was returning, and so was his vivid spirit of inquiry.

He was going on about the property, Ireland, even something about how wonderful it would be to have a car that ran on water. My father’s mind worked that way.

I was listening, but not fully.

My mind was on Cian. He hadn't been acting odd or distant. If anything, he was sticking even closer to me. Without him and Beatrice, I wasn't sure I could have handled the stress of my dad's surgery by myself, but he was still... absent in a way he hadn't been since I'd met him.

"Maeve," my dad called.

"Hmm?"

"The pirate figure you carved."

"What pirate figure?"

He looked between Cian and me. He smiled a little.

"Remember the one I tried to carve of the Pirate Jean?"

I tried to remember... "I do! You didn't feel like you were doing the face justice. You asked me to do it. Then asked me to do it again. I made two."

"That's it. They were for Bryce MacGregor."

"You didn't mention his name."

"No," he muttered. "I didn't."

"Who is he?"

Loud barking echoed from the house before the two rapidly growing bodies they belonged to came barreling toward us. Beatrice chased behind them with a house towel, grumbling something about monsters in the kitchen.

The hounds were going straight for Cian. When they got close enough, they sniffed around his feet before they relaxed and started loitering around the water.

Subconsciously, I seemed to be moving closer to him too.

Beatrice was complaining about the dogs eating her biscuits before she started back for the castle. I smiled at her and she smiled back, even though she was put out. I'd grown close to Beatrice over the weeks. She was there for me the entire time my dad was in the hospital and even after, just like Cian.

My dad unraveled himself from me and went to stand at the edge of the water. He stared at it before he blinked. He removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes, then put them back on.

I stood next to Cian, and his body touched mine. I smiled a little when his hand came down to pet Argus and Grania's heads. Keenan went to walk back toward the castle, but I stopped him.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Keenan nodded at Cian. "Ask your husband."

I looked at him and raised my brows.

"I'll tell you what's going on," Keenan said. "Your husband started a war with Oran Craig, and he's about to forfeit it. You can't direct a battle from an entire country away."

"Because you're not in Boston," I surmised.

Cian nodded.

I thought about the last months. Our honeymoon. What happened to my dad. He knew I wouldn't leave my father, and he didn't leave me, even though it might cost him everything he needed to heal.

"We can go back now," I whispered. "My dad is okay."

"He still needs weapons." Keenan removed his cap and ran a hand over his head. "We missed the meeting with Murphy."

"Good."

We all turned to look at my dad, who had turned to face us.

"You can't trust him. He's too indebted to Oran. Ever heard of a man named Bryce MacGregor?"

Cian and Keenan glanced at each other before Keenan nodded.

"I developed a friendship over the years with Bryce," my dad continued. "Oran invited him to Boston. As you know, Bryce deals in arms. His family still manufactures guns. Bryce didn't care for Oran, and business didn't go as far as dinner,

but he and I connected over books. Maeve even carved two figurines for him.”

“The Pirate Jean,” I said.

My dad nodded. “He cherished them.”

“You think you can get us a meeting with him?” Keenan asked.

“I do. He owns a castle in Scotland. Invites me to his birthday celebration every year. Up until now, I’ve turned it down. I’ll have to be honest about why you’re coming along, but...” he wrapped his coat around himself tighter “...I’m sure he’ll agree to the meeting.”

“Why tell us this now?” Keenan asked.

“Mr. O’Callaghan’s true feelings for my daughter have been made clear. I wouldn’t put my tail on the line for anything less.”

“Fair enough.” Keenan tipped his hat to my dad.

“Of course, Maeve will have to come to the celebration. He’s been wanting to meet her for years. Thank her in person for the figurines.”

Cian shook his head. I squeezed his arm.

“I wouldn’t bring my daughter to a place I knew she was unsafe. It would say a lot, and go a long way with Bryce, if she attends.”

“Aye.” Keenan nodded. “I can see how that would help.”

Cian growled low in his throat and started to pace. The dogs moved with him, as anxious as he was. They were anticipating his next move.

He stopped short, so did the dogs, and six eyes stared at me.

“It’s a celebration—” I started.

“A fancy one,” my father added. “Women in gowns and men in tuxes. His birthday lands on the day the company was founded.”

I nodded. “It’ll be fine.”

Cian hesitated for a second, then nodded toward the castle. He placed a hand on my back, and the four of us started back, Keenan and my father lingering behind.

CHAPTER 23

MAEVE

I wasn't sure what I was most unsure about. Trying to help my husband obtain weapons—for a war I might lose him to—or the dress Beatrice chose for me to wear to Bryce MacGregor's celebration.

If she was going for subtle, she'd failed. The gown was gold and shimmered, especially against a dark background. The sleeves hung off my shoulders, the body of it cinched at the waist, and the hem flowed to the floor. She'd sent my wedding heels to match. They looked like they were made of gold and engraved with beautiful patterns.

I wasn't sure if they still had dried blood underneath them from our wedding day.

Since Beatrice had stayed behind in Ireland, I did my own makeup and hair. I went with soft colors, shades of pink that would shimmer like the dress under candlelight. I pulled my hair into a bun because Cian seemed to like to undo it and watch as the strands fell around my shoulders in waves. I switched my glasses out for contacts.

No matter how this night went, I wanted to be all Cian needed after it was over. I wanted to be his reminder of this: *Regardless of how this all goes down, you still won the war.*

You have your life back.

You have me.

It was the same for me, but in a different way. I was finally off the shelf. My life story had been opened, the pages

exposed, and I was free to keep writing it. And what had found itself imbued in the words was true and couldn't die.

Love.

It bonded me to Cian O'Callaghan like metal fuses together to form an everlasting ring. I looked down at my left hand and sighed wistfully. My heart felt light, as if it floated in my chest.

At the sound of a low, gruff noise coming from behind me, my eyes flew up and landed on the mirror. A pair of gray eyes that could have been described as *stormy as the sea* was taking me in. Tonight, they were unsure about having me in the mix of his business. They were also wary of making a deal with Mr. MacGregor *and* apprehensive about the future if Mr. MacGregor turned us down. There was a lot of inner turmoil making them seem more intense than usual.

Before I could ask Cian to zip me up, he came to stand behind me. He was all decked out in a tux. It was the first time since our wedding that he was somewhat...tame looking.

A thrill shot through me when I imagined undressing him and bringing him back to the wild. Running my hands all over his skin, which was so taut against all his muscles, and letting his nature run free with mine.

The zipper on the dress was nothing but a whisper between us when Cian slid it up. I shivered at the soft touch.

"Beatrice will no longer be choosin' your dresses," he whispered harshly.

"Why?" My heart pounded against the tightness of the dress. "Is there something wrong with it?"

"It's too right. All eyes and thoughts will be on you. It's only *my* right to keep my eyes and thoughts on you."

"Oh." I looked down for a second and grinned. That was his version of a compliment.

His hand came around my neck. It was so big, it seemed like he could snap it in two without much effort. But I knew he was *my* beast. He wouldn't hurt me on purpose.

“So beautiful.” He slid his fingertips up and down my neck. “Like a fragile doe.”

I closed my eyes, tilted my neck to the side some, and sighed. His touch felt so good. So right. I knew my pulse kicked up when he set his hand over it.

“Physically I am,” I whispered, “but I have tough skin, O’Callaghan. Tough skin meaning what I’m made up of on the inside. I can handle tonight. I can handle this life with you.”

His eyes took me in seriously. “Together we make a body. I’m stronger on the outside, but you’re stronger on the inside.” He leaned down and sucked over my pulse, as if he was taking life from it. The strength he craved. He held me up when he pulled his mouth away. He’d made a mark. “I will not be expectin’ any problems tonight, but keep your eyes on me, and stay close.”

Even as the new scenery of Scotland passed us by in a blur, I couldn’t take my eyes off him. He couldn’t take his eyes off me. We’d become each other’s stories. We transported each other to other worlds, but we always came back to the one we were making together.

Keenan made an “*ach*” sound at us.

I grinned.

Cian did too.

It felt like I levitated for a second. The more he grinned, or smiled, the more natural the reaction became, and...his grins and smiles were lopsided.

“How is this even fair?” I said to him.

The blank look on his face turned my grin into a smile. It stretched my cheeks.

“It should be a crime just how handsome you are, O’Callaghan. I should have packed my purse as a weapon. I’m going to need it to whack a few women out of my way tonight.”

He blinked at me before a roar of laughter seemed to echo inside of the SUV, which Henry was driving. Keenan and

Fiona glanced at each other, then smiled at hearing it. My father laughed along, though his came much easier than Cian's. Sometimes my dad would just laugh for no reason, out of the blue. It became normal, and I stopped asking why. Whenever I did, he usually just said something like "an angel tickled me on the side," or something eccentric like that.

The mood in the car grew lighter. I hoped it was a foreshadowing moment for what was to come.

Cian took my hand as we stepped out of the SUV, and it wasn't the chokehold I expected. Maybe because I was trying to stay calm, and he felt it.

It was only my husband's entire past and our future depending on what Mr. MacGregor would say to us—no pressure or anything, right?

The thought made me take a shuddering breath. Cian's grip on my hand grew tighter. It didn't lessen as we made our way inside the invite-only castle. Men in fine tuxes. Women in designer dresses. Mr. MacGregor seemed to know how to throw a fancy party. He must have done especially well in arms dealing over the years. The castle was vast, and it was filled with candlelight. The scents of champagne and expensive perfumes drifted through the air. Weighing heavily underneath them were the smells of whiskey and leather and cigar smoke.

My dad had untangled himself from us as soon as his feet hit the entrance, and he stood with who I assumed was Mr. MacGregor on the top step of the impressive entryway. Mr. MacGregor was an imposing figure like my husband, but more genial it seemed. He was over six feet tall with reddish brown hair that had started graying on the sides. His face was a bit ruddy, maybe from all the smoking and alcohol, and with his paw-like hand on my dad's shoulder, his laughter boomed. Probably as loud as the fireworks were going to be later.

Mr. MacGregor's laughter fizzled out as he looked at me, though his smile lingered. I assumed my dad was telling him I'd come, because he was gesturing toward me, and I smiled in return.

Cian slipped his hand to the small of my back and pulled me closer. I was sure Mr. MacGregor noticed, but the smile didn't fade from his face. A younger version of Mr. MacGregor joined him and my dad. The younger version could only be his son. I could tell Cian didn't like the attention I was getting from the two men—older and younger versions. He kept making a noise in his throat, almost like a low, warning growl.

“Simmer down, lad,” Keenan said almost under his breath. He took a quick drink of whiskey. “Men have eyes like ferrets, and your wife is the shiniest woman in the room.”

Cian turned the noise on Keenan.

“Hey—” Keenan started.

“Look!” I rushed out, trying to redirect their attention. “Here comes my dad.”

My dad stopped when he came to us. His eyes were bright, and he was a bit flushed. Mr. MacGregor had probably told him he had some ancient piece of history in this castle somewhere, and my dad was eager to find it.

Dad fixed his glasses. “Business first,” he said. “By the time this night is over, MacGregor might not even remember why we're here. He's already downed a lot, and the night is just getting started. It's best to get it over with now. His son will be joining us. MacGregor is retiring soon, and his son is going to take over the business. They're waiting to show us to the office. Let's go.”

At the top of the stairs, introductions were made. Mr. MacGregor shook my hand lightly, and so did his son, Alexander. Neither of their grips lingered, maybe because of the look in my husband's eyes. It wasn't steady, and they had probably sensed it. Mr. MacGregor turned on his heel as his son walked next to him, but a man kept a few paces behind Fiona, who was the last one up. I had a feeling he was security for the MacGregors. He wore an earpiece in his ear.

We were showed to Mr. MacGregor's office, where my dad rushed to a case of books and figurines, saying something

like “*how extraordinary!*” as he looked them over. I had to admit, his collection was extensive, and next to each one, he had carved wooden pieces.

Mr. MacGregor motioned to the figurine of the Pirate Jean I’d done. With my husband’s hand on my back, we walked to the case together. It was next to a signed, limited-edition hardback of the book. Cian’s eyes flicked to mine after he compared the illustrated pirate on the front cover to the one I’d done out of wood.

His eyes lost some of the storm, and I could tell he was proud. He gave me a subtle nod, and the heat from his palm seemed to increase on my back.

“I had the author over for dinner one night.” Mr. MacGregor looked between me and the figurine. “He was delighted by your work. Since he wrote one of my son’s favorite books, I decided to gift him with it. My son was upset about parting with it, almost as much as I was.” He smiled, and I decided then it was kind. “I told Pauric money was no issue. I needed another for my collection. He told me not to worry. He and his daughter were glad to do it. But I’m a man who doesn’t like to owe, even if the favor or gift is done out of kindness. I told Pauric I had a tab with him, and he’d put what he’d done for me on it.” There was that hearty laughter again, but it faded some as he looked at his son.

His eyes were almost...nostalgic.

Mr. MacGregor cleared his throat and then invited us all to take seats around his desk. My dad and his son were the only two left standing. My dad because he was all over the room, looking at everything Mr. MacGregor had on display. Alexander stood behind his dad, like whatever his father decided, he’d be on board with.

Kennan was leaning forward a little, and I could tell he was about to get straight to the point of the meeting, but Mr. MacGregor beat him to it.

“I know why you’re all here tonight. Pauric made no secret of it, even if he could have. I enjoy his mind, and I just like him. He’s a good man. An honest one. When I told him I had a

tab, I wished for the day I could make good on it. I never thought he would, though, unless something happened with his daughter.” He sighed. “Perhaps what’s going on directly affects you?”

I nodded. He returned it.

He studied my face for a moment before he met Cian’s eyes. “I’ve been knowing Oran Craig before you were born, lad. Disliking him for that long as well. I can only assume as to why you’re going to war with him. If everything I heard on the street is true, it’s an honorable reason. A reason I could stand behind, even if years ago, I didn’t need a reason. Money spoke to me, nothing else. But then my son was born, and he took sick as a young lad. It felt like a punishment or something, for all the sons I might have taken away from their fathers with the deals I made under this table.” He took his pointer finger and knocked on the wood with it.

“One night, after I’d used up all the emotions, and all that was left in me was despair, I sat at this same table and made a deal with God. I wouldn’t make another one under this table as long as I got to keep my son. It’s been a ‘no’ for me ever since when men have come to me with under-the-table deals.”

My head slowly moved to the case with the book and the figurine. It was a book a young boy would probably enjoy, especially if he was sick. All the adventures the Pirate Jean would take him on while sailing the tall seas. I mean, I even enjoyed the book as a kid, even if I dreamed of marrying Pirate Jean instead of being his first mate. My eyes moved slowly to Mr. MacGregor and his son, and his son nodded at me.

“I didn’t want to show it, but when the author took my figurine away as a kid, I was torn up inside. I kept the new one next to my bed until—”

“Today.” His father laughed. “We couldn’t pry it out of his hands when he was a wee boy, and as a man...we just let him have it.”

“I’m glad,” I whispered, realizing what my dad had done. He’d given this family something to hold onto, even when it

felt as if their lives were falling apart. I was touched they had treasured what I'd done so much—almost as much as they treasured the words inside of the book. “I'm glad you're okay now.”

“Over twenty years in remission,” Alexander said. “Getting married next month. It'll be an honor to pass on the Pirate Jean to my son, or daughter, someday.”

“You can understand why this decision has been a hard one to make,” his father continued. “I made a deal, and now the man I owe is knocking on my door, asking me for the one thing I can't in good consciousness give. But...I spoke to Alexander earlier, and he said he would do it. It's a technicality, but a technicality I'm not comfortable with. It doesn't sit right in my soul.”

“Because of my Da's personal deal,” Alexander said, “we keep our supply to the minimum of what the government needs. All we would have to offer you is not even half of what you're asking for.”

Not even half for this man's, *this father's*, personal deal. I happened to agree with Mr. MacGregor—it was a technically that was too close to his son's life, and more than that, this was something Mr. MacGregor was going to have to live with. But this wasn't my decision to make. I could already tell Keenan was going to agree to it. At this point, weapons were weapons, and they needed them.

Keenan's anxious eyes were on Cian, and Cian's eyes were on me. I turned my face, staring at the cases, letting my husband know this deal was between him and Keenan, but I had a feeling he already knew how I felt. But I also didn't want to be the reason he lost this chance, or the reason for any bad blood between him, Keenan, and Fiona. They wanted this war as much as Cian did.

The grip my husband had on my hand became harder, and then we were all standing. Cian nodded toward Mr. MacGregor, and the next thing I knew, we were rushing through the castle, going for the door. Keenan and Fiona followed. Earlier, my dad had told me no matter how the

meeting went, he was going to stay behind for a while. Keenan left Mr. MacGregor with a warning from Cian: *Anything happens to Pauric, there will be no deals to be made with the O'Callaghans that will save you on earth.*

Outside, I felt a tension brewing between Cian and Keenan.

Keenan paced while we waited for Henry and the SUV. He stopped abruptly and stared at Cian.

“Weapons are weapons, no matter how many. We needed them!”

Cian shook his head. “The deal MacGregor made is bigger than ours.”

“You think the weapons might be cursed, Cian?” Fiona asked.

Cian shrugged. “Doesn't feel right in my gut to take 'em.”

“In your gut?” Keenan questioned. “Or your wife's heart?”

“Same difference.”

Keenan made a gruff noise and started pacing again.

Cian's eyes stilled on a dark figure in the distance making his way toward us. As he grew closer, his build and features came into focus. He was the spitting image of Cian's cousin, the singing man in Derry, Killian. The new man was dressed in a tux, and like my husband and Killian, he cut a fine figure.

“Cillian,” the man said. “Or I hear you're goin' by your true name these days. Cian. I'd prefer to call you as I knew you, though.”

My husband and this man were around the same height, and they shared similar features, but the one that stood out the most was the dangerous vibe they both emitted. Neither one was going to challenge the other to a sing-off any time soon, that was for sure.

“Cashel,” Cian greeted the man, and they shook. Cian introduced me to him, and then to Keenan and Fiona.

“Cash’ll do,” he said to us. Then he met Cian’s eyes. “I know why you’re here, but I’m sure you know now that MacGregor flies straight when it comes to arms. I’m the man you’re looking for. I have what you need—and in return for a price that’s just fuckin’ grand.”

“Who?” Keenan stepped up. His eyes were bright, but his tone was a bit wary.

“I know a man who knows a man deep inside the Russian government.” Cash glanced at Cian. “He can get the weapons at an excellent cost. And unlike so many *families* in America, he doesn’t give a fuck about your name.”

“Oh, ya.” Keenan spit on the ground. “What does he care about then?”

“My word,” Cash said. “Because it’ll be my arse on the line if the money isn’t there.”

“How much?” Cian asked.

Fiona moved forward a little, interested, or maybe holding her breath.

Cash came back with an absurd amount of money, but Cian, Keenan, and Fiona didn’t even flinch at it. They almost seemed more excited. Money was never Cian’s issue. It was that Oran had everyone in Boston and beyond on lock when it came to these kinds of deals. Cian was a new shark in a massive pond that Oran had run for years, and his business was worth more than Cian’s because he’d been around longer. It seemed like Oran had a knack when it came to knowing who to screw over and who not to.

“He doesn’t care about the O’Callaghan name then?” Keenan asked.

“Nothing wrong with the O’Callaghan name,” Cash said. “I’ve vouched for this.”

“Price is right,” Cian said. “What’s in this for you?”

Cash’s smile came slow. “You’re aware I have my own issues with Craig. My brother-in-law is in deep with him now. Something happens to him, my wife doesn’t forgive me.”

Cian thought about this and nodded.

“I’ll be in touch,” Cash said as he turned to go. He stopped. “It’s good to hear your voice, cousin,” he said to Cian, and then he disappeared into the darkness.

I’d been so busy watching Cash melt in with the night that I jumped a little when Keenan stepped up to me.

“What’s your heart sayin’ about this, Princess?” he asked.

“I like him,” I said, meeting Cian’s eyes.

“Thanks be,” Keenan said.

Fiona twirled around, holding up her black chiffon skirt, showcasing her black combat boots. She was excited the night was going so well, especially after the letdown in Mr. MacGregor’s office. I was relieved too. I could see how Cian was starting to lean on me more, and I didn’t want Keenan or Fiona to think I was trying to put a stop to whatever Cian had always wanted. Maybe even needed.

Henry pulled up and we all piled in.

“I can’t get Beatrice on the phone,” he said, sweat pouring down his face. “This isn’t like her.”

Forty-eight hours later, back in Ireland, Beatrice still couldn’t be found.

CHAPTER 24

MAEVE

I could hear the clocks ticking in my dad's place in Boston like I was there. Each second was in a rush to get to the next on time's side. On ours, it felt like a breath behind to find Beatrice and her daughter-in-law, Rylee. The man at the pub in Galway was Beatrice and Henry's son, Charlie, and Rylee was his wife.

From what Charlie had said, Rylee had left the pub first, then Beatrice not long after. Beatrice called Charlie a few minutes before she got to the castle to tell him she'd forgotten something there and was only going to be a minute. Cian had a strict rule about anyone being at the castle without him, Keenan, Henry, or Fiona: not allowed.

That was why Henry was so adamant that something was off. Beatrice would never break the rule and hadn't ever. Even though I hated to see it, Fiona had a suspicious look on her face, like maybe Beatrice had gone back on purpose. I could see Keenan was torn. He didn't want to believe Beatrice would break their trust, but he wouldn't put his head on a chopping block for it either.

Henry said he would for his wife.

Cian stared at me, gauging my reaction.

I wasn't sure how to feel about this except for anxious. Two women were still missing. They were nowhere to be found in the city, or any of the places they were known to go, which made sense. Both of their cars were left at the castle, but after the grounds were scoured, it also made sense to

widen the search, just in case. The biggest problem we faced was how big the search area was. The castle's grounds were vast and varying in degrees of hills, slopes, and water. The brush was thick in some areas, almost like small forests, and nonexistent in others.

Whenever I looked down from our bedroom window, I had to take a deep breath when my eyes found the lough. I was almost afraid Beatrice would float up. Cian would lead me back to bed before my imagination could get away from me. He'd wrap his arms around me and keep me close, but when I'd wake up, he'd be gone. He was sleeping less and less, starting to resemble the wild man I'd first met. Except for his hair. I kept it in check for him. I thought that was the only reason he bothered with it. I had done it.

The tension of the ticking clocks had reached the castle and everyone in it. Cian stared into the distance while Keenan stared in the opposite direction. Fiona paced, Henry drank enough to start swaying in his seat, face red and sweat running down his temples, and Charlie had his eyes closed, his mouth pressed against his fists, his leg bouncing underneath the long dining room table.

I closed my eyes, metaphorically anticipating the clocks going off all at once, bracing myself for it.

My hand was in Cian's, and he stood, bringing me with him. He whistled for Argus and Grania to follow us. My husband must have felt the insistent ticking of the clock too.

Maybe we all had ticking clocks inside our hearts, and on a deeper level, we sensed the loss of time against the breaths of life.

We were silent as we walked outside hand in hand, the dogs sniffing around but keeping close. Without discussing it, we seemed to be moving in a certain direction. We stared out over the lough once we got there, until Cian let my hand go and then went to the edge of the water. He took a knee and pulled at a fishing line. There were a few of them lined around the bank. I'd always noticed them, but I'd never seen anyone pull any fish from them.

It wasn't fish, or even a piece of driftwood, that my husband hauled up, but chunks of gold. They were tied in a way that a few pieces could be fastened to one line.

Cian's eyes met mine. "Even if I'm not here, you'll never go hungry, Maeve. You'll always eat, but not from this lough. It's cursed now. We're going to move the gold to another place. A place only two people know of. Me. You."

"You'll *be* here."

He let the line slide through his fingers, and the gold disappeared underneath the murky water. "It brings me peace to know you'll be taken care of."

"Fuck the gold!" I shouted and crossed my arms over my chest.

His stormy eyes met mine.

"I don't want your money, or your cursed gold. I only want you, Cian O'Callaghan."

"You have me," he said. "You'll have me, as long as time allows it."

I looked away from him for a second, my heart racing. "This—all the gold—is why Fiona and Keenan are suspicious of Beatrice and Rylee?"

He nodded. "No one comes here unless the visit is approved. Yeah, there are rumors about the gold, but no one has been brave enough to search for it, except for Craig. Even he treads lightly. Beatrice and the wife of Charlie knew we were in Scotland."

My head went blank for a second while I gazed in the distance. "What do you think happened?"

"What I think—" Cian stood and wiped his hands on his pants. "I think the wife of Charlie has eyes that are attracted to shiny things, is what I think."

"Maybe Beatrice came after her?"

He grew quiet for a second before he nodded.

“I think Beatrice would have followed her,” I said. “Tried to stop her, knowing what was at stake. I grew close to Beatrice when my dad was sick. Hasn’t she been around for a long time?”

“Before I was born.”

“Yeah. It just doesn’t seem like she would do something like this. Not now. Not after all this time. Maybe she knew Rylee was after the gold and tried to stop her, thinking Charlie would be caught up in this if his wife was caught.”

My husband was good to me, but I’d heard the rumors about him in Boston. They gave him the moniker Beast of Boston for good reason. I hated to keep remembering it, but the night of our wedding was still a vivid picture inside of my mind—red, bordering on black, soaking through a pristine white tapestry. His eyes were not his own when he was backed into a place of survival.

“What could have happened after?” I spoke the thoughts inside of my head, not necessarily needing answers, but just airing them out. “If Beatrice followed Rylee and tried to stop her? I hope Rylee didn’t...damn. I hope she didn’t hurt Beatrice to stop *her*.”

Cian took my hand, his clammy and cool from the water, but it was still warmer than mine. We said nothing else while we just stood there. The dogs were sniffing around the lough, catching scents we didn’t have the power to. A rustling wind blew. Argus and Grania both lifted their heads and sniffed. A second later, Henry was running toward us, trying to keep his pants up while he seemed to zig zag between obstacles that were not there.

“She’s alive!” he roared. “Help! She’s alive!”

It seemed like Cian and I moved in sync. We ran toward Henry, the two dogs following, and then the four of us followed Henry. We were heading toward a part of the property that seemed more remote than the rest. The foliage was up to my knees, and in some parts, it was prickly with brambles. They were tugging at my jeans.

I was worried about Argus and Grania getting caught up in the thorns. I stopped underneath a towering tree, telling Cian to go ahead with Henry, who had stopped not far away. He leaned down, taking Beatrice's hand. She was hidden, all except for her hand.

Cian shook his head. He wasn't moving any further. He was only a few steps ahead. He was about to turn back to me when Henry started to shout what had happened. Beatrice had come to stop Rylee from searching the property for the gold she'd heard about. Craig's men must have followed Rylee. She ran from them, and without Beatrice knowing, she had chased behind all of them. When she realized what was going on, she hid behind a tree before she tried to run back to the castle for help.

It was dark by this time, and Beatrice didn't see a hole in the ground. She stepped in it and fell in the brambles, hitting her head on a rock. She thought her ankle was either twisted or broken.

"The only thing she remembers after hittin' her head is the screams," Henry boomed out.

"Screams?" I whispered just as a drop of rain hit me on the forehead and ran down my nose. I wiped it, and all at once, rattling the screws inside of my head and loosening a cog inside of my heart, the clocks in my dad's house hit noon at once.

My hand was stained with blood, and as I looked up, I flinched so hard it felt like all my bones were jumping clear through my skin.

Something that resembled a bird cage was swinging from above, the bloodied body of Rylee inside of it, her hands still clutched to the bars, but her eyes closed for good.

CHAPTER 25

MAEVE

It wasn't a sea of mourners at Rylee's funeral, but a pool of them. They all gathered around the graveside, heads bent down, mourning for a woman I didn't know. I couldn't even piece together her story. All I knew was that she was married to Charlie, and she seemed to value gold over her life. It was unclear whether the Craigs had gotten to her before they killed her, using a familiar face to get close to the gold, but Charlie was still standing. I knew that meant Cian either hadn't found fault with him, or he was doing it because of me. He knew how I felt about Beatrice.

She stood on one side of her son with a crutch wedged underneath her arm, Henry on the other, and they both had a hand on his shoulder. He truly looked devastated by his wife's death, no matter the reason for it. In his mind, probably, she had been reckless, but people are reckless every day—in cars, in jumping out of airplanes, in defying the sea when it's frothing and the boat on top is nothing but a spinning plaything in its grip.

Life in general is dangerous. But sometimes the risks weren't worth it.

Fiona stepped up to the grave, closed her eyes, and started to sing a song that sent my skin rippling and my heart aching. It was in the Irish language, and it almost sounded like she was singing to someone—communicating through melodic phrases. The lines were ornamented and melismatic. It wasn't even about how good Fiona's voice was. It was all about the

emotion she put in it. Almost like she was bleeding from the heart for it.

I couldn't understand a word of the song, but something about it made me move closer to Cian at the same time he moved closer to me, like the message and sound was pulling us together. When he set his hand on my shoulder, I could feel the tremble of his bones. His touch was light, but it almost felt like he was squeezing me to him.

Charlie broke down at the end, and all the mourners left. I couldn't help but to look over my shoulder at the grave once more before we left. It seemed cold, and the song forever haunting it.

Cian drove us back to the castle. He was deeper inside of himself than usual. Even if he wasn't standing on the gravesite on the hill, I knew he was back there, that void of life easy for him to slip back into.

Looking down at my hands, I cleared my throat. "That was nice of Fiona to sing that song," I whispered.

It took a moment for his straightforward gaze to turn to me some. It was a flicker, then gone. "Sean-nós." He pronounced it like "shan noas."

"It sounded old."

"It translates to old style," he said, his voice almost vacant. "The first half of that sean-nós is the ghost of a woman callin' to her lover from the grave. The second half is him callin' back to her, grievin' for her."

A sob stuck in my throat, and I squeezed my hands together. That song would haunt me for the rest of my life. And even though I didn't voice it aloud, I wondered if that was why Fiona had sung it. She wanted Charlie to be haunted for his wife's mistakes.

The SUV bounced as we made our way closer to the shadowed castle.

Suddenly, I didn't want to be there anymore.

I wanted to be back in Boston. Life was probably going to get messy there, but for some reason, it still felt like a fresh start for us. Here, Cian kept getting pulled back to the spot he'd created for himself.

Even after he picked me up and set me on my feet, taking my hand in his, we ended up on the hill. I left flowers and he stared, but I wondered if, this time, it was more about me than what had happened in the past. Rylee's senseless death was a grim reminder of what was at stake—for both of us.

Even after we were inside and the blazing fires reached out long fingers filled with heat, I still couldn't shake the cold. A layer of ice had formed around my heart and was haunting my veins. I took a seat on the bed while Cian removed his tie, moving toward the bathroom. A few seconds later I heard the water running in the pipes. He must have turned the shower on. He emerged out of a blossom of smoke and stared at me.

So many words inside of my chest, but it seemed like I was choking on every one of them. I couldn't get them out. Instead, I took his outstretched hand and followed him into the bathroom. The room was already filled with steam. I shivered as I had when Fiona sang the sean-nós.

One side was the grave—cold—and the other side was life—warm.

Cian undid the buttons on his shirt and then turned to face me. It was still tucked in his pants. He gave me an expectant look. He wanted me to start undressing too. But I had to get these words off my chest, or they were going to strangle me. Because I'd realized something when I'd taken a seat on our bed.

How truly lonely my husband's life had been until I came along. I had been imagining him going through this sort of day all alone, having no one to turn to at night once the lights went out.

When I looked into his stormy gray eyes, I made it past the chaos to the broken heart of it. As it did the day I found out what had happened to his family, my heart cried out for his.

“Cian.” My voice almost broke on his name. “I’m so glad you brought me here, with you. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. When I think about—”

Before I could even get the words out, he had me plastered to the wall. “It’s on you.” He seemed to force the words out. “The smell of death. Take these fuckin’ clothes off.” He started ripping at them, tearing them to shreds like the beast he was.

I wanted his off too, and our hands were hitting as we fought to get to the warmth of each other’s skin.

Warmth meant life.

I craved his as much as I craved my own next breath.

Our mouths came together, and our breaths tangled as my skin and his met. With a growl deep in his throat, he picked me up off my feet and carried me into the shower. He set me down, and we came together again, kissing and touching, washing each other in a frenzy. The bathroom filled with the scents of fresh water and clean soap.

By the time we were done, my skin was flushed, but I was shaking with need instead of cold.

Cian swept me up and charged toward the bedroom, but my mouth sucking over his pulse stopped him before he could even make it there. He set me down on the bathroom counter, and I wrapped my legs around him. Tilting my hips up, he entered me in a thrust that made me cry out. But even as I cried out, my hands begged for more as they reached out and held on to him, needing him to feel my desperation to hold on.

He was desperate too.

He was fucking me so hard, and so wild, sweat started to slip down his skin and mine. With the momentum of our bodies hitting, the droplets were splashing.

This went beyond want and into need.

There was no gray area here. No confusion as to why we were so crazed.

We needed this connection to feel how alive we were because we had each other.

Our bodies had taken over. Our hearts pounded, our blood rushed through our veins, our breaths came in pants, and I felt like, if he wasn't inside of me all day, every day, then I *might* die. The pleasure was almost too much, too addicting. If he stopped, I'd go mad. If he continued like this, I wasn't going to last much longer. I was already on the edge, about to tip over.

His pace was relentless and his strokes so filling. The wild noises he made in his throat only added to what he was doing to my body. I knew he was making them for me.

I'd be the only woman to ever hear this beast of a man come apart. I'd be the only woman to ever see this beast of a man become vulnerable enough to let go and release himself inside of me.

He'd kill for me.

I'd kill for him too—no other woman would ever touch what was mine.

Death was the only force strong enough to come between us, and I refused to let that touch us either.

My body reflected that. The noises from my throat did too.

“Maeve,” he almost growled out. “Fuck!”

My hips started to meet his, thrust for thrust, and the feel of beautiful defeat tore through me as I shattered a few seconds before him. He growled like an animal tearing into a meal as he exploded inside of me.

It felt like my body was bloodless, my lungs burning with fire, as I leaned into him, barely able to wrap my arms around his neck.

The world seemed so quiet suddenly.

Except for the proof of life—my heart and his still pounding like drums. I could feel the pulse in his neck throbbing against my lips. I sighed, and a shiver ran through him.

He set me back some, his eyes still hungry and roving over my body. He removed a few pieces of my hair from my skin and then sank his hand underneath my hair, pulling my mouth to his. It was a kiss that seemed to twist at the end, entangling and fusing us together.

He lifted me off the counter and brought me into the bedroom, setting me down on the bed. He took a step back, his eyes not missing an inch of skin as he seemed to study me. His hand roamed down to his engorged cock. It was slick from what'd we'd just done. He started to stroke his shaft, from base to tip, his eyes lowering, his mouth parting a little.

His breath picked up when I slid a finger from my navel up to my throat and back down again, detouring to circle my nipple. He growled when I started to barely brush the tip, and my legs parted. He stepped up to me, one hand still stroking himself, and slipped his finger inside of me. He was pushing his seed in, and when I pushed against his finger and started to moan, twisting my nipple, his eyes heated like he was jealous of my hand.

I was jealous of his too.

I went to stop him, but he shook his head. "Keep doin' what you're doin', my intoxication."

A breathless whine slipped from my lips, but I was so turned on, I couldn't stop myself. I started squeezing my nipple as his finger slid in and out, but then I moved away from it and started to touch myself. He growled a little and gripped himself tighter, his hand moving faster. I was writhing against the sheets, biting the pillow, watching him watching me.

When his paced picked up, so did mine.

His hips were thrusting, his hand pumping.

We were both making desperate, strangled noises.

Until I couldn't take it. I was still so sensitive from before. And this was...erotic in a way I'd never experienced before. He was so damn sexy. All I could think about was what he was

doing as my hand started to move faster, obeying my body's needs.

"Please," I barely got out. "I'm about to—!" All the blood in my body seemed to rush down at once, and I made a noise that seemed to gush out at the same time he positioned his cock at my entrance and started to finish there before he slipped inside, pushing himself in deep with a long, guttural groan.

I couldn't hold back. Another orgasm ripped through me at the feel of him, even though he'd only thrust inside of me once.

His mouth was close to my ear as he hotly whispered, "You like that, my intoxication'? Watchin' me come apart for you? Rubbin' that perfect arse against the sheets, bitin' that pillow like it was me?"

It was hard to answer him. He was nibblin'—nibbling at my ear, his minty breath fanning over my skin. He was hard again, and I was barely hanging on. But there was something inside of me. A fire he'd started.

I was still jealous. I wanted to be the one who gave him pleasure like that. Then again...it was so hot.

"How did *you* like that?" I whispered, my voice hoarse. "You could have been inside of me, warm, wet, willing. Instead..." I looked down at his hand.

He growled low in his throat, a little pissed off too, and taking me by the wrists, pinned them above my head. He came in to kiss me, but I bit at his lip, snapping my teeth at him. His face transformed, a slight grin coming to it. It was a bit devilish.

"You goin' to bite me, my little doe?"

"Get close enough and find out, my beast."

He came into the danger zone, and my teeth latched on to his bottom lip, making him hiss out a breath. Then we started kissing, and he let me wriggle free, and flipping the scene, I took his wrists and pinned them as I climbed on top of him. I barely rubbed myself against his erection. He said something

about me *teasin'* him, and I said something about him doing the same thing to me.

We laughed some as we kissed, but then we were almost... wrestling in the sheets again, like we were fighting against the memory of our own hands on our own bodies, when it should have been mine on his and his on mine.

It was madness, and I said so. He set my forehead against his and laughed quietly. Then we were kissing again, and my hands were on him, and his were on me, and I lowered myself on top of him, taking so much pleasure in this realization: we could do this anytime we wanted, for as long as wanted, for the rest of our lives.

As I started to move, our eyes met, and our breaths were becoming harder, more ragged.

“How do you feel?” he ground out, doing something with his hips that made me feel like I was swirling in midair.

“So good. So. So. *So*. Good.” I took a shuddering breath. “You?”

“How a man would feel if he knew he was dyin'. I can taste and feel life—as if she's a woman against my hands, me movin' inside of her, like this.” He gripped my hips and flipped me over, burying himself deeper inside of me. “Like I could live inside of her forever, even if his time stops.”

CHAPTER 26

CIAN

My wife's eyes were wide as Keenan drove us to our house in Boston. She'd lived in Boston all her life, but time away was makin' her see it differently. Maybe things she'd seen a million times before were somehow made new in our absence.

She felt more comfortable here. Not only was it her home, but she felt it was different for me in Boston. It was a place I'd claimed as my future, instead of bein' rooted in the past and havin' it follow me around like a hauntin' ghost.

Without her, I was a ghost.

She gave me shapes and colors, blood and bones, breaths and a beatin' heart.

Without her, I was an empty shell of a man.

She lived. I lived.

With or without her, I was the beast everyone said I was. But to her, I was just her man.

That was a concept I was gettin' used to. Bein' her man.

I'd been ruled by one purpose before. Takin' over Boston and makin' the Craigs pay.

Her existence in my life started rulin' me after she blew through it. I wasn't sure how such a little storm could turn me around entirely, but she had, sendin' me in her direction forevermore.

Her eyes lit up when we pulled up the long drive. She squeezed my hand. “The place looks the same, but so different!”

I nodded, only agreein’ that it looked the same but different to her. Everythin’ looked the same to me, except for my life these days. It was like she’d said. It looked the same, but so fuckin’ different because of her.

She smiled at me. “How does it feel to be back?”

“I’m ready to rule this mother fucker.”

Keenan met my eyes through the mirror. He tipped his cap to me. My wife studied my face, then turned toward the window. There had been a tug from Keenan when he realized how much power my wife held in my life. We’d spent years orchestratin’ the takeover of Boston from the Craigs, and he was worried she’d try to derail it. Even if she did, it was her right as my wife to worry and care for me. But there was no way for me to back out. The wheels were in motion, more so than they had been before.

Even if I could stop the machine, I refused.

Boston was mine.

More so than that, vengeance.

The only thin’ worth more than that to me was my wife’s life.

As the car came to a stop, my cellphone went off. It was Cash. He wanted to set up a time to meet. After we did, we hung up, and both Maeve and Keenan were starin’ at me.

“In a rush, your cousin,” Keenan said, approval drippin’ all over his tone. “What happened to his wife’s brother worked in our favor.”

“All the same,” I said. “Cashel and I share blood. He won’t mind spillin’ some of mine if it comes down to it. He has enough of it to spare.”

“If you were to double-cross him, yeah.” Keenan shrugged. “We don’t plan on doin’ that. We have more to lose in this deal than he does.”

“I don’t agree. His wife’s brother is the reason he’s lookin’ to make this deal. That’s a high price for him to pay—especially since he’ll be owin’ his wife if Craig kills her brother.”

Keenan opened his hands against the steerin’ wheel as if it say, *both sides have a lot to lose then.*

Which made me feel more at ease with this deal. Yeah, I’d treat it like I treated any other deal, but we were on even ground. We both had a lot at stake. It would make for a more harmonious start between us.

Fiona pulled up behind us and opened the back door, letting Argus and Grania free. They immediately started sniffin’ around, and after I opened Maeve’s door, the three of us stepped out. Keenan and Fiona went into the house. Maeve and I walked the hounds to their new backyard in Boston. They were feelin’ frisky after the long flight, creepin’ down on their haunches, and after a bit of a waitin’ game, one of them would make a sudden move and they’d both start runnin’.

Maeve laughed, and I set my hand on her neck just to feel the song of it rush through my blood.

“They seem to like it here!” She clapped for them, and they seemed to feed off her energy, runnin’ around even faster.

I pulled her into me and kissed her temple. After a few more minutes, we started toward the house, the dogs followin’ behind.

“Feel free to redecorate the place. I bought it and never touched it. It’s yours to do with as you like.”

She nodded, tuckin’ a strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s beautiful as is. I might just add some personal pictures and touches to make it ours.” She took a sharp breath and then laughed a little. “That’s such a normal thing do when everything else feels...like it has no normal shapes, right?”

For her, this life would take time to adjust to. I’d been called the Beast of Boston ever since I disconnected a man’s head from his shoulders—one of Craig’s men—and stuck it on a spike in front of his house.

She would be the Beast's wife, Maeve O'Callaghan, and known no less than the Beauty of Boston.

There would be books about us someday. How the Beast fell in love with the Beauty, and by some miracle, she fell in love with him too. With the wolves surroundin' them, they fought and won.

At the end, they were both devastated by the love they shared.

All good stories should be devastatin'. Devastation means they lived in love until the very last page of their story.

Keenan and Fiona were in the kitchen when we walked in, the dogs stormin' past us to sniff out their new place. Fiona had water goin' for tea, and Keenan was waitin' for me. Maeve looked between us, her shoulders fallin' a little.

I nodded at Keenan. He nodded back. He'd meet me in the office. Takin' Maeve by the hand, I brought her to our room. She plopped down on the bed and covered her eyes with her arm.

"Going to work?" she asked.

I moved her hand. She blinked at me.

"Work." I grunted. "For a lack of a better word, yeah."

She nodded and sat up, looking around. "I guess I'll just unpack?" She made it sound like a question.

I leaned in and kissed her on the head. "This place is your castle. You do whatever you want to do."

"Can I leave?" Her voice rose. She was excited at the thought. She didn't even have to say it. She wanted to run to the bookstore and see her friend, Delaney.

"No."

Her hands twisted in her lap. "I mean, I know things are dangerous with the Craigs...but I can't stay here forever. It's perfect, but I miss Delaney and the bookstore. Can I at least have security or something?"

"No."

“Why?”

“Unless the Craigs are gone, I don’t trust anyone enough.”

“What about Fiona?”

“Fiona rarely leaves. She’s not good in traffic.”

“You’re bullshitting me.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“She followed a man home after he cut her off. She waited behind a tree, and the only reason she didn’t hurt him—” I paused “—was he had a little kid who ran out to greet him. She slashed his tires instead.”

“Damn,” she breathed, then looked away from me. She was thinkin’ hard, worryin’ her thumbnail.

Before she could come up with anythin’ else, I told her I’d be back in a while and went into the office. Keenan was already sittin’ down with a glass of whiskey in front of him. He offered me a glass, and we drank in silence while men started to arrive for the meetin’ he’d planned. It was time we updated the higher-rankin’ men on the situation. Once the weapons were ours, we were goin’ to wage war against the Craigs, not just small skirmishes.

First, we’d sell some of the weapons, offerin’ better deals to his usual business. Second, we were goin’ to turn some of the weapons against him and his men.

Keenan took over the meetin’, as he usually did. My face was the one the men watched while it was Keenan’s voice they heard. They were cautious of me, as they should be. There was no grey area where I was concerned. Either the man was with me or against me.

About twenty minutes into the meetin’, the men had a fresh energy about them, fired up at the new turn in our fortune, when music infiltrated the office. The men grew quiet at the sound of it, then lowered their eyes in confusion as my wife’s voice joined in the chorus. She was pourin’ her heart into the song. It was by the singer I’d stolen in Ireland to sing at our weddin’.

Maybe I should have killed him instead.

I was fuckin' jealous that she enjoyed his music so much, like I'd been jealous of her hand.

Still was.

She'd lit a fire wherever the fuck jealousy lived in my body.

Keenan coughed into his glass, then said the singin' voice belonged to my wife. I looked each man in the eye. They'd meet hell before they met her. I'd talk to Keenan after, and we'd decide on a different place to hold our meetings.

Keenan went to say somethin' else in the sudden silence, but the music started again, and she hit a high note. He dismissed the men and shook his head at me as he left to find Fiona, mumblin' about a magical singin' doe in our midst.

My magical singin' doe could be as loud as she wanted, but the blisterin' burn moved my feet when I thought of her gettin' lost in the sound of his voice. The door was shut to our room, but it sounded like it didn't even have one. The music blared, and she didn't even hear me come in.

I was suddenly thrust into a much cooler and more heavenly place when my eyes found her.

She'd taken a bath, and her scent clung to the humid air. Her hair was up in a towel, and she wore one of my T-shirts. It fell to her knees, and while she danced around, singin' and puttin' our clothes away, she held one of my nicer shirts to her chest. It was like she was singin' to it or somethin'.

This song was a much more emotional one than the one before. It seemed like a war song. A man puttin' down the lyrics to it in a letter to his woman while he was off fightin'.

It wasn't a song to grin at, but I was grinnin' at my wife. The singer had an Irish accent that came through with the lyrics, and she was tryin' to sing like he was, even tryin' to reach his vocal ranges. I leaned against the doorframe, just watchin' the magic that was Maeve O'Callaghan move throughout our room. As with everythin' else, she was leavin' behind sparks that were bringin' life to the walls.

I realized somethin' I hadn't before.

What I thought was jealousy was actually longin'.

In that short period of time, I'd missed her.

I was so fucked.

Keenan already knew it.

She turned around, her eyes shut tight, clutchin' the shirt to her breast like it was me she was clingin' to. Her eyes opened and tears slid down her cheeks. She didn't jump or make a noise when our eyes connected.

She flung the shirt on the bed and ran into my arms. She wrapped her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist.

"How long as it been?" she whispered between her mouth crashin' against mine in a mixture of hard and soft kisses. "Five centuries?"

"Somethin' like that," I said, feelin' as mad as she was. She clung to me so hard, I was able to reach up and wipe her tears. I kissed the lines they made on her face. "Cryin' over a song?"

"No. Over you." She sighed, restin' her head against mine. "I mean, not *over you*, but...I just missed you. And that song...it felt good to let it out."

"Felt good?"

"Yeah. Sometimes it's good to just let it all flow out. Music helps move the melancholy when it feels stuck in my chest."

"I made you cry."

She moved her head back some and searched my eyes. "I missed you that much." Another tear slipped down her cheek, and I used my mouth to dry it. I started for the bathroom.

"What are you doing? Cian?"

I set her down on her feet and started to undress. "Get dressed," I said before I stepped into the shower. A few

seconds later, she was in with me. She traced her fingers around the pattern of the buck's antlers on my stomach.

My eyes found hers, and she reached up and wiped droplets of water from my face. "Where are we going?"

"I'm takin' you out," I said, but first, I set her against the wall and forced out the cold longin' in our blood.



I HIT THE BRAKE, and the car came to a smooth enough stop. Maeve smiled at me and squeezed my hand. From the backseat, Keenan ran a hand down his face, shakin' his head, and Fiona clutched the arm, her knuckles white. When she met my eyes through the mirror, I could've sworn she was cursin' me. If I lost my balls, or somethin' equally as important, by the time the night was through, I'd know for sure.

Maeve looked away from me, toward the window, and was tryin' not to grin. Keenan and Fiona demanded to go on what Maeve was callin' *date night* with us, but it looked like they were on a date instead. Keenan wasn't used to people drivin' him around, and Fiona only trusted a few. I hadn't earned that part of her trust yet.

She popped the back of my seat when we stopped again. "Not enough space, you heathen! You're almost up that car's arse. What do you want to give them? A rectal exam? See what's inside of their boot? I'm tellin' ya now, it ain't nothin' that belongs to you! Stay back. You'd think your Da taught you how to drive."

The car went quiet, but I could see Maeve was grinnin'. She liked when Keenan or Fiona brought up my parents. She said they would have liked it. Then she turned on the radio, and Keenan groaned.

"Not this fecker again!"

"I didn't do it on purpose." Maeve held her hands up, laughin' like a loon. She motioned to the dash. "It's the radio. He's popular here in Boston."

“I don’t see ya changin’ it, Queen O’Callaghan.”

“No,” she said. “Because I like it!”

Keenan met my eyes through the mirror, and I knew what he was thinkin’, because I was thinkin’ the same thin’. I shoulda killed the fecker when I had the chance.

I did a double take in the mirror when I noticed Fiona movin’ her shoulders some. Keenan followed my narrowed-eyed gaze, and his mouth fell open. When Fiona noticed us watchin’, she rolled her shoulders like they were sore.

“Weather must be turnin’ bad,” she said, rubbin’ the left one. “I’m feelin’ stiff.”

“Fiona, do you want to come with me to the bookstore after dinner? Del has so many books on knifery.”

Knifery? There wasn’t such a fuckin’ thing. I glanced at my wife. The way she’d said the fake word made me think it was a codeword for somethin’ else. Keenan looked at me again, like somethin’ was up, and again, I agreed. Not that a bookstore couldn’t carry books on *knifery*, but Maeve had told me Delaney carried more stories in the romance genre.

Keenan and I waited to see what Fiona was going to say.

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I do need new books on the subject.”

“You’re going to love it!” Maeve seemed to have a permanent smile on her face. “Turn here!” She pointed to a street at the last second.

“Argh!” Keenan ripped his cap off, runnin’ a frustrated hand down his head after he busted shoulders with Fiona. He started mumblin’ and complainin’, but I tuned him out as Maeve showed me where she and Pauric had lived.

I’d been there before, followin’ Pauric home. He was such an odd man, though, that I’d just left. Keenan always said I’d spared him because he was wearin’ old-lookin’ goggles.

I was thinkin’ I had spared him because the beautiful woman inside his house had always been mine.

The memory of it stirred up a funny feelin' in the pit of my stomach. It was fuckin' odd, like I felt somethin' at work in that second that I never had before. I grew quiet, tryin' to place it, tryin' to figure it out. Maeve went on about different places in the neighborhood, things she'd done, until we passed Craig's house. I remembered what she'd told me, how I was there with her even when I wasn't.

She went quiet.

I was thinkin' it was for the same reason I had.

Maybe this was what she'd called reflectin' once.

She blinked at me and then cleared her throat. "Are we going somewhere specific?"

I gave her a blank look.

"Do we have reservations? I didn't even think—" She looked down at herself. A long, cream-colored sweater, another one underneath, and a brown skirt with a delicate flower pattern. She wore brown stockings with brown boots. The diamond band on her left finger winked at me in the darkness. If she ever took it off, she would be naked to me.

"You eat whatever you want. We go wherever you want."

She smiled almost shyly at me. "What if I want you to decide someday?"

"I decide then."

"Good," she said. "Because I've been known to wear a place out. I like the food at the pub across the street from the bookstore. I could eat there every day. Delaney said getting me to eat somewhere else is like encouraging me to do something wild and crazy."

I made a sudden turn. Keenan and Fiona both started yellin' at me from the backseat. I grinned, and so did Maeve. I squeezed her hand. I wasn't fuckin' good at this relationship business. I'd learned how to kill a man before I'd even touched a woman like I had my wife. I was behind. Kinda lost. These outings were to teach me the ways of my woman. I was

goin' to fuckin' learn how to be her husband. I already knew how to be a beast.

“Are you sure about this?” Maeve looked at me and then at the pub.

I gave her another blank look.

She sighed. “Good thing I can read you so well, Cian O’Callaghan. I wasn’t sure about the *Craigs*.” She whispered the last name. “I know they come here.”

I led her toward the pub, Keenan and Fiona followin’. “I won this part of the war for you already. I have men all over this area now.”

She was speechless. I took that as a good sign. She was pleased with what I’d done. The pub workers knew her and seemed excited to see her, but they were tamin’ it down. They knew who I was, even if they’d never seen my face uncovered before. I’d used to roam the streets wearin’ a hooded sweater to conceal who I was. Even if the wind took it down, my hair had been a fuckin’ mess.

Maeve didn’t seem to notice, or she didn’t care, about their reactions to me. She told us her favorites to order, and we all settled in for burgers and Guinness. Music played in the background, and when Ruairi Merrick came on, Maeve started crackin’ up at Keenan’s sour face. Fiona and I grinned, and he turned the face on us, accusin’ us of being traitors.

My hand was on Maeve’s slim neck as we left the pub and walked across the street to the bookstore. She kept sighin’ and leanin’ into me. Every time she would think of Keenan’s face, she would start laughin’ again. Even though he gave her sour looks, when he met my eye, he winked. Keenan could be flirty when he turned on the charm.

The bookstore was quaint, and Maeve fit there. It was filled with some late-night readers browsin’ the shelves. Maeve stopped before we reached the counter. Delaney was behind it, checkin’ customers out.

“Ms.!” Maeve grabbed a book and held it up. “How much for this one?”

Delaney went to hold her hand up, to probably tell Maeve to wait her turn, but when her eyes landed on my wife, she screeched and ran toward us, leavin' everythin' at the counter. She wrapped Maeve in a hug that almost rocked her on her feet. Maeve held her back and they started to sway, almost like they were dancin'.

Once they pulled apart, Delaney kept her hands on Maeve's shoulders. She looked at me. "Are you bringing her home for good?"

"We move together," I said.

Maeve smiled at me and then turned back to Delaney. "We'll be here for the indefinite future. Maybe we'll go back to the castle in Ireland from time to time, but...this is where we'll be most of the time."

Delaney screamed, like she was about to start clappin' or somethin'. "Please. Please. *Pah*-lease, tell me you're coming back to work? I thought I was going to die here without you." She looked at me. "You have no idea how much of this girl stayed behind after she left. Her touch is everywhere. I didn't even want to dust the shelves. Robert made me do it." She turned back to Maeve. "I'll even give you half of this place if you come back."

Maeve laughed, but it didn't sound as free as it usually did. She glanced at me before she looked Delaney in the eyes. She grabbed her hands. "We'll see."

"You know I'm not going to take no for answer, right?"

"Ms.?" The girl at the counter, the one who was being checked out, called at Delaney.

"Oh! Be right back, Mae!"

"Go!" Maeve made a shooin' motion with her hands.

After Delaney got back to business, Maeve stood quietly next to me. Her entire mood had changed.

I didn't fuckin' like it.

She'd told me she was surrounded by worlds here—worlds she'd never thought she'd see—and workin' at the bookstore,

or even buyin' it, was going to make her feel trapped in her life again. I was who I was, and my business in Boston couldn't be left for long stretches of time. Even men who vowed loyalty to me would sniff a vulnerable leader out and go after him (me) like I'd gone after Craig. Most likely for other reasons, reasons that were not personal, but there were no guarantees.

Keenan could stand in for me, but Keenan wasn't a permanent solution.

Nothin' was, except for me bein' in Boston.

Maeve's eyes found Fiona searchin' the shelves. She smoothed out her sweater and started toward her. After she got there, a man came in and watched as she talked to Fiona. He didn't call her name.

He ran up behind her and picked her up off the floor.

She startled and slapped at his arms.

She fell out of them when I wrapped my arm around his neck and started to squeeze his throat. I'd lifted him off his feet some, and he was kickin' at me, tryin' to claw my arms.

If the store was in chaos, I didn't hear it.

All I felt was his life drainin', and I knew it wouldn't be long.

"CIAN!"

Maeve's voice cut like a knife through the buttery noise in my head, and everythin' went quiet.

"Oh my God," she cried, her panic like a piercin' scream in my ears. "Please, Cian." She lifted her hands. "Let him go. He didn't mean it. I know him from before."

"Know him," I repeated.

"No!" she rushed out. "Not like *that*. He's Robert's nephew. Nothing more. *Please*. Don't do this. *Please*."

Her pleadin' was the only thin' that saved his life. I dropped him on the ground, fixed my long coat, and wrapped

my arm around her. She fell into me, and I kept her pressed to my side as we left.

As soon as we were home, she shoved me off, and for the first time, I came face to face with a truly pissed-off Maeve O'Callaghan.

CHAPTER 27

MAEVE

At first, I had been surprised. I wasn't expecting Kyle to pick me up like that. Once I'd realized who it was, I knew my husband was going to go after him. He didn't care about names.

Still.

My shock melted into pure, undiluted fear when Kyle's eyes started to bulge and he started to piss himself. Cian was draining the life from him right before my eyes. I knew he wasn't even hearing the screams in the shop, or Delaney's wild cries as she begged for the life of someone she considered her nephew.

Keenan and Fiona stood back, watching the group instead of Cian. They wanted to make sure no one recorded what he was doing.

Me?

All I could do was plead and beg for my husband to stop, hoping by some miracle my voice cut through the dark fog like morning breaks through night, and he could see me. I'd seen Cian kill before, and it was almost effortless, like he'd been programmed to do it. There was no line between right and wrong for him, only survive or die.

I couldn't blame him for that. Craig had sent him down a dangerous road a lesser man would have succumbed to. Cian never had the time to truly be a boy. He'd been turned into a killer, and that killer created the beast to protect the little boy who still hid under a piece of grass on a hill in Ireland.

The aftermath, though—Kyle crumpled into a mess on the floor, the look Delaney had sent me before I left, like maybe she never wanted to see me again—made my heart ache.

I wasn't sure who I was madder at.

My husband.

Life.

Even myself.

Because my anger wasn't all for what Cian had done. I had this idea in my head of how life would be when we got back to Boston. I knew what was coming, but I'd dared to dream of something a little different.

He'd spend most of his time with me, just like we'd done in Ireland.

It was only a dream, though, and I still took it to heart. He'd become the entirety of it, even morphing into all the worlds I'd always yearned to see.

When we returned from Ireland and he went straight to work, it gave me a glimpse into the future. He would be gone most of the time, constantly fighting battles he had to win, and I'd be stuck in the cold Boston castle, there for him whenever he needed me to be.

At least the bookstore had been my relief from life, even when, at the same time, it had been a lock on the door to it.

Cian said the lockdown was until he won Boston from the Craigs, but I wasn't so sure he would ever let me go. The war with the Craigs was only the beginning. Because it wasn't a war, but only a battle. It would always be war to keep Boston in his grasp. There would always be more Craigs lining up to take it from him, and I'd always be waiting in the shadows, the warm woman pulling him back to life.

I didn't mind the last part. It had become my purpose in life. I wanted to do it. Needed it even. But I also wanted to do something for me sometimes. Working at the bookstore, being friends with Delaney, even eating at the pub and my

woodworking...that would see me through when Cian was fighting battles I'd heal him from.

He'd never understand that, though. Our natures were too different. Our opposites, which attracted us to each other, were also going to try to pull us apart.

Those differences had us on opposing sides of each other after my husband tried to take my arm and I'd shoved him off.

His eyes were even wilder than they were while he was crushing Kyle's windpipe. Because his eyes hadn't been wild. They had been almost...dead. When he looked at me—that was when he came alive. It was the same for me. I'd never felt life on such a deep level until I'd met him. Moments had existed only on the surface of the page.

Cian O'Callaghan had brought me inside of the story.

That was what I was fighting for.

Our happily ever after.

"You almost killed him," I seethed.

"I'd do it again."

"Not everyone is a threat."

"When it comes to your life—they are."

I crossed my arms over my chest, and he seemed to stand even taller. His eyes were focused on me, and I could barely stand to meet them. I moved, needing a bath, needing some space. He moved with me.

I stepped to the left.

He stepped to the left.

I stepped to the right.

He stepped to the right.

He kept blocking me.

It brought back memories of the night I'd run from him for fun. I didn't want to do that. Turn this into something it wasn't.

“Move,” I said, tilting my chin up to him, doing my best to keep it firm.

He took a step toward me. I held my ground. His body touched mine, and without even having to pick me up, he moved me. He backed me up until we were in the bathroom and the counter was at my back. He took my wrists in his hands, and I tried to maneuver out of them, but it was no use. His next words reflected his physical action.

“I’ll never let you go.”

His words were the opposite of his touch. They were anguished, like he was losing me, and he couldn’t deal with it. I felt the tremble of his bones through his hold.

He thought because I was mad that I was going to leave him.

For good.

His anguish hit me straight in the heart and almost brought me to my knees.

My husband could kill so easily, but this...between us, was still so foreign to him. I’d never been in a relationship either, but our problems would never make me run.

“Cian,” I whispered, “I’m not leaving. I’m never going anywhere.”

He shook his head.

“Just because we don’t agree, or one of us gets mad, doesn’t mean it’s over. Would you leave me?”

He made a pained sound in his throat.

It seemed to come from my heart.

I was so wrong for treating him like he was just a man who could, maybe, understand my feelings, even though I hadn’t shared them with him. I thought I could figure it out on my own, but it was time to be completely honest with him. My anger wasn’t all anger. It was hiding fear.

“I’m so sorry, Cian,” I whispered, looking away from him.

He released one of my wrists and turned my face toward his. I almost sobbed. It was like this was causing him enough turmoil to set him on fire.

“I just...I missed you so damn much earlier. I wasn't expecting that. To feel like you were too far away from me in the same house. We've grown so close, so fast. And I never felt like I had to keep up. I was letting the flow take us wherever. I loved the rush of it. Being with you all the time. It honestly felt like heaven to me. Not the painful secrets of the past but a better future. But that was in Ireland. Here...” I took a deep breath and sighed it out.

“I see life for what it's going to be. Your time is not mine...not nearly as much. And I don't want to feel lonely when you're gone, so...I thought I still had the bookstore, my old life, to depend on. I don't. Life is changing fast here, has changed while I was gone, and I'm having a hard time keeping up now.”

Tears slipped down my cheeks. He made another one of those pained noises. He let me go when I wriggled my locked wrist free, and as soon as he did, I wrapped my arms around his neck and sobbed into it. He held me to him like he could fuse us together. I breathed him in while I cried. His bones shook underneath my palms.

He slid his fingers underneath my messy bun and pulled my head back so I was looking up at him. “You need a purpose,” he said, his voice full of grit.

I sniffed. “That's not it. You're my purpose now.” How to even explain this without making a liar out of me? It took me a second. “I just can't sit around and redecorate an already perfect house. While you're out taking care of business...I'll be here, nothing really to do, worrying all the time. I need busy work.” More tears fell from my eyes.

He said, “Fuck, Maeve,” and kissed me. He kissed me on the side of the lips while I told him I was sorry, and he told me he couldn't live without me. How he loved me more than he could almost deal with. His heart was burstin', and he didn't know how to lessen the ache. I didn't either.

It was a messy display of beautiful truths and fearsome realities. It was moments full of what it meant to live and feel. It was being cruelly human and hopefully everlasting.

I'd worn a long-sleeved bodysuit with a low-cut back under my cardigan, and his hands found my bare skin, his fingers curling and almost scraping against it, like he was desperate to get to the heart of what was going on between us. To truly understand it.

He shivered when my cold hands roamed underneath his sweater and found the warmth of his skin. I tucked my face in his neck and just held on. "I never want to fight again," I whispered against his racing pulse. "It's not us. Not who we are."

"Talk to me, Maeve. Make me understand if I don't."

"I will." I sighed. "It was just hard to put into words what I was trying to understand."

"We'll make sense of it together then."

"Yeah," I whispered. "We're both learning."

After a minute or two, I pulled away some, and he let me. I looked him in the eyes.

"I meant the vows I made to you, Cian O'Callaghan. It'll be life and death for us."

"I'll never let you go," he repeated. His voice was like iron, though the words didn't feel like shackles to me. They felt like a delicate ring on my left finger.

"We do this life together, or not at all."

"You gave me a heart, Maeve O'Callaghan, and you break it."

I moved toward him, and he moved toward me. We came together, our fingers hungry, our mouths thirsty, and undressed each other. He released my hair from the bun and watched as it tumbled down my shoulders in insane waves.

"So fuckin' beautiful." His voice was hoarse as he gazed over my body. "*My* wife." He scooped me up from the counter

and brought me to the bed.

He set me down gently and took his spot next to me. I reached out to him and he came to me. When our mouths touched, it was like magic had turned the night liquid around us, our hands and movements causing the current. We followed it, the issues between us drowning, while we held tight to each other.

CHAPTER 28

MAEVE

My eyes opened to a cold, dark room, but Cian's mouth was warm as he kissed my neck, my lips, my chest... I shivered from how good it felt, and then closed my eyes and sighed as he made his way down. He kissed my thighs open, and...*good morning to me.*

Even if the room was cold, our bodies were warm, and it was like I was floating in the clouds as his tongue did things to me that my entire body sighed at.

I broke just as the sun came up.

I coaxed him onto his back and returned the favor.

Then we were in the shower, and after all we'd done the night before, and that morning...he had to carry me to the vanity in the bathroom and sit me down after we were done. My legs were useless. He dried me, then had me slip my arms inside my robe. He gently unraveled the knots in my hair, drying it after.

He ran his hand through my hair, like he was running it through water. "Everythin' is so beautiful about you, Maeve."

I shivered before I stood. I grinned and pointed at the chair. "Your turn."

My grin turned into a smile when he almost hurried to take it. He enjoyed it when I freshened up his cut. I used my towel to dry his back and then got to work, humming as I did. His eyes watched me the entire time until they closed. He sighed, and every so often, his skin would convulse at my touch. When I was done, I leaned down and kissed his pulse.

“All done, handsome.”

His eyes blinked open. He nodded.

“How does it look?”

He shrugged. “I just ask you not to shave me bald. Then you’ll have no reason to do this.”

“I’ll always have a reason to do this,” I whispered, running my hand down his neck.

He stood, towering over me, and had me take the seat again. He disappeared into the closet, and when he came back, he was holding a small box. He handed it to me. I opened it slowly and stared at the two rings for a second before he took it from me and got down on one knee.

As gently as he’d untangled my hair, he took my left hand. He slipped off the band that belonged to his mom and then slid another V shaped band on. It was as delicate as the first band, lined with diamonds with one larger one at the tip, but it reminded me of a crown a queen from a different time would wear. He took the second ring out of the box. It was in a halo style, the marquise diamond in the center at least four karats. He slipped his mom’s band over it.

He ran his finger over mine. “You said yes to me.”

“I’d say yes to you with only a promise, no ring needed.”

He looked up at me with those enchanting eyes, and after I caught my breath, he barely touched my face.

“Thank you, Cian O’Callaghan,” I whispered, closing my eyes, resting my hand against his palm. “I love you. I always have. I always will.”

I gasped as he lifted me off the seat and set me on the counter. He removed the towel from around his waist and got the robe off me in record-breaking time. His mouth was on mine like he wanted to inhale my soul, and his hands touched me in a way that seemed like he was going beyond flesh and hitting bone. He ran his hand between my legs, and a low groan trembled in his throat.

“So fuckin’ wet for me.” He licked his fingers before he tilted my hips up. We both groaned as he entered me.

My eyes automatically closed, but he took my face in his hand and ordered me to look at him. Our eyes held while he thrust in and out of me. I whimpered at how connected to him I felt. He growled low in his throat, like he could feel it too, and he’d protect it all costs.

One look. One touch. One word. And we couldn’t keep our hands off each other. I wanted this...*need* between us to last forever. I was almost desperate for it.

I’d never experienced a man in this way, and I wasn’t sure if this was normal, how we couldn’t seem to stop, but if it wasn’t...I didn’t want normal. Ever. I felt like I’d die without this.

“*Ah, ah, ah,*” I started to chant, my voice almost vibrating, when the tension inside of me started to become almost unbearable.

“Look at me,” he barely got out. “That’s it, my intoxication. I’m going to fill you up and give you a purpose. You’ll never miss a part of me, if you have this.”

His words made no sense to me, but I wasn’t concentrating on what they meant...only the soft tone of them, how sexy he was, how good he was making me feel.

When he tilted my hips up a little more and started to drive into me faster, I snatched his arms and let go. He came with a roaring curse. Even after he was done, he kept moving inside of me, his eyes closed, making noises that were turning me on again.

I rested my head against his chest. “This is madness. Total madness.”

He grunted in response, kissing the top of my head.

He separated us and went to the closet. He came back and slipped a pair of panties on me. He pulled them up tight, and I could feel them pressing against my crotch, but I was too dazed to care. Cian didn’t take long to dress, but I did in a

haze, all of my muscles and bones protesting in the most delicious way. I could sleep for days.

Maybe I would.

I felt like I could live on sex and sleep.

I could live on my husband's touch.

An alert came through that someone was at the gate. I looked at Cian, but he didn't react to it. He must have known who was coming. Maybe more men to meet with.

"I'm almost done," I said, opening the medicine cabinet. "I just need to take my—" My birth control pills were gone. I took them every morning from that cabinet. I never moved them. I closed my eyes, wondering if I was losing my mind, until I turned and found Cian staring at me, holding up the box.

"I'm going to fill you up and give you a purpose. You'll never miss a part of me, if you have this."

I understood then...he wanted to have a baby. His words made a lump form in my throat. I hadn't thought much about it. We were just figuring *us* out. But...having a piece of him, a piece of me...it made my heart race in the best way.

He stood and walked over to me. He leaned down and kissed me, and when he stood, our eyes held. He held the pills out to me, ultimately giving me the choice.

Another alert came across the alarm system that a visitor was at the front door.

When I didn't move, he took my hand, put the box in it, and then left the room.



I STOPPED SHORT when I came to the top of the steps. Delaney was standing in the doorway. Cian held the door open for her. She was looking at him, then she ducked her head some and spotted me. I hurried down the steps, not sure why she'd come. She hadn't answered my texts about Kyle on the way

home the night before. I understood why, but I hoped she hadn't come to let me know Kyle was dead or permanently injured.

"Hi," I said as I came face to face with her.

"Hey."

It didn't seem like she was going to say anything else, so I just plowed right into it. "How's Kyle?"

"He has a throat contusion, but he's expected to make a full recovery."

I nodded and looked at Cian. He had no expression on his face. It didn't seem like he cared either way. Maybe Delaney noticed. Maybe she didn't. Cian looked between us, shut the door behind Delaney, and then told me he was going to work.

Delaney and I watched as he rolled his sleeves up and disappeared upstairs. It seemed like our eyes lingered behind him for a few beats too long, to stall facing each other. Then I turned to her.

"You came to see me." I gave her a small smile.

"Your husband can be very persuasive."

As soon as the words were out, Keenan walked in behind her, and after he tapped his hat to us, he followed the direction my husband had gone in.

Cian had gotten Delaney to come here? I looked upstairs, not expecting to see him, but there he was, watching us. He gave me a subtle nod and then disappeared again.

"Oh," I breathed out. "Cian had Keenan talk you into coming here."

"Yeah, but you know I wouldn't have come if I really didn't want to. It was messed up what happened, but I still love you, Mae."

I took her hand and squeezed. "Things are different for me now. Kyle didn't say anything before he picked me up, and given how dangerous Cian's business is..."

"I get it. I hope he rids Boston of the Craigs."

Out of nowhere, she pulled me in for a crushing hug. I hugged her back with the same enthusiasm. It felt good. It felt like we were okay. When we pulled apart, I invited her inside. She wiped my eyes and then hers, and it seemed like she couldn't wait to see our house. As we toured the downstairs, we made small talk about how Cian told me I could redecorate it.

“Why?” She peeked into the kitchen. “It’s damn near perfect!”

“That’s what I said!”

She headed deeper into the kitchen, and I took a seat at the long bar. She started rummaging through cabinets and found tea. She lifted the container.

“Wooo! The good stuff. Straight from Ireland. Want a cup?”

She made us each a cup and poured a lot of whiskey in each one. She took a seat next to me, and we swiveled on our stools to face each other some.

“Hot toddies are so good on a day like this one.” She motioned outside.

I hadn't noticed, but she was right. The weather was crisp, and the leaves had started to turn. Fall in Boston was a sight, and I couldn't wait to experience one with Cian.

She slapped me on the knee. “Fill me in on Ireland and all you’ve been doing.”

“Oh!” I jumped off the stool. “I’ll be right back!”

I ran upstairs, digging in the bags with all the gifts I'd bought for her. On my way back down, I stopped in the darkness of the hallway, right before the light from Cian's office could reach it. I heard Keenan talking.

“You can't take over from that fuckin' seat, lad. Maybe afterward, you'll get more inside time, but for now, we must fight.”

I shook my head and ran back downstairs, almost tripping on my way down. Delaney was gazing out the window when I

came back in.

“What’s wrong?” she said after she took in my face.

“Nothing.” I forced a smile. “Except I almost bit it on the way down.”

“That’ll do it.”

“Here.” I set the gifts in front of her. “These are yours.”

For the next hour or so, she opened the gifts and we talked about my wedding and my honeymoon in Ireland. When I realized how I had taken over the conversation, I turned it toward her.

“How’s the bookshop? Robert? Tell me all the things!”

She sighed and played with her cup. “The bookstore is excellent. As grand as ever. Robert is...good too, but without me.”

The cup came down from my mouth slowly. “What do you mean? *Good without you?*”

“He’s going through something. Maybe it’s...oh...what do they call it? A midlife crisis or something.” She waved a hand.

I grabbed it before she could put it down. “Talk to me, Del.”

We entwined our fingers and held on tight.

Sighing, she reached over and filled her cup with whiskey. She refilled mine too. At this point, we were only drinking alcohol.

“I don’t know. Things were great. Excellent in fact. Life was moving forward.” She pointed straight, like she was giving me directions. “We were together. Enjoying life. Then —*BAM*. He did something I never expected. When I told him I wasn’t sure if I could...agree, or maybe live with it, I said we should take a break. Or maybe he did. Point is. We both agreed it was for the best.”

I set my feet down, freed our linked hands, and pulled her in as tightly as I could. “I’m so sorry, Del.” I closed my eyes and breathed her in. She always smelled like a romantic story

to me. Roses and paper and ink. I just couldn't believe Robert would do this to her. They were the couple who made everyone believe love existed. Me included.

They had been together for so long... Maybe he was needing more? Maybe he had cheated on her? It felt insensitive to come right out and ask, but I could only assume. She'd said he done something she never expected, and she couldn't live with it.

"This is why men need to just get it out of their systems early, you know? I mean, why wait until half your life is over to do something like this?"

I nodded, but I was having a hard time keeping up. I kept thinking about Cian and how he never really got to get anything out of his system except for vengeance. I was the first woman he'd ever slept with, and forever was a long time. What if someday I wasn't enough? He turned every head in the room. Soon, he would rule Boston and have enough power that I'd never know if he had affairs.

He could hide families all over Boston, and I'd be clueless, until one day a girl with his eyes knocked on the door looking for her father. This was a mafia tale I was concocting in my head—it seemed fitting.

As Delaney went on about Robert, I pushed my glass closer to the whiskey bottle, and she topped me off. I didn't drink often, but I was being a supportive friend. I was also trying my hardest to drown my own sudden insecurities.

"Keenan...Cian's uncle?"

"Yes," I said. "Just without the same blood."

Delaney nodded. "He's so good-looking. Is he available? He was being flirty with me, and I thought maybe he might be interested in a date? Robert has been on a few." She groaned and shook her head. "I feel too old for this shit!"

"I'm not sure about Keenan," I said. He could be kind of flirty, and he was handsome, especially when he wore his Paddy hat and his peacoat, but I'd never seen him with an actual woman besides Fiona. Then there was what happened

on our wedding night, when he'd touched her headband, and she ran like he'd scared her. "Anyone else?"

Delaney laughed. "How about we cook a light lunch and prep for dinner? It'll give us something to do while your husband works. Maybe we can come up with another eligible bachelor or sign me up for one of those website dating things."

We laughed some as we started scouring the cabinets for food. Fiona joined us about an hour later, eyeing me with suspicion before she took a seat at the bar. I was glad in that moment that I directed Delaney in a different direction from Keenan. Fiona had a piercing stare and a sharp knife.

"You going to try your hand at cookin', love?" she asked me.

I held up a massive carrot and waved it like a sword. "Sure? Why not? I did it before I left. How hard can it beeee to cook chowder?"

"She only burned the pan before it had anything in it." Delaney refilled her glass, some of sloshing over the sides. "Cooking a carrot should be a *breeze*."

Delaney looked at me. I looked at her.

We exploded with laughter.

I couldn't feel my cheeks.

A slow smile came to Fiona's face, and she joined us at the stove. We decided on a bottle of wine for something we were cooking, but we drank it all before it went in. Somewhere along the way, someone turned music on, and a computer was pulled out. We signed Delaney up for a dating service, then started picking through the gents, as Fiona called them.

By the time night fell, we had clam chowder simmering on the stove, and fresh baked bread was perfuming the air from the oven. We also had a few contenders on the dating app hearted for later, but we couldn't stop laughing at a few of the descriptions on some of the profiles. Something Fiona said, something about a crooked carrot commercial, set Delaney off.

She set her head on the counter and screeched with laughter, then suddenly became quiet. Fiona and I started laughing. She'd passed out. She was already snoring.

"All right," Keenan said, suddenly appearing in the kitchen. "What's taken a hold of all of you?" Before we could answer, he was already looking in the trash can, shaking his head. He turned to the doorway. "They emptied the place out, lad! Better not get wounded. We won't have anything to clean the wound with." He lifted an empty wine bottle, then threw it in with the rest, wiping his hands.

Cian stepped in and sniffed the air. He looked directly at me.

I waved. "Hiya, Honey! How was work?"

His eyes narrowed. Then he caught me when I took a step forward. He picked me up, and the entire room spun.

"Whoa," I breathed out.

Cian nodded to Delaney, and Keenan sighed before he lifted her up. She still had a grin on her face. Fiona turned the stove off and opened the oven a little, and then we all headed upstairs. Once at the top, Keenan and Fiona headed toward a guest room, while my husband carried me to ours.

"Cian. Cillian. Cian," I breathed. "You are *the* finest man I've ever seen." I lifted my arms in the air in triumph. "And you're all mine. Or are you?"

He gave me a suspicious look and I started laughing quietly, though the uncertainty in my heart ached like a stub to the little toe. He brought me into the bathroom and set me down on the counter. He took a step back, and for whatever reason, maybe the filter in my mind being numb, I started rambling.

I told him all about my day—how Delaney came to see me, how I gave her the gifts from Ireland, how she confided in me about Robert, and how not even years together could protect them from a cruel fate.

"He's been on *dates*. Can you believe that?"

The look on Cian's face told me he didn't understand. I repeated my words, trying to enunciate each one.

"I understand," he said.

"Of course you do!"

"Meanin'?"

"Meaning..." I sighed. "I'm the only woman you've ever been with. I might get old...well, I *am* gonna get old someday." I looked away from him. "Then Mini Storm Eyes is going to show up at my door and wreck my entire life. All those years and what I thought to be true." I sighed wistfully, then wiped at my eyes.

"I don't recall anyone named Storm Eyes, but she's not goin' to wreck anythin' of yours."

"She might if you decide someday that I'm not enough. If separation can happen to Robert and Delaney, it can happen to anyone. He's been going on *dates*."

"So you said. But last I checked, my name is Cian Cillian Cian and yours is Maeve. We're not Robert and Delaney."

I went to open my mouth, but he put his hand over it. It was stuck in an "O" position, but I was too numb to really tell.

"So...what you're saying to me is...I'll be enough?" I mumbled around his palm. "Even when you rule Boston? Even when I'm old and—"

He leaned forward and kissed me. He kissed me until I couldn't breathe.

"What I'm sayin' is that you're all of my story, even the end of it." He grinned at me. "You're fuckin' cute when you're intoxicated."

I sighed. "Have you ever drunk this much?"

"I drink this much every day."

"You do?" I hiccupped.

He gave me one of those blinding smiles. "You intoxicate me, Maeve, but with none of the sickness that comes with it."

“Ah,” was all I could think to say. Then I tried to jump down from the counter, but I only hit my back. Cian seemed to know what was happening, because he brought me to the toilet, and I retched into it. He held my hair and was fanning my neck. He also brushed my teeth, undressed me, kissed my cheeks, and held me tight in the darkness.

When I could, I held him back. “I understand what you meant earlier,” I whispered. “I only want to be drunk on you too. It’s so much better than this.” I climbed on top of him, needing to feel the connection move through me. After I was coated in sweat and all my insecurities were exhausted, I fell asleep in his arms, drunk on him.

CHAPTER 29

MAEVE

Either my heart had made it into my brain and was pounding against my skull, or I was having a killer headache. Probably the latter, all thanks to the booze I'd consumed the day, or night, before. I groaned when I turned over and ran into a solid wall.

My husband's chest.

I was hoping he'd just hook my eyelids and pull them up for me. It felt like peeling paint when I tried to open them. The sun was so bright, and it filled our room like it had nowhere else to shine. I hissed out a breath and then immediately closed my eyes. I lifted a hand against it and cursed myself for being a glutton.

Raspy laughter fanning over my face forced my eyes open.

"How are you feelin'?"

"Like that red wine I drank might have actually been vampire blood, and now I am one. Why is it so bright in here?"

Cian moved slowly and closed all the shades. He slipped back into bed just as slowly, and I was thankful for it. I was also thankful for the dimness of the room. My corneas weren't on fire anymore.

Cian ran a finger over my forehead. "You have such an imagination."

"A side effect from reading so many books. That's how I got the idea about the vampire blood and red wine. Read it

once. It's how the vampire tricked the woman he fell for into accepting him. If she didn't drink some of his blood, he couldn't turn her. It wasn't a conventional vampire book, but it was good. And my dad...well, enough said." My jaw clenched and I took a breath. Then I heard shouting. "Is that..." I took another breath. "Delaney and Robert?"

Cian nodded.

"What...?" Last night came rushing back to me, how I'd been honest with Cian about my insecurities, and I had a feeling my husband had meddled. "You brought Robert here, didn't you? Because I was feeling insecure?"

He nodded. "It's not what you think between them."

"Did you lock them in the room or something?" His face answered for him. "You didn't!"

"I didn't. Keenan did."

I pulled a pillow over my head and groaned. Then my stomach made this horrible noise, and I didn't know if it was going to revolt or if it just desperately needed sustenance to soak up the acid left from the alcohol.

"Maeve."

I lowered the pillow. Cian stood on my side of the bed and handed me a cracker. He'd moved so easily from his side I hadn't even felt it. He had already dressed. A pair of sweatpants.

While I took small bites of the bland food, he set a sweater over my head, slipped some thermal pants on me, and then took knee-high socks with the Irish flag on them and pulled them up my legs. Then as easily as he had moved before, he picked me up and brought me downstairs.

He set me on one of the stools in the kitchen and then started to open cabinets. When he found the crackers, he put a bunch on a plate and set it in front of me. He poured me a cup of tea, and I inhaled it like air as I twisted my hair into a low, messy bun.

I'd gotten caught up in eating and drinking, and it took me a second to realize Cian's eyes were on me. When I looked up, he was standing against the counter, his arms crossed, and a big grin on his face.

"You think this is funny. Me being hung over." I flung a cracker at him. He dodged, laughing. "You do!" I flung another one at him, and this time he opened his mouth, trying to catch it.

"You went buck wild on me last night." He dodged another cracker. Then he looked down his pants. "You might have even broken my cock."

"Liar!" I went after him, and after he dodged a bit, he let me jump on his back. "I'd never break that. It's too valuable." I switched to his front and stuck my hand down his pants. "But if I did...I don't mind fixing it. I'm good with my hands." I wiggled my fingers against him.

We started laughing, and touching, and kissing.

A throat cleared at the door, and I removed my hand from down his pants like he'd suddenly gotten blazing hot. Cian laughed even harder, setting me down, using me as a shield in front of him. His erection poked me in the back. I thought he was doing it on purpose.

Keenan shook his head, but he was grinning some. "Fair warnin'. I'm lettin' the two prize fighters out."

He disappeared, and something dawned on me. I turned my head a fraction. "It's not that you find me drunk and with a hangover funny, but you like when I get jealous. I was being jealous last night."

"You don't ever need to be jealous, but when you are..." His eyes lit up. "It makes you do some wicked thin's to me in the bedroom."

"Do you ever get jealous over me?"

His face turned serious. "Every second of every day—I'm jealous of the air you breathe. It gets to have you in a way I don't."

I shook my head. “Not true. You feel like the air I breathe now.”

He leaned into my neck and kissed my pulse, and I wrapped my arms around his, pulling him even closer to me.

Keenan breezed back into the kitchen, going for the hot water to make himself a cup of tea. Robert came in next, looking disheveled, though I could tell he'd taken a shower that morning. Delaney mirrored me, except she was swaying some, and one side of her hair stuck up. I hurriedly touched my head and realized mine was doing the same thing, even with the bun.

She pointed at me. “Drink it up while you're young, Mae. A midlife body does not recover like a young one.” She plopped down on a stool and resumed her same position from the night before. Her head went to her arm, and the not knotted pieces of her hair fanned out. “I have a wicked, wicked headache.”

Keenan set a glass of tea in front of her, and Robert eyed him with suspicion. I narrowed my eyes at Robert. He had no frigging right to get jealous after *he* was going on *dates*.

Robert lifted his hands. “I'm not sure when alcohol got involved, or how much it made Delaney omit, but she didn't tell you the entire story.”

I looked at Delaney, and she tried to shove Robert but ended up pushing air.

“I asked Delaney to marry me,” he said.

“What?” I breathed at the same time she popped up like a puppet on a string and yelled toward him, “And why did *you* have to do that?”

Robert pointed a hand at her.

“What's going on, Delaney? I thought you said...” I didn't finish, because I'd missed a big chunk of the story.

“He did something I never expected. When I told him I wasn't sure if I could...agree, or maybe live with it, I said we should take a break. Or maybe he did.”

“You didn’t say,” I continued. “You didn’t want to tell me.”

“I did give her an ultimatum,” Robert said. “But only because I want to get married—to *her*.” He gave her a pointed look. “I had a health scare after your wedding. She had to go through some red tape to see me at one point. It’s not only that, because I can fix that situation legally, but I just want to do something meaningful, be connected to her in a way that no one else is.”

“Yeah,” she cried, wiping her eyes. “But things were so perfect. Marriage only ruins it.”

“Does it look like it’s ruining anything for them?” Robert nodded to us.

“Not now,” she barely got out. “But we’ve both seen what it does. Our parents. Our friends. We were the only ones who never said vows, and we’ve outlasted all of them.”

“Vows aren’t going to change that, Del.”

“Exactly, so why do you need them?”

“I just do. I want to be your man, your husband, not some fuck boy, as the kids call it these days.”

She nodded and turned forward, like she couldn’t bear to look at him when he said the same thing to her for what seemed like the umpteenth time. I wasn’t sure if the fighting this morning was over me and my husband getting involved, or over their relationship.

“No,” she breathed, not looking at him. “You were just my partner. In all things.”

I could have sworn Robert mouthed *marriage won’t change that*, but he didn’t say it. I looked away from my friends, the woman who had always been a warm figure in my life, and cleared my throat. My eyes were burning. It was hard to look at two people who seemed to defy all of life and love’s challenges, and then watch as their relationship became a train wreck. Or already was.

Delaney cleared her throat. “Hey, Mae?”

I blinked back the tears and turned to face her.

“There’s something about me you should know. I didn’t tell you because it’s always been easier for me that way. I don’t want you to be mad at Robert. Or even me. You of all people know...things just don’t work out in life sometimes. But that something I never told you about—I got married when I was really young. It wasn’t a good or even decent relationship. I can say this now. He abused me. Physically. Emotionally. In all the ways imaginable. That’s why I fell into romance so hard. I stole a bodice ripper at the grocery store. He couldn’t beat me for it because it wasn’t on the receipt.”

She looked away from me, took a sip of her tea, and seemed to steel herself before she turned back to me. I tried not to make it obvious, how hard I was clutching my husband’s arms.

“The bravest thing I ever did was leave, you know? And I made promises to myself once I did. I’d help other women by giving them the power to read these stories that connected with them on a deeper level. A healing level. That story I stole emboldened me, as silly as it sounds. I gained enough confidence to leave him after I read it. And just for the record, I bought ten of the same book once I was able to and returned them to the store.” She wiped her eyes even though she wasn’t crying, but this part of her story seemed harder for her to share than the first.

“Another promise...I’d never get married again. My parents’ marriage. Mine.” She stuck a thumb at Robert. “His parents. All our friends...just further proof that marriage only dooms us.” She drained her cup and shook her head. She walked over to me and took me from Cian.

We wrapped each other in a tight hug. Tears fell from my eyes. Because I realized...no matter how much you think you know someone, sometimes you never do. I had no clue Delaney had gone through so much.

“Not you, kiddo,” she whispered in my ear. “I can tell. You’ll have the storybook ending we all rush to the last page

for. It'll be devastating in a way mine wasn't." She looked at Cian. "Your man knows what I'm talking about."

The kitchen grew quiet, and as Delaney pulled away, Cian cleared his throat.

"I'll kill him," he said evenly.

Delaney and I both looked at him. I was usually pretty good at understanding everything my husband said, even without words, but this time, I was as lost as Delaney was, and he was using words.

He nodded to Robert. "He hurts you, or tries to run after you're married, I'll kill him."

Delaney looked me in the eyes. She wanted me to tell her he wasn't being for real, but he was. I could only shrug.

Robert stood from his chair. "I'm good with that."

"What?" Delaney whirled to face him.

"Just what I said. If I'm willing to put my heart on the block, I'm willing to put my life on the same one."

"This is ridiculous!" Her eyes searched, and landing on Keenan, she said, "Mind giving me a ride home?"

Robert stepped up in front of her before she could rush out of the door. She lifted her arms, like she was going to push against his chest to get him to move, but he wrapped her wrists in what didn't seem like a strong hold, and after a second, her head came down to his chest and she started to cry. He wrapped her up in his arms, and they left.

I turned and wrapped my arms around my husband, holding him as tightly as I could. He gave me a hard kiss to the top of the head, but it only seemed like he was fazed by all of this because I was. He had no intentions of ever letting me go.

Suddenly his body froze, and when I didn't move, he turned me around.

As quietly as she could, Fiona stepped into the kitchen. She was almost tiptoeing. Keenan had been about to take a sip of tea, but it stilled before it reached his lips. He set it down on

the counter as she set one of her books about knives down not far from it. Without looking at any of us, she opened it, revealing the romance book she always hid inside of them.

Then she turned and walked out.

In her own way, she was admitting to a story like Delaney had. Something had pushed her to read romance too. She was daring Keenan to find out why.

My husband picked me up and carried me upstairs.

It was the first time Keenan didn't seem to care about business.

CHAPTER 30

MAEVE

“I don’t mind that it’s so early,” I said to Cian as he led me outside by the hand two days later. “But I’d like to know what for. And in these.” I looked down at my body. Cian had me dress in a warm, slouchy sweater, yoga pants that were lined with something soft, and sneakers.

I shivered when the crisp fall air cut through the warm air lingering on my skin from inside. He pulled me closer and set his beanie on my head. He was dressed similarly, but in a T-shirt and sweatpants that showed the outline of his massive bulge. If he tried to go out in public in those...I’d trip him. He’d have every woman with a pulse drooling.

He barely touched the pieces of hair that had escaped from the hat, and I trembled. “You didn’t know how to react when you were grabbed at the bookstore.”

“Yeah, because he surprised me.”

He gave me a blank look.

I laughed and raised my free hand. “In my defense, it’s early, and you did some wicked things to me this morning.”

A slow smile came to his face before he shook it off. He moved toward me to avoid Argus and Grania plowing into his back before we started moving again.

“Defense,” he said, like he was continuing his train of thought, “is what we’ll be learnin’ today.”

“Wait.”

We stopped.

“Are you saying you’re about to teach me how to fight?”

“How to defend yourself. You’ll have lessons in self-defense, shootin’, and Keenan offered to teach you archery.”

I suddenly had a glimpse of his childhood after his parents were murdered.

“Archery?” I shook my head. Hard no. “I’ll end up pulling the bow back and knocking myself out. I’m willing to learn the others, though. And what about knifery?”

He threw back his head and roared with laughter. “Is that a new word you added to the dictionary, my love?”

“I told Delaney I should publish it someday. A book of Maeve O’Callaghan’s Unique Words.”

He grinned. “I’d read it.”

“Thank you.” I bowed my head to him.

He lifted my chin with his finger and kissed me. A cool, smoky wind blew, stirring the burnt leaves at our feet, and I could have sworn it was by magic.

The entire scene—kiss and all.

Before I was ready, though, we started moving toward a small place behind the big house. Cian told me it was his personal gym. I wasn’t a gym person, so he could’ve had anything in there and I’d never check to find out. We stopped at the hundred-car garage on the way. He opened one of the doors with a remote from his pocket. A red SUV with the Ferrari emblem was on it.

He nodded to it. “Yours.”

“Is this part of my lesson?” I grinned.

His face was serious. “Yeah.”

“You’re going to teach me how to drive? I already know how to drive.”

“We’ll see.”

“Are we doing this—test—before or after the self-defense lessons?”

“Yeah, let’s go for a drive first.”

“Good.” I held my hands out for the keys. “*I feel the need, the need for speed!* Also...this will be my warm-up before we start getting hot and heavy in the gym. Also, also,” I said as we both took our seats and I started the car, “I can drive, but I didn’t do much of it. I preferred to ride my bike as much as possible.”

His eyes grew wide as I backed out of the driveway, made the circle around the front of the house, and then hit the gas as I took the long drive out. I preferred to ride my bike, but the Ferrari was smooth and fast, and it felt freeing to be the one driving for once. We stopped and grabbed coffee, and then we passed the Boston Public Library. I slowed down some as we did.

I sighed. “I can’t believe Delaney is getting married there and she doesn’t even know it.”

She’d called me the morning after what she’d shared with the entire kitchen about her first marriage. She’d agreed to marry Robert, but only because she wanted to, not because Cian had scared them into anything.

She said she was only scared to commit, but she decided she wanted to do it. But she told Robert to just surprise her. She went out and bought a simple dress, and the rest was on him. He’d just have to pack the dress in the trunk, so she couldn’t see it, and then drive her to wherever it was going to be, then be like...*today we’re getting married.*

Robert had decided on the public library. She’d never suspect it. It was one of her favorite places to go in the city. It was so romantic, so beautiful, and I loved that he’d chosen such a special place for their wedding. The library was where they had met. Robert had given me the date and asked that we be there.

At the last second, Cian instructed me to turn. I did. The car only complained a little. He nodded in approval. He continued to do this the entire way back, and I was proud to report my coffee didn’t even spill. He was testing me to see how I’d drive in an emergency situation.

We were going to see how I did with my lesson in defense. *I* might need emergency assistance once it was done.

Cian must've had every type of exercise equipment available, even things that looked archaic, but my stomach turned some when he moved toward a wide mat spread along the floor. It looked like the kind wrestlers used. He removed his T-shirt, throwing it in the corner.

He turned to me and crooked his finger. "Come here, Maeve."

"No." I shook my head. "I feel like this is a trap."

"It will be."

"I don't want it to be."

"For the next hour, I'm your husband. For the hour after that, you'll consider me your enemy."

Oh boy!

It didn't look like he was going to go easy on me.

I'd removed the slouchy sweater after the first half hour. The gym was hot, like it had a steam room close by, and my skin dripped sweat. So did Cian's.

The first hour of direction passed in a blur, and when the second hour hit, I had to use all the skills and moves he taught me to get out of his holds. Somehow, we ended up on the floor, and we were rolling around on it, like we were in bed, but much rougher. And when I ended up on top of him, I rubbed myself against his erection.

He groaned and flipped me over, pressing his hips even harder against my stretchy pants. His eyes were dilated, I was out of breath, my heart pounding in my chest, and an easy moment passed between us before it seemed like chaos erupted between our bodies. In the same way we had been going at it on the mat, our hands were going after our clothes.

"Fuck," he said when he took in the sports bra and the underwear I'd worn. The underwear had two straps on each side, hugging my hips. He pulled one side away, and I hissed when it slapped against my skin. He flipped me over on my

knees, my ass toward him, and leaned over my body to whisper in my ear, “You like that?”

“Yes,” I barely got out. A droplet of cool sweat ran down my throat, falling to the mat and exploding before it reached my chest. I rammed myself against him, and his hands gripped my hips, stopping me. His finger traced the path of the panties, which were wedged in my crack, and I closed my eyes and sighed.

“What’s it to be, my intoxication? Will I give you a purpose?” He moved the fabric to the side and slipped his finger inside of me.

I made a strangled noise when he started moving it very slowly, from tip to end, tip to end, pumping, pumping, pumping, stretching my walls.

“Talk to me,” he whispered hotly in my ear.

“You might have already,” I barely got out.

Even though I couldn’t see him, I felt his mood change, like when the clouds cover the sun, and everything becomes as stormy as his eyes. He became more possessive somehow, and so did his hand as it came over my womb. The heat from his palm seemed to seep into my skin. He slipped his finger out, pulled me toward him, and sitting on his ass, entered me in a stroke that was as slow as his finger. His arm came around my front, and he started to tease my nipple.

“*Mmmm.*” What he was doing to me was so hot and delicious. I was losing my mind.

His free hand came to my chin and held my face in place. “You’re ready to have my baby?”

“*Yes.*”

“Fuck.” He thrust so hard, I cried out. “I’m going to fuck you and keep fucking you until you’re filled up and can’t take anymore. I’m going to fuck you until I fill your womb.”

The more we talked about it, the more turned on we were getting. When he bit my neck and started to pump into me, I

came around him with a cry. And after he filled me up, he kept pushing inside of me, as far as he could reach.

When I started to go limp, he pulled me to his chest and kept me cradled there. He was holding me so tightly, I could barely breathe.

“What?” I whispered, knowing he was being more protective for some reason.

“I know how this session ended,” he said, his voice rough. “But I want you to pay attention and remember what I’m teachin’ you, Maeve.”

I turned my head a fraction and met his eyes. A droplet of sweat ran from his temple, down his face, down his neck, to his chest. “It’s really going to start soon, isn’t it?”

He nodded.

A day or two later, Cash showed up at our house with men—his brothers-in-laws, I thought—and a trunk full of weapons.

CHAPTER 31

CIAN

My wife stood at the window, lookin' down as Cash and his caravan pulled up to our house. She seemed to breathe easier when she watched as the women he brought along stepped out of the vehicles. Then her eyes narrowed.

“Is that the guy who killed Devin?” she asked.

Cash's brother-in-law, Lachlan, was the one who was in deep with the Craigs. He had killed Oran's son, Devin, after Devin and a few of Craig's men attacked his brother. That left Dermot, the one who wanted my wife—for me.

I looked over her shoulder. “That's him.”

She nodded to a tall, redheaded woman stretching. “Cash's wife?”

“I believe so.” The lump in my throat made my voice tight.

My wife studied me in the dreary light. “Talk to me,” she whispered.

I shrugged. “She reminds me of my mam.”

“Her hair?”

“Yeah. It was long like that and fiery red. It had these gold pieces in it. They would spark in the sun. I remember when I was a wee lad, I'd run my hands through it.”

“Do you have pictures of them?” she asked. “Your parents?”

I went to the closet and pulled out a shoebox. I dug through it and found three photos. I handed her the one of the three of us.

She gazed at it, smiling, and lifted it. “How old were you here?”

“Four, maybe five.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and each one I wanted to curse myself for.

“No,” she breathed, lookin’ at me. “Let me feel this. It’s not sad. It’s just...nice, to see you all together. So happy. Look at you!” She beamed at me. “You’re laughing.”

“Mam was ticklin’ me to get me to smile for the picture.”

“I see that! She’s beautiful, Cian.” She sniffed. “And your Da was so handsome. Just like you.”

“I’ve been told we coulda been twins.”

“Yes!” She lifted the picture again. “Can I frame this and hang it up in the house?”

Could she? I didn’t know if I could take seein’ it day in and day out. I rarely looked at the three I had.

“It’s okay. Maybe someday.” She ran into the room, holding the picture to her heart, and used one hand to dig in a bag that Pauric had brought her in Ireland. She always wanted to keep it close. After she removed somethin’, she ran back and handed it to me.

It was a picture of Pauric, a woman that was the twin to my wife, and my wife. I’d know those eyes anywhere. They were hypnotizin’, even as a wee babe.

“You know my dad, and of course me,” she said with a smile. “But that’s my mom. Caitlin.”

“Caitlin,” I repeated. “My wife’s twin.”

She nodded, almost eager. “I love the way you say her name. You say it like it’s supposed to be pronounced.”

I took her hand and led her into the closet. I'd showed her where all the gold was, but I felt like this might mean more to her. I was almost impatient to give her this. I removed the shoebox with my other two pictures—one of my parents on their weddin' day and the fuzzy picture of my brother or sister—and all the knickknacks I'd saved as a kid.

Unique shaped rocks, a yo-yo that had been my Da's, a picture I'd drawn of the hobbits, or whatever the fuck I'd dreamed of on those hills, and a little toy buck my Mam had also saved. She was goin' to give it to the new babe. It'd been mine.

As an adult...the figurines Maeve had given to me. The Beast and his Beauty.

Tears fell down my wife's cheeks in a rush as she started to go through it. "Cian," she breathed, holding the little buck. "This is everything that means something to you."

"Yours," I said. "To do with what you'd like."

She looked up at me, then put the picture of her with her parents into the box. She closed the top and pressed it to her chest. "How about we keep them all together?"

I used my thumb to dry her tears, and she inhaled softly. She turned and found the spot it had been in and placed it there.

A knock came at our bedroom door.

Our eyes met through the murky darkness.

She breathed out. "Cash brought his wife."

"I trusted him enough to be close to mine. It was a show of good faith, you could say."

"So now he's trusting you with his?" Her throat was tight. Her voice reflected it.

"Somethin' like that."

"Can I meet her? What's her name?"

"We'll see. Keely."

She repeated the name to herself as we left the closet and met Keenan at our bedroom door.

“Ready, lad?” he asked.

He knew the answer to that already.

I kissed my wife, leavin’ her by the window to gaze out while I met Cash outside. Keenan went to make sure all was good with the money for the weapons. Cash would bring a trunk full, then the Russians would bring the rest later to an agreed-upon site. Even though Cash was blood, it didn’t matter when it came to business.

All the women’s eyes landed on me when I stepped outside. Cash’s wife’s eyes were especially sharp as she looked me over. Probably tryin’ to find the resemblance. The other woman looked at me guardedly. Maybe she saw what everyone but my wife did.

The coldness in my eyes—how dead they were when I looked at anythin’ but Maeve O’Callaghan.

There was another woman who was married to another of Cash’s brother-in-law’s, Harrison, and she was Italian. She didn’t seem to have a care either way as she took her place next to him. Cash had told me Harrison was a lawyer, and if anythin’ was to go down legally, he’d be representin’ me, since I’d be bloodyin’ my hands for his part in this.

Two kids were runnin’ around. Cash’s wife was holdin’ another one.

Trust.

Cash was showin’ me he trusted me with family, even if we were strangers in business.

As strangers, I sized up every man in my yard, then checked out the guns in the trunk. Exactly what we’d agreed on. After I gave a nod of approval, I nodded to the house. Cash, Harrison, and Lachlan followed behind me. Another of the brothers stayed with the women. Keenan had told me his name was Owen. The other, Declan, took the car and left.

We'd have a meetin', and if everythin' went straight, the weapons were mine, and the money would be transferred to the Russians. What Cash wanted from me in this war went beyond payment, though. He wanted Oran Craig destroyed, and if I was doin' the destroyin', the better for him.

Keenan shook each man's hand as they entered the house. Fiona stood in the shadows, all her knives probably glintin' against the weak light touchin' the corridors. She wouldn't show her face unless she had to. Then she'd come in screaming like a banshee and brandishin' her weapon, her teeth already showin' in a snarl.

We all took seats around the table. Keenan did most of the talkin' as Cash and I steadily gazed at each other. The deal was simple. I'd take care of the Craigs, then Cash would have an ally in Boston whenever he needed it, and I'd have one in New York if I ever found myself in need. Since he'd connected me with the Russians, we were on level ground.

He did me a solid.

I was goin' to do one for him.

Lachlan cleared his throat and sat closer to the table. "Oran was going to force Maeve Bell into marriage with Dermot."

Keenan gave me a side-eyed glance. He didn't want me to lose my temper. The meetin' was goin' smoothly so far.

"That *was* the way of it," Keenan said. "Ms. Bell is Mrs. O'Callaghan now."

"Yeah?" Lachlan grinned at me. "I'm glad to hear it, if she's happy. I would have been the one to make sure she made it to the church on time." He paused, givin' emphasis to what his figure of speech meant—he would have forced my wife down the aisle if she would have tried to run away from the Craigs. "I've always liked Pauric. Interesting man. I hated to see him and his daughter caught up in their wicked games."

A surge of blood rushed to my heart, makin' it pump even faster when I thought of my wife dressed up in a beautiful white gown for Dermot Craig. I was truly goin' to earn the

name Beast of Boston—I was goin’ to tear his throat out with my teeth. For Oran—I had somethin’ special planned.

Again, a peculiar feelin’ came over my gut, like I had been with my wife when she’d been forced to have dinner with the Craigs. She’d told me my name had stopped Dermot’s advances. A sense of pride filled my chest that a part of me had been with her, as a low growl emanated in my throat at the thought of my lil’ doe breakin’ bread with monsters.

“All settled, then?” Keenan said as the meetin’ wound down and we had nothin’ left to discuss.

“All settled.” Cash nodded.

I stood and he stood. We shook. The men all filed out. Keenan was first out of the door. He and Fiona were goin’ to see about the weapons as soon as the men left. We’d be dealin’ with the Russians after this, but Cash had placed a certain amount of trust in their business.

Cash was the last out. He stopped at the door.

“My wife would like to meet you and your wife—formally,” he said.

I looked to the side of him, and she was studyin’ me, but her eyes kept flickerin’ upstairs. She was probably curious about Maeve. My wife probably had her forehead pressed to one of the windows.

I nodded.

He turned to go, then stopped and turned back to me.

“I haven’t forgotten the last time we met,” he said. “We were supposed to meet again. We’d made plans to chase trolls.” He grinned. “For what it’s worth, Killian and I were brought to America after that. To New York.”

“We thought we were giants back then.”

“Not much has changed.”

“Except maybe we’re the trolls now.”

Argus and Grania each took a side of me. I patted their heads.

Cash's grin came slow. I matched it.

"Grand. Just fuckin' grand." He lifted a hand. "See ya on the other side of this, cousin."

My wife's hand came to my back. She peeked around me. "Bye, Cash!"

He stopped and looked at her, then at me. Keely stepped up next to him. She waved at Maeve, and Maeve waved back.

"When can we invite them over for dinner?" Maeve asked.

"Dinner sounds fun!" Keely said.

"See ya two soon," Cash said, placin' a hand on his wife's back, directin' her to the car, laughin' some.

"Yeah," I said, lookin' at the smile on my wife's face. "See ya two soon."

CHAPTER 32

MAEVE

A month later, I was getting ready for Delaney and Robert's surprise wedding. It was happening just as the sun set. Robert had asked me for help throughout the process, but he mostly handled it himself, and I thought he did an incredible job.

Delaney was going to love all the subtle touches, and how romantic having it at the library was going to be.

I couldn't wait to see how everything was going to come together. The thought made me rush to finish getting ready. I applied the finishing touches to my makeup and then slipped into the gold slip dress I'd decided on. I'd have to wear a thick jacket over it, but I thought it was going to be perfect for the backdrop of the library. I was even able to pull out my wedding heels to wear. Beatrice had made a good choice when she'd chosen them.

I made a mental reminder to call her soon. She and Henry had been somewhat distant after what had happened with Charlie and his wife. I wasn't sure who was responsible for that—my husband or them.

Cian came into the room and stopped when he saw me. "Intoxicatin'," he said in that sexy way of his, taking me in.

I took a shuddering breath and thanked him. I opened my mouth, but then shut it. I opened it again and pointed to the closet. "Your suit is hanging up."

He wrapped his arms around my waist, watching me through the mirror, until he set his mouth over the pulse in my

neck. He kissed me there until I was trying to remember how to breathe. It was like he was making love to me with his lips and tongue. When his eyes met mine, I grabbed for the counter to steady myself against his gravitational pull.

He kissed me one last time, a small grin on his face, and left me so he could get dressed.

I stared after him, thinking about how our lives had changed so much in just that one month.

The war with Oran Craig was waging on. So far, my husband was in the lead, since he had more support and was able to take over areas that had previously belonged to Oran, but all war comes at a price.

For my husband, it was the loss of some of his men, sometimes it was an area he wanted and couldn't take over yet, other times it was money and time.

For me, it was the loss of sanity and sleep—whenever he was late, I had to occupy myself to keep from calling him a million times just to hear his voice. I threw myself into woodworking, but the *tick* of the clock had never seemed so loud. Neither had the imaginary petals in the hourglass falling to the sound of it.

Sooner or later, my husband was going to face Oran Craig and his son, and I knew how horrible they could be. It would take a beast to stand up to them.

I just wasn't sure I wanted it to be mine.

It felt wrong to feel, especially because of what Oran had done to Cian and his family, but...a part of me that was very selfish didn't want to take the chance of losing him over it.

I turned back toward the counter and fiddled with the makeup spread over it, then fixed my hair a little more. Cian said something about being late from the closet, and I turned so fast I knocked a few things onto the floor. He met me there while I was picking them up and put a hand over mine. His was steady over my trembling one.

“Talk to me, Maeve,” he said, bringing me up without the things I'd dropped.

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. He was breathtaking in a classic black suit. A shot of courage made me open it again and speak the first truth that came to mind. “It’s a big day for Delaney,” I said.

He nodded, picked up the things I’d dropped, and then helped me into my fancy coat. I stopped short when Kennan came out of the kitchen, fixing his nice jacket.

I motioned to his face. “Sorry again about your nose.”

“*Ach.*” He waved it off. “Stop apologizin’, girl. It’s just bruised is all.”

As Cian chuckled, Fiona came out of the kitchen and ran a hand over Keenan’s shoulder like she was dusting it. I wasn’t sure what was up with those two, and when I asked Cian, he said he didn’t want to know, but I could tell the shape of their relationship had changed after the morning in the kitchen. I was just glad I didn’t change the shape of Keenan’s nose. Or I hoped not.

Cian had warned me that someone in the house was going to come after me unexpectedly to test all the work we’d done on self-defense. If I knew it was coming, I could prepare. If I didn’t...I’d either succumb to the fear of the scare or I’d react like he’d taught me.

I’d reacted.

Unfortunately, it was at the expense of Keenan’s nose.

He didn’t seem to mind, though. As tears had run from his eyes and blood gushed from his cracked nose, he was giving me compliments. Cian had too. Fiona had beamed at me and gave me a thumbs up before she stuck a washcloth underneath his nostrils.

When the library came into view, I sighed and checked the clock on the dash. Delaney and Robert would be here soon. He’d asked me to double-check that everything was as it should be, even though he’d hired a wedding planner.

Only a handful of people were invited to the ceremony, and then a larger crowd to the Guastavino Room for the reception.

The Boston Public Library always stopped me in my tracks as I entered it. Cian's hand was like a small flame against my back, but he took it in with me.

The first time I'd ever visited was with Delaney. They had a special tour that day, it was all about the history of the place. The guide told us the library was the first Beaux Arts building in the United States. It was also the first large-scale urban library in the nation.

After that, Delaney and I would visit one Monday a month, when she'd schedule us both off for some girl time, to just walk around and get lost. It was all rich gold and marble and intricate patterns. Almost reminiscent of some grand old building in France, but—*bonus*—it was close to home *and* filled with some amazing stories on the shelves. Delaney would always tell me this was where old souls (like me) and younger ones (like her) came to meet.

"I love it here," I whispered.

"You belong in a place like this." Cian matched my volume, but his was deeper, gruffer. "Browsin' the shelves and findin' doe holes to fall down."

Our eyes met and we both grinned.

The place was already shimmering with soft winter light slowly spilling through the windows, but I didn't think it was because the sun was going to set soon.

It was because my husband was with me in one of my favorite places.

The wedding planner found us and breathed a sigh of relief. "This way!" She nodded toward the steps. "Mr. Kennedy doesn't want Delaney to see anyone before the ceremony!"

Cian gave her a blank-faced stare as she tried to hurry us along. No one was going to move me—I could read his thoughts as though they were moving through my head with an Irish accent. I nodded toward him, he nodded back, and then he took my coat. She took it from him and said she was going to check it in for me as she led us to the ceremony room.

As my heels lightly clicked, Cian cleared his throat. “The sound of the tappin’ of your heels is like a soothin’ melody. It puts me in a trance. I’d follow it anywhere.”

I smiled big at that. The heat from his hand seemed to increase on my back.

Only two other people waited in the ceremony room.

Robert’s sister and nephew, Kyle.

Mom and son congregated close together. I pulled closer to Cian. He didn’t seem to care that the tension was thick. It broke some when both sets of parents arrived. Robert must have requested no significant others at the intimate ceremony. Three parents were remarried. Delaney’s mother was not. She still pined for Delaney’s father.

About thirty minutes later, Robert came in and welcomed everyone. He was so excited, it was hard for me to stop smiling. An hour later, the wedding planner stepped into the room and told me Delaney wanted to see me. Since she knew the wedding was about to take place, she knew I was there waiting.

Cian walked me to the room she was using to get ready and waited outside of it. There was a full-length mirror, and she was looking at herself when I stepped in. Our eyes met, and she smiled at me.

“Hey, Mae.”

I lifted my hands to my mouth, willing myself not to cry. “That is *not* simple,” I choked out.

Her gown was ivory, had a square neckline, open back, and a fitted skirt that fell from the waist. It hugged all her gorgeous curves. The most spectacular detail about the dress? All the sparkling beading running across it in a linear pattern. It had a mini train that displayed more of the delicate crystals. Her auburn hair was pulled up, and she reminded me of fall incarnate.

“I decided if I was going to do this...I was going to do it right this time.”

I ran my hands through her long veil. “You’re going to kill him, Del,” I whispered. “He’s going to have heart palpitations when he sees you.”

“*Good*,” she said, striving for bite but falling way short. Her voice trembled, which it never did. “After all he’s put me through...he deserves some floor time.”

“It’s going to be all right, kiddo,” I said to her, taking her trembling hands. “It really is.”

“God, I hope so, Mae.” She flung her arms around me, and we hugged.

A knock at the door pulled us apart, but we locked hands. It was the wedding planner, telling us it was time.

“Mr. Kennedy requested a sunset ceremony,” she said. “We only have a few minutes until that time.”

“Of course he did,” Delaney barely got out. “It was the time we met. He asked me for coffee, and I told him no, I didn’t go out with strangers, especially at night. He told me he’d be back the next day, same time, and we’d meet, until he wasn’t a stranger anymore.”

“How many library dates did that take?” I grinned at the look on Cian’s face when he noticed us holding hands. He seemed a little lost, like he wanted to take my hand from hers.

“You know this.” She laughed, but it was quiet, nervous. “A bunch. I figured when he stopped showing up, at least I would’ve gotten some free coffee out of the deal. He’d always bring me a coffee from my favorite place. He noticed the cup that first time, and he brought me different flavors until I told him that was *the* one. It was the one I had when I first met him.”

I did know all of this, but telling their love story was keeping her walking.

“And what did he say?” I asked.

“He said...” She cleared her throat. “You’re *the* one.”

“You ran away then.”

“I did, or as he says, I dumped him like I do other brands of coffee.”

“But fate had other plans,” I said. “Robert happened to be the owner of the pub across the street from The Belle.”

“Yeah, there was no escaping him.” We stopped at the closed door to the ceremony room. Del hurriedly looked behind her, but there was a sudden wall at her back. My husband. She whirled on me. “Do you know I hate that coffee?”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“The coffee I had that day. I *hated* it. It made my stomach turn so bad.”

A smile I couldn't stop spread over my face. It was so wide, it hurt. I squeezed her hands. “But you kept drinking it, and it became your favorite, because of Robert.”

She nodded. “Because of Robert.”

“He gave you *the* feeling, Del. He's the one. It's real. No one would fake love coffee that turns their stomach for *fake* love.” I turned to the wedding planner and asked her for the card Robert had designed for their guests.

Delaney read it, and tears came to her eyes. It said, “We're all authors of our own stories. This is ours...” And it had a picture of them in front of the library, along with the story she'd just told us. He'd written it out and had it printed. He didn't seem to know about the coffee, though. He'd hired the shop to serve it and even had bags of it for the guests to take home.

“Bas-ted!” she said with a strong Bostonian accent. “Why does he have to be so good at this love stuff?”

“I don't know,” I said, crying with her. “But I'm thankful they are.” I looked at my own husband and he nodded at me, a stormy look in his eyes, before he nodded ahead.

The wedding planner handed Delaney a simple bouquet of flowers, then opened the door. Cian and I slipped through it.

And then, Robert and Delaney got to the part of their story where life was just beginning for them.

It was a reminder for me.

Life was beginning for us again, too, but this time...with a small thumping heartbeat in my womb.



GUESTS LOAFED around The Guastavino Room, waiting for a chance to congratulate the happy couple. Delaney was more in her element here, greeting everyone and showing off her new husband, as well the two new rings on her left hand. I was sure she was in the moment and loved swapping vows with Robert, but she seemed so...relieved to just be married and still standing to talk about it.

Her eyes searched the crowd as Robert talked to someone who was probably from his side, and when she found me, she waved. I waved back, then motioned to the room.

“Oh my God!” she mouthed. “I know!”

Robert had gone with a black and white theme throughout. Paired with her shimmering white dress and his black suit... the entire evening made a statement not soon to be forgotten.

I laughed when a photographer came to whisk Delaney and Robert away to take pictures by all the bookshelves. She'd made a funny face at me.

A woman carrying a tray of appetizers passed by and I grabbed one, stuffing it in my mouth. Cian looked between me and the tray and roared with laughter. He laughed so hard his whiskey trembled in the glass.

“You went fishin’ just now, my darlin’, and caught yourself a cracker with cheese.”

“I’d like to catch myself another one.” I grinned.

As another tray passed, he snatched the entire thing smoothly from the server. The server went to open his mouth to say something, but one look at my husband and he hurried

back to wherever the food prep was going on. Cian held the tray in front of my face, and without shame, I ate, trying not to get crumbs down the front of my dress.

“It feels like I haven’t eaten in hours,” I complained.

“Hasn’t been that long,” he said. “You ate before we left the house.”

“How do you know I ate?” I asked. “You were busy.”

“Never too busy to know what my wife’s up to.”

“Even down to my calorie count?”

“Every breath you take.”

“That’s the stalker’s anthem. You know that, right?”

“Stalkers have an anthem?” His face pinched, and I tried not to laugh as I kept eating.

The last cracker felt like it wedged itself in my windpipe as Keenan and Fiona started toward us. I knew the face Keenan wore. It was his *somethin’ has happened, lad* face, and it wasn’t usually good news. Fiona looked around at the party as Keenan leaned in close to Cian’s ear and whispered something. Cian’s face turned to stone. He nodded once as Keenan pulled away.

The dried bread seemed to swell in my stomach and form a lump there when Cian looked at me. “Stay close to Keenan and Fiona. I’ll be back soon.”

I didn’t even have time to ask him where he was going. He kissed the top of my head and rushed off, bodies moving out of his way automatically, even though a lot of the women stepped aside only to look at him. I was pretty sure one refused to move so he’d have to stop and ask her to. He didn’t. He picked her up without hardly looking at her, set her to the side, and kept moving forward.

“What’s going on, Fiona?” I asked. Cian held no secrets from me. He told me everything I wanted to know, and if he didn’t, Fiona did. I could tell he’d rather I didn’t ask, but he wasn’t going to lie to me either.

She took a drink of champagne, and it seemed like her boots itched to boogie against the floor. “Those Ryan brothers.” She *tsked*. “Loads of trouble. Well. The one is. The one who’d gotten himself in deep with Oran. He’s gotten himself taken.”

“Gotten himself taken?” I wasn’t sure why I was repeating her words. Maybe because an uneasy feeling sat in the pit of my stomach.

A server offered me a glass of champagne, but I declined and asked for a water instead.

“By the bithiúnach in Ireland,” she said. “You’ve heard of them?”

I nodded. I had. When Cian and I were on our honeymoon in Ireland. He’d called them that and told me they were a group of over-aged gangsters. They wore old-time suits and long jackets and Paddy hats, just like the ones Keenan wore. I could see him being one of them.

“Oran hired them to take the one,” Fiona continued. “Lachlan is his name. He killed Oran’s son. Devlin was his name. Devlin’s widow now requests a meetin’ with the Beast of Boston. Says she has information on where we can find Dermot. When the tables are turnin’, the players in this game will too. The city is comin’ to recognize who will be in power. The Beast.” It seemed like she stood a little taller and her shoulders squared.

“Shay,” I said, remembering how she’d told me to run what felt like centuries ago, but had only been months.

“Shay,” she confirmed. “If we can take Dermot, Cash will have a life to barter for Lachlan’s.”

If Cian could do that for Cash, I was glad to hear it. I was hoping that, outside of business, they could be family again. I really wanted to meet Cash’s wife, Keely, too. She seemed fiery and fun, almost like playing outside in the summer under a blazing sun.

The reception was starting to relax some, the band pulling the guests closer and closer to the stage, and somewhere close

by, Delaney screeched with laughter. I tried not to think about the chaos in our lives while celebrating such a momentous day, but it was hard not to.

Delaney found me a few minutes later. Taking my hand and Fiona's, she dragged us to the dance floor as the band played one of our favorite songs.

"It's my wedding day!" Del raised her glass. "My *actual* wedding day. I've decided the first one doesn't even count. Woo-hoo!"

I tried to keep my face even and smiling while I let Delaney do most of the dancing. Fiona just watched. Around a crowd, she wasn't all that comfortable, but her boots tapped in rhythm to the music.

About an hour later, the crowd seemed to part, and Cian walked through it. He grabbed a glass of whiskey from a passing server and then came to stand next to me, like no time had passed at all. There was an odd smell coming from him, though. I sniffed in his direction. He smelled like a wet penny that had been doused in salt.

"What's that smell?" I asked. It was unpleasant, something I'd never said about his scent before.

He shrugged and downed the rest of his whiskey. Fiona and Keenan glanced at each other.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "What's going on?"

Cian took me by the hand and led me to the dance floor. A soft, slow song played, the one from our wedding. He placed my hand on his shoulder and took my other one, but when I slid my hand down, his eyes seemed to light up, as if lightning had struck through the gray of his storms and brightened them with electrical fire. His muscles seemed to involuntarily contract at my touch. His erection pressed against me.

Slowly, I moved his suit back and gasped at his shoulder. "Oh my God." The noise I made almost sounded like a sob, but it wasn't. "You've been shot." His shirt had a bullet hole torn through it that went straight into his body. A crimson

blossom of blood stained around the hole, and it was quickly saturating his shirt. “Cian!”

“No worryin’.” He swayed for a second. “I’ve had worse.”

I wedged my body next to his, like I could keep him up, and my eyes searched the crowd. When they landed on Keenan and Fiona, they both rushed toward me. Keenan took most of his weight, and we rushed toward the door.

“An ambulance,” I said, breathless. “We have to call for help.”

“No,” Cian said. “We have someone we use for times like these.”

Keenan helped him into a seat in the hallway, then rushed to get the car while I stared at my husband like he might disappear on me.

He grinned at me. “So sweet,” he murmured, like he was drunk. For a second, I thought he might be. Another second passed, and I was starting to freak out that he was bleeding to death. I stuck my hand against his wound. He hissed out a breath.

Fiona paced in front of us, her wild eyes making sure no one was coming close.

It seemed like Keenan took forever to come back, but it had only been seconds. Cian groaned when Keenan helped him up. Fiona took his other side, and Keenan handed me the keys. We got him to the car, and Keenan took the back seat with him. I took the driver’s seat, and Fiona took shotgun.

“Where do I go?” I rushed out.

“Take a breath,” Keenan said, attending to Cian. “We won’t get anywhere if you panic.”

“Where to?” I practically shouted.

“The house,” Keenan said.

Fiona had her phone pressed to her ear. She cursed at it and looked at Cian through the mirror. “She’s not answerin’.”

“She will,” Keenan said calmly. “The lad has had worse.”

When I made a turn, something rattled in what was considered a trunk in the car. Or was it cargo space? Oh, who cared what it was called!

Cian groaned again as he sat up straighter. He set his hands over the seat and touched my shoulder. “You’re doin’ fine. Keep steady. Just like we practiced.”

Keenan kept glancing over his shoulder.

“What’s back there?” I asked.

Maybe my voice sounded forceful enough because Fiona said easily, “My guess? Dermot Craig.”

I groaned, and Cian touched my shoulder in support.

“Where’s my wife’s coat, Fiona?” Cian asked her.

Fiona laughed some. “Forgotten. Coulda been the hasty exit, but maybe I’m just gettin’ old.”

Cian grinned and Keenan laughed. I shook my head at all three of them.

“You cold, my darlin’?” Cian asked me.

“What?” I breathed. I had no clue what I was. After he mentioned it, though, internally, I felt like I was on fire, but on the outside, I was freezing.

“Fiona,” Cian snapped.

Our eyes met for a brief second before she shook her head. “I don’t believe she’s in shock. Just nervous is all. She’s doin’ a mighty fine job drivin’. She’s good.”

Fiona said this as I took a sharp turn and she barely had to reach out and touch the dash to keep steady in her seat. Whoever she had called for help, though, hadn’t called back.

“Why isn’t she—whoever *she* is—calling back?” I asked.

Fiona brought the phone to her ear and tried again.

Flashing lights swirled in my rearview, and I considered trying to outrun them.

Cian’s breath was cool on my shoulder as he said drunkenly, “Pull over, Maeve.”

“What? No, we don’t—”

“Pull over, love,” he said, his voice in better control. Our eyes met through the rearview mirror. “Trust me. This will only take a second.”

I pulled over, but my knee was bouncing on its own as the two cops approached from both sides of the car. I knew I looked as guilty as hell. My husband was bleeding in the backseat, and Dermot Craig was probably trussed up like a turkey in the *cargo area*. If it came down to it, I was going to lie straight through my teeth. Tell them Dermot shot Cian and Keenan was able to subdue the rogue shooter. I was on my way to the hospital when—

The police officer made a motion for me to roll the window down before I could finish writing the story in my head. He opened his mouth to tell me I’d been speeding, and to probably ask for my license and registration, but when Cian sat up and met his eyes, the policeman only nodded.

“Drive safely, Mrs. O’Callaghan.” The officer tipped his cap to me and went back to his cruiser with the second police officer.

I didn’t wait to watch them leave. I peeled out and made it to the gates of our house in record time, even with the stop. The gates opened as soon as the contraption in the car gave the massive iron figures permission. I hit the gas even harder and came to a smooth stop in front.

As soon as the car was in park, I jumped out, hearing Cian roar behind me to stop. But it was too late. I was already halfway to the front door, my heels stepping in puddles of blood and carrying the stains.

On our doorstep, two mangled animals, a small one, and a larger one—a doe—lay in a pool of their shared blood, steam rising from the warm liquid as it clashed with the cold air.

It smelled stronger than the bloodied scent coming from my husband. I shut my eyes tight and whirled around, running into a chest harder than steel.

CHAPTER 33

MAEVE

Cian took me by the shoulders when I whirled, and the next thing I knew, I felt like I'd levitated as he picked me up and rushed me back to the waiting SUV. Keenan passed us, calling for the dogs to come.

As soon as I was back in the driver's seat, and the dogs were in the back with Dermot, Keenan took his seat, and Cian claimed the one in the back again. He seemed to sink into it, his eyes closing, sweat dripping down his face.

"Drive, Maeve," Fiona snapped at me.

On autopilot, I made the turn around the horseshoe and gunned it down the long drive. The gate was already open. I flew through it.

"Where am I going?" I barely got out.

Fiona didn't give me an address. She just started directing me like GPS.

My eyes flashed to the backseat. Keenan was applying pressure to Cian's shoulder, but my husband's eyes were on me. I didn't know how I knew, maybe we didn't even need words anymore, but I knew. He was silently asking me if it was true—was I pregnant?

I nodded, and two tears slipped down my cheeks. Those two innocent animals left to bleed out on our front step were not left there by accident. Somehow, my husband's enemies knew about me being pregnant, and they were sending a message to the Beast.

Cian had just found out, though.

How did they?

Maybe they were digging through our trash? I'd thrown two tests away that I thought I'd botched. Cian hadn't suspected anything because I'd put them on the grocery list when we'd first started trying.

Cian made a noise in his throat—part growl, part desperation—and I knew it was because he'd connected the scene on the front step to our situation. Keenan's hand pressed harder against his chest. Keenan was trying to restrain him. I knew memories of what had happened to his parents were probably attacking him, and he had the urge to flee like a wild animal trapped in a cage, his own bones locking him in.

“Stay down, lad,” Keenan snapped at him. “We have to keep him alive for now.”

Cian ignored him, forcing himself up. Instead of going for the very back, though, he got close to my seat, and resting his head against the headrest, slipped his hand around and set it over my womb. I set my hand over his, steadying him. He was trembling. It might have been partly from the gunshot, but I knew it was from a desperation he probably hadn't felt since he was a kid hiding underneath that chunk of soil.

He closed his eyes a few minutes later, and I screamed, “Keenan!”

“Pulse is slowin', but I think that's because he's relaxin'. Let's just get there, aye?”

“How much further?” I asked Fiona.

“Five minutes.”

I made it there in two and a half.

We were in a small seaside town outside of Boston. My dad had taken me there once for lunch. It was quaint, and... I had no idea what we were doing there. I squinted against an overhead light haloing a wooden sign over the door of a picturesque old house. The word “Vet” was carved into it.

Cian waved off Keenan's help once I put the car in park.

“I think we’re at the wrong place,” I said to Fiona.

She shook her head and hopped out. So did I. I gasped when Cian wrapped his arm around my waist and locked me there. We did this weird walk, Keenan keeping close to his free side, as we moved toward the open door. We were both trying to hold the other up.

The dogs flew past and ran around a woman in a flannel shirt, jeans, and boots standing in the middle of the doorway. She was a slim, dark-haired woman with light brown skin who seemed like she could handle her own. Her black hair was pulled back, and a few straight tendrils fell out, framing her face. I noticed a picture of a girl in a field of bluebonnets framed and displayed on the counter of her practice. Her certificate with her credentials hung on the wall in a plain gold frame and stated that she’d gone to veterinary school in Houston.

The place reeked of animal.

Her eyes widened some when she took in Cian. “Okay,” she breathed out, like she always knew there was a handsome face underneath all that wild hair. “Let’s see what you have for us this time, O’Callaghan.”

“Dr. Estrada.” Cian nodded.

Her eyes widened even more. She pointed to a room we should go in. “The gunshot is expected. The voice not so much.”

The room smelled like antiseptics, like she’d been cleaning before we got there. Cian all but collapsed on the table and she pulled up a seat and got to work. Keenan took a seat on the other side of him. Dr. Estrada called for another woman who looked like a younger version of her but wore scrubs.

Dr. Estrada cut away Cian’s shirt, examining his chest under bright lights with her gloved hands.

The room spun a little at the sight of all that blood and the hole in his shoulder. Then it came into sharp focus when she bent her head down to check the wound. Her hair must have tickled his nose, and he looked down at her. Through the scent

of antiseptic, I could smell how sweet she smelled, and I wondered if he noticed it too.

It was the worst time, and totally unreasonable for me to feel, but a hot stab of jealousy seemed to stab me in the heart and made my stomach feel weak. Like I wanted to cry and hit something at the same time. I wanted to strangle the feeling, but it was too large to wrap my hands around.

Fiona held my arm in her grasp and tried to tug me out of the room. I shook my head, refusing to be moved. He'd told me I was his first, but it made me wonder if he'd ever been attracted to this veterinary doctor who also worked on this wild beast under the radar.

“Dr. Estrada,” he said, his voice gruff.

Her eyes flew up to his. “That’s going to take some getting used to.” She smiled at him. “Hearing that handsome voice.”

“A seat for my wife, if you will.” He nodded toward me. “Maeve O’Callaghan.”

Dr. Estrada’s eyes slowly rose to meet mine, like she was seeing me for the first time, and whatever tool she was about to use clashed to the floor. The woman assisting her took in the entire scene before she handed the doctor another one of whatever she was about use.

The doctor’s eyes met mine. “Maeve,” she said, and it was like the moment of shock was already gone. “Nice to meet you.”

“Same,” I whispered, taking the seat the nurse had brought in for me.

A man came in wearing a doctor’s white coat with a stethoscope hung around his neck. He leaned in and examined Cian’s wound with Dr. Estrada.

“O’Callaghan,” he said. “I was hoping the last time was the last time.”

Cian grunted.

The man looked at me. “We have a new member of the cheering squad.”

Fiona showed him her teeth. Keenan shook his head.

“My wife,” Cian barely got out.

“Maeve,” Dr. Estrada said when the man’s eyes almost bugged out and he seemed too shocked to speak.

“Mrs. O’Callaghan.” The man finally got out. “I’m Dr. Higgins, Dr. Estrada’s husband.”

I looked at Fiona and she rolled her eyes at me like I was ridiculous. Maybe I was. Nothing seemed real, and after a squirt of blood shot out of my husband’s wound, my eyes mimicked Fiona’s, the room spun, and I lost control of it as I fell into a black whole.

CHAPTER 34

CIAN CILLIAN

“Cillian! Wake up! Cillian!”

My eyes felt heavy, but I forced them open. Mam was sittin’ on the edge of my bed, shakin’ me awake. She narrowed her eyes at me, and just to be sure I didn’t fall back asleep, she tickled my side. She always did. I wanted to squirm, but I was too old to be tickled, so I kept still.

Even in the darkness, I could tell she was makin’ a fierce face at me. “Just makin’ sure you’re up, my lad.”

“What time is it?” I yawned.

“Too late for growin’ lads to be up, but...watch yer eyes.” Her red hair made a curtain as she leaned forward and turned on the bedside lamp. The gold in it sparked, even in the dim light.

I blinked against the sudden brightness. She was all lit up in it, like she was bathin’ in it. Da said she’d been lit up ever since she found out I was goin’ to have a brother or sister. I understood what he’d meant in that moment.

She set a warm hand on my arm. The other was behind her back. “I have somethin’ to show you, Cillian.” She said it all excited like.

Oh, man, if she came at me with a chocolate bar or somethin’, I was goin’ to have to brush my teeth again. It would be worth it, though. She wielded a picture instead. It wasn’t a very good one. It was black and white and fuzzy.

“What’s that?” I asked. “A picture of our TV when it’s on the fritz?”

On the fritz. It was an expression Da used sometimes when somethin’ was broken around the apartment. I just liked sayin’ fritz. It fizzled on the tongue or somethin’, like those candies we traded each other for in a school in *Baw-sten*.

Mam threw her head back and laughed. It was breathy, like she didn’t want to disturb somethin’. It seemed to echo in the small apartment even though it was a quiet chuckle. We were probably alone. Da out workin’ late again.

“Look harder, Cillian.”

I squinted but didn’t really see anythin’. It had Mam’s name and date of birth on it, though. I read that aloud.

She messed my hair. “This—” she pointed to a small blob “—is your brother or sister.”

I took the picture from her. She sighed, watchin’ me try to make out arms, a hand, or even a leg. Nothin’.

“What are you thinkin’? Boy or girl?”

“Boy,” I said automatically. Not sure why, but I couldn’t see havin’ a sister for some reason.

“Maybe,” Mam said. “We’ll know soon enough.”

“The baby’s not goin’ to take that long to bake?”

“Life moves fast, my boy.” She messed my hair again. “You ever heard the expression, *like sands in an hourglass, these are the days of our lives?*”

Yeah, I did, but from what she called her “stories.” This television show she was obsessed with. She followed it like she was readin’ a book, Da said. Couldn’t pry her away. Da said all that would change once we got back to Ireland. She liked to be outside there.

She took a spare pillow from my bed and propped it in front of her. She was in a chatty mood, it seemed. I didn’t mind. We had conversations when Da was at work sometimes like this. Da told me it was because she liked talkin’ to me,

and she probably missed him when he was out workin' for Mr. Craig real late. I was the man of the house when Da was gone.

“Got any names?” Mam asked.

I thought about it for a second but couldn't come up with nothin' special.

“I have two,” she said, fillin' the silence. “One for a boy, and one for a girl, just in case.”

“How come you call me by my middle name if my real name's Cian?” I asked out of the blue.

“My Granda. His name was Cillian. Best storyteller around!” She hugged the pillow closer. “He was a twin. Oh! You have two cousins around your age—twins too. Someday you'll meet 'em both.”

“Cool,” I said. I had plenty of friends in *Baw-sten*, but no family but us. Unless I counted Da's gang, Keenan, Fiona, and Henry. Dunno why Da called them that, but I guess I had a gang at school too. Just a bunch of fellas the same age to run around with in the schoolyard. Another boy who lived in the apartment complex sometimes asked to have me over, but that was it.

“Twins, Cillian! Can you imagine it?”

“That's what you're havin'? Two of the same one?”

“Two of the same one?” She grinned at me. “Sometimes they're identical, but sometimes not. But no, I'm havin' just the one according to that.” She tapped the picture. “But who knows? Maybe one of them is hidin'. That happens sometimes.”

If that picture was their space, I had no idea where two could hide. It seemed like a tiny box.

“How about Camden for a boy? Caitlin for a girl?”

“Caitlin,” I repeated.

She nodded. “Knew a girl in school by that name. She was somethin' else. So beautiful. She left before we could grow up together and stay close.”

“Shame,” I said.

“Yeah.” Her voice turned soft. “I think so too.” She sighed. “So? Whatdya think, laddie? About the names?”

“Cool,” I said. They were both good names.

She took me by the face and squeezed. “Cool, huh?” She tried to wrestle her accent in and make herself sound like she was from *Baw-sten*.

I laughed a little, but she was squishin’ my mouth, and it sounded funny.

“Keep goin’ with that *Baw-sten* accent, and I might have to wash yer mouth out with Irish Springs’ soap to get my boy’s accent back!” She roughly let my mouth go, like when Da was messin’ with her when he shaved, and she shoved his face away with a laugh because he had shaving cream on it.

We both cracked up laughin’. This time it seemed to make the clock chime in the kitchen, like these *were* the days of our lives, like she’d said, but the sands in the hourglass had stilled for a little while. She kissed me on the cheek and stood to go.

I held out the picture. She took it, studyin’ it and then me. “I love you, *Cian* Cillian O’Callaghan. Remember that, always. You’ll always be someone’s baby. Mine. You’ll understand one day when you have one of your own.” Leaning down, she kissed the top of my head, then propped the picture up on my lamp, turned out the light, and walked to the door.

She stood in it for a second, the light from the hallway haloin’ her before she seemed to disappear into the darkness before my very eyes, as the words *so proud of my wee lad* echoed in a whisper behind her.

CHAPTER 35

CIAN

It felt like my lungs were being strangled, and I came to with a gasp that had me chokin' on what was supposed to be thin. The air. It tasted like dirt in my mouth.

My arms flew out and knocked whatever was on the silver tray all over the floor. The items clattered and shattered, and Higgins held his hands up and took a step back.

“All right, O’Callaghan?”

“I fell asleep.” My voice was hard but broken at the same time.

Higgins set his hands down. “You usually do when you’re in pain.”

Yeah, that was somethin’. Most people screamed out, or cried, or squeezed someone else’s hand. Or, like Keenan said, bit down on a stick. I fell asleep when the pain hit. My brain had rewired after I’d hid underneath the earth. Pain drained me after, and I’d nod off.

Higgins nodded to my shoulder. “Let me fix that. You’re bleeding again.”

I stood, swayin’ a bit on my feet, and he didn’t bother tryin’ to help me. He knew better.

Maeve. Her name floated through my head, and, fuckin’ truth, her name alone intoxicated me.

She’d just been weak from seeing my blood and had passed out against my chest. Once I knew she was safe, drinkin’ orange juice and eatin’ crackers, Fiona next to her in

this buildin', I allowed the pain to take me under. My shoulder was still throbbin', which was why I was havin' a hard time keepin' my eyes open, but I had to see her.

"Your wife is in the next room," Higgins called after me. "Salma and Maya made her a bed on one of the tables. She's all right."

Salma, Higgins' wife, was doing somethin' behind the counter when I walked out into the hall. She looked up just as her sister, Maya, was comin' out of a room. They were lookin' at me differently, like maybe it was time I moved up to a real hospital, since my wife got her hands on me and was turnin' me into a real man.

All Salma and Maya dealt with were beasts.

There was another reason for me comin' here, besides me bein' the equivalent of a wild animal, though. It was under the radar, and Higgins could see me without gettin' questioned by anyone. He was a surgeon and could find a bullet better than an x-ray machine, Keenan always said. Keenan had watched him for months before he approached him about our deal.

I hadn't understood Higgins' motivation for agreein' to treat me then, but I understood it better than how to pronounce my name after Maeve came into my life. Higgins was bogged down with bills from his schoolin', and he wanted to buy a house in this small town for Salma. He also wanted to open this practice for her.

We paid him enough to do it all—at a cost. If we needed medical attention, he or his wife would tend to us.

The other doctor, the one closer to Boston, hadn't answered. Keenan never said it, but I had a feelin' they were foolin' around before we left for Ireland. Fiona knew everythin', and I wondered if she'd even called her at all, since things seemed to be changin' between them.

"O'Callaghan," Salma said, stopping me before I went inside the room. "Maeve told me she's pregnant. I'd like to do an ultrasound on her, since she hasn't had one."

"My wife is a woman," I said.

She grinned at me. “We use the same equipment for animals, but we have better ones, so to speak, thanks to you.”

I nodded.

“All right. We’ll be in in a sec and see what we can see.”

My heart started to beat faster, and my feet moved in rhythm to it. Both came to a complete halt when I crossed the threshold of the room. Maeve was lyin’ in the center of a table with wheels, her eyes shut tight. It looked hard and uncomfortable, somethin’ made for someone like me, but the doctors had tried to make it comfortable by addin’ blankets and pillows.

I realized the table seemed meant for death, and my heart took off like my feet had the night Craig ordered my life to be destroyed. It was one of those silver ones.

One of her feet stuck out. My eyes automatically went to her toes.

I took an easier breath.

Nothin’ there.

Except...blood stained her face, and she was almost hidin’ under the covers because she was cold in that slinky dress she’d worn to her friend’s weddin’.

Why hadn’t they cleaned her face?

Why hadn’t Fiona got her some fuckin’ warm clothes?

“Stop lookin’ at me like that, lad.” Fiona sat up in the chair and stretched her arms over her head, yawnin’ like a mammy bear just wakin’ from hibernation. “We did the best with what we were given last night, seein’ as you would have gone off the rails if we would have left to grab new things. Your woman is all right. You see how wide her mouth is open? She’s catchin’ fireflies right now in her sleep.”

“Am not,” Maeve said, soundin’ drugged, her eyes still closed.

My shoulder hit the wall, and the pain almost made me hit the floor. I shook my head, tryin’ to shake out of the fuckin’

stupor.

“What happened last night?” Fiona asked, stompin’ each of her boots against the floor once. It was just somethin’ she did when she first woke up. When I’d asked her why when I was a kid, she told me it was because she was givin’ the devil a head start.

“Dermot had friends with ’im.” It took all my restraint not to kill him after Devin’s widow had told me where he was hidin’. I spared him for Cash’s benefit, but that didn’t mean I didn’t have plans for him. Plans to crush his head so the memories of my wife would shatter with it.

Maeve set an arm over her eyes, like she was hidin’ from what I’d just said. I nodded toward her, and Fiona stood, understandin’. I needed to be alone with my wife. Fiona left us, and I pulled the chair she’d vacated from the window and set it next to Maeve. I removed her arm from her face, and she blinked at me, slowly openin’ her stunnin’ eyes.

This woman was the storm of my life, and when she looked at me like that, she moved through my soul, breathin’ chaos and peace into it. She was my balance of life and the after.

“You okay?” she whispered, runnin’ her cold, soft hand against the coarseness of my five o’clock shadow.

“Tell me again. You’re havin’ a babe.”

Her smile came slow. “*Your* babe.”

Besides the first time I’d ever seen her, nothin’ else had ever made me feel so alive. She gasped when I stood and picked her up, blankets and all, takin’ her place against the cold steel. She tried to wiggle out of my hold, but my arms were too strong.

“I’m okay, Cian.” She looked up at me, her eyes wide. “Your shoulder!”

“Fuck my shoulder,” I said. “I need you where you are—even closer, if I could.”

She studied my face, wipin' sweat from my brow, and nodded. She tucked her face into the crook of my neck and sighed.

"I thought there was no way I could sleep on this table. But you know what? After I found out you were okay, I slept like I was on a cloud. I've never slept so good before. Dr. Estrada said that's normal."

"What did Dr. Estrada say?" Salma walked into the room, Maya behind her.

"Why I slept so good, even on this." Maeve tapped the metal.

Salma smiled at her. "You also had a stressful night. Some of that could have been relief sleep too."

Maya went straight to a machine with wheels and started movin' it toward the bedside. Salma washed her hands, gloved up, then took a seat next to the bed.

"This is your ultrasound machine, O'Callaghan. No one else has ever used it. Now I guess it'll be just for the O'Callaghan *family*." Salma looked at me. "We're going to need Maeve in a different position for this."

I looked at my wife.

She nodded. Her eyes were so bright. Excited.

I groaned when I stood, makin' the same noise I did when I spilled myself inside of my wife. I set her down gently on the bed and took the seat again. Maeve clasped my hand when everythin' started, entwining our fingers, holdin' on like she was preparin' for the storm of her life, and I was safe ground.

"All right," Salma said, lookin' just as excited as my wife. "Here we go."

I was more worried about the wand she was stickin' up my wife's warm honey pot.

Salma grinned. "The baby is probably too small to see with the other tool. This can get up further to detect the heartbeat, and...." She smiled big and turned the screen to face us.

“There it is.” She fiddled with some dials and turned the sound up.

It sounded strong to me, a sound a man could march to. Maeve gasped, and the smile on her face could have blinded the sun. Tears ran down her cheeks. I only realized how tight we were holdin’ on to one another when I kissed her knuckles.

“That sounds like a...a Cian O’Callaghan heartbeat,” Maeve said through tears. She looked at me. “So strong and full of *life*.”

Our eyes held until I noticed the way Salma kept flickin’ glances to her sister. She turned the screen back some, and her eyes narrowed while she bit her bottom lip.

“Salma,” I said, my voice on edge.

“What?” Maeve looked between the two of us.

“Well...” Salma said, and a little machine printed out a picture. Maya looked at it, nodded, and handed it to Salma. She handed it to me.

It brought up an old memory that slammed into my gut. The little picture of the fuzzy TV screen Mam had showed me. This time, though, two areas were circled. Maeve and I both studied the picture with pinched faces.

“What does this mean, Dr. Estrada?” Maeve asked.

“Well...” Salma said again. “It means...you’re having twins. Baby A. Baby B.”

“Twins?” Maeve barely got out.

“Twins,” I said, and all eyes turned to me. “Camden and Caitlin.”

“Not sure of the sexes just yet,” Salma said, “but definitely two.”

“Two of the same,” I said, feelin’ a sense that this moment had happened twice in my life. A shiver ran through me. Maeve held on to my hand even tighter.

“Twins for the wins!” Maeve pressed her head against the pillow, her feet tappin’ against each other, and laughed, so full

of joy, I thought she might burst. Maybe that was why her eyes were leakin' like that.

“At the twelve-week scan, you’ll be able to tell if the babies are identical. But I’ll say this.” Salma took the picture and looked right at me. “They’re not hiding. As wild and as bold as their dad, it seems.”

Salma winked at me, handing the picture to Maeve, and then she and her sister left me and my wife alone, allowing what seemed like all the light and fresh air in the world to flood in.

CHAPTER 36

CIAN

Sometimes, out of the blue, I was the kid buried underneath the surface of the ground again. My lungs would burn, like I'd just run up that hill. My heart would ache, like I'd just realized my parents and siblin' were gone. I'd taste the acid of vomit in my throat and smell mud in my nose. I'd feel things crawlin' on me, but I was too frozen to move.

I'd feel trapped in this life. In this body.

After, I moved about like a ghost on the hunt for the men who'd murdered my parents and stolen my life.

I looked down at my hands, turnin' them some in the foggy beach air. My nails were cut down to the quick, but my blood was still caked underneath them.

Just as I'd imagined those memories from before, I was seein' somethin' entirely different now.

The blood might as well have been mud.

Lookin' at my wife, I realized she'd given me the breath to claw my way out of the grave and to break the hold death had on me.

She gave *me* a purpose.

She had mine tucked deep below her surface, shieldin' them like armor.

A grin came to my face when she rushed back with the tide and it almost touched her feet. The water was choppy, the wind whippin', tearin' her hair out of the bun. It clung to her

face as the strands desperately tried to hold on. Even with all the violence of the weather and the silvery tint to the world, she was the brightest spot in it.

Her head was turned up to the sky, like she was absorbin' the sun.

She was the sun. Nothin' could touch her but the clouds. And she intoxicated them as much as she intoxicated me.

I was the world in that moment—feelin' everythin' and reactin' to it.

I'd make sure nothin' ever touched her or my purposes that she hid deep inside.

Closing my eyes, *I see the scene again.*

My parents.

The shimmer of the stained-glass window.

Two figures who didn't belong.

I hear it again.

Mum's screams.

The gurgle from Da's throat.

I feel it again.

The flight up that hill.

The temporary relief when I slid underground. The cold earth pressin' in on me before I froze.

I smell it again.

The mud.

The blood.

The vomit.

Before, I had an automatic reaction to what had happened, like an arm jumpin' when a nerve had been struck.

Kill.

This time, I felt the rush of somethin' more powerful than anger froth in my veins. The unnamed thing was pushin' me

closer and closer to the moment of finality, whisperin' new reminders in my ear:

Feel every strike of the weapon with purposes in mind.

Finish this with purposes in mind.

Revel in it once it was done with purposes in mind.

Give meanin' to it with those same purposes in heart.

My parents, my siblin', deserved that. A man who could feel what he was doing in honor of them. Not just an animal who ran on instinct alone.

Only a small section of beach separated me from my wife. The wind whipped between us. She turned around and smiled at me.

And the sun came out.

Everythin' settled around me, even the chaos of the weather.

She'd changed into an outfit Fiona had gone out and bought for her. A long black sweatshirt that had BOSTON stamped on it in white letters, a pair of black leggings, and combat boots. Her hands were tucked inside the arms of the sweater, her fingers holdin' on to the sleeves. She raised one and waved it at me before she took off runnin' and wrapped her arms around my waist. Even though she told me not to, I picked her up with one arm, gruntin' as I did. She wrapped her arms and legs around me and held on tight.

She leaned her head down and softly kissed my lips. "When you go, you go big, Cian O'Callaghan," she breathed against my lips. She smoothed out the tightness in my forehead with her fingers when she realized I didn't understand. She laughed, kissing me harder. "You gave me double purposes—twins!"

It felt like my heart tore away from my chest, and the rippin' of it could be heard through my laughter. "Twins run in my family."

Her eyes widened. "That's right! Cash and Killian with a K. But how do you know...one boy, one girl? Camden and

Caitlin.” Her voice came out softer on her mam’s name. “I really love those names, by the way.”

I nodded, then shrugged. “Just a feelin’.”

“What the Craigs left at our door,” she whispered, and then her throat bobbed as she swallowed hard. Her voice was tight. “How could they know?”

“They’re garbage diggers,” I said. “And they’re not goin’ to know for long.”

She studied my face, catchin’ my meanin’. She nodded and looked away from me.

“I was a kid before. I’m a man now. I’m not goin’ to let them hurt you.”

Her eyes whipped to mine. “I know.” Her voice was fierce. “It’s not me I’m worried about. It’s you.”

“You worry about nothin’. I’m your man, but I’m the fuckin’ Beast of Boston. No one touches you but me.”

She shook her head. “*I* worry about you, O’Callaghan. Because without you, this life loses most of its value. Before the twins, it would have lost all its value.”

That’s what my Mam used to say to my Da. The past was comin’ too fuckin’ close to my future. I shook off the cold wind, and when I felt my wife shiverin’, I carried her back to the car.

The Ferrari was too conspicuous, so Fiona had bought a smaller car and set Georgia plates on it. She paid cash for it under the name Sherry Pop. Maeve had laughed and gave her a high-five. It was a character’s name in a romance book. I wondered how many times she’d done it before. We’d always left that part of the transactions up to her because she could come up with realistic soundin’ names on a whim. We knew why now.

Maeve held her hand out for the keys. I gave them to her without hesitation. She was one of the best fuckin’ drivers I’d ever had the pleasure of ridin’ with. While she drove us to a restaurant to grab breakfast, I slid my palm against her

stomach. She glanced at me, then looked forward. Her expression was soft, like she was meltin’.

She parked out on the street, and I locked her hand inside of mine as we went inside. We were seated right away, but Maeve kept flickin’ glances around the restaurant. It was mostly older folks eatin’ eggs and porridge.

“Your eyes keep flickin’ around,” I said after the waitress took our orders.

A slow smile came to her lips. “The women in this place... they’re all staring at you.”

They were all over fifty, at least.

Maeve laughed, settin’ her juice down. “I bet they’re thinking to themselves...*oh, to be young again!*”

Her laughter came and went as we ordered our food and started to eat. She only ordered one plate, but I ordered two more for her—she was eatin’ for that many. She didn’t complain as she dug in with a single-minded focus. *Eat. And eat some more.* It made me ravenous for my own food to see her doin’ so well. I tasted every bite of it, then sat back and watched as she absorbed every last bite.

“Maeve.”

“Huh?” She looked up and blinked at me.

I grinned. “Good, my darlin’?”

“So good...I finished three servings of food.” She smiled at me.

I nodded. “There’s somethin’ I want to discuss with you.”

She set her last piece of toast down and wiped her hands. “Okay,” she whispered.

“I’m goin’ to sell the castle.”

She stared at me for a second. “What about—”

“I’m not goin’ to sell the cemetery part of it. That belongs to my family. Just the castle. I’ve had offers before. I didn’t want to sell then. The property meant too much to my Da.”

“Now?”

I shrugged. “He’ll be restin’ there forever.”

She studied my face. “I understand.”

I knew she would. I’d already spoken to Keenan about my wishes in the event somethin’ happened to me in this war. Before, everythin’ that belonged to me would have gone to Keenan, Fiona, and Henry. Parts of it still would. The rest would go to my wife and children. They would be taken care of for as long as they lived.

“Okay.” She sighed and looked toward the window, then back at me. I knew her shift in mood had nothin’ to do with talk about the castle, but about where we were headed. She didn’t want to discuss the impendin’ end to this story. “This is supposed to be a celebration, so...how about we call my dad and tell him about the twins?”

I dialed his number. He answered on the third ring. He sounded tired. Maeve made small talk with him before she put him on speaker and gave him the news. He became quiet. His voice was choked when he finally said how excited he was and started askin’ endless questions. When he was comin’ home was the main one.

Maeve told him soon. It was safer for him with the MacGregors. Oran didn’t expect him there, and MacGregor would spare no expense to keep Pauric safe. As I paid the bill, she told Pauric she was about to drive and that she’d call him later. I opened the door to the restaurant and Maeve stepped out. She was about to say somethin’, but her voice died when my eyes locked on two men lookin’ through the window of our car. Two men I’d searched for since I was ten years old and could never find.

One of the men had a spider tattoo on his neck. The other had a web.

“Cian,” Maeve whispered, shakin’ my sweater. “Cian.” I heard her, but the memories were assaultin’ me.

My wife bein’ snatched from my arms as she cries out my name for help.

Her blood bein' spilled at my feet.

Buryin' her and my babes on that hill.

I shook out of it, and a second before they turned, I pinned her against the wall. I turned the hood of my sweater up, shieldin' our faces, then set my arms on each side of her like I was about to kiss her.

"Move toward the restaurant when it seems natural," I whispered.

"I've seen those men before," she barely breathed out, pullin' at my sweater like she was pullin' me closer. "The night I was at Oran's for dinner. The night I met you. Do you know them?"

We took another step toward the door.

"They killed my parents and siblin'."

She made a distressed noise, then tilted to the side some, holdin' on to me even tighter. "I think they're coming this way."

I could see them through the reflection of the window. Spider and Web were glancin' at each other, tryin' to decide if they should make the trip across the street or not.

"Don't even look at 'em. Keep your eyes on me."

Her hands fisted into my sweater and she nodded, doin' exactly like I told her to do. Slidin' closer to the door, I opened it and set her inside.

"Call Keenan," I said. "Tell 'im to put the pot on, we have company."

"Cian," she hissed at me. "Where are you going?"

I was already out the door, steppin' directly into their line of sight. I lowered the hood and opened my arms. *I'm the son of Conor and Mona. The boy you could never kill.*

Spider and Web looked at each other, then crossed the street after me as I started movin' away from the restaurant. I wasn't runnin', but my pace was clipped. I watched them through the reflection of the windows until I turned the corner.

I stopped.

A breath.

Two.

They stepped around and stopped.

Only a few paces stood between us.

“About time,” Spider said, spittin’ on the sidewalk.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” Web said. “More than I did killing your worthless parents.”

“While you’re drowning in a pool of your own blood, I’m going back for that beautiful little bitch. I’m going to make her cry and beg before she meets you at the grave.”

“You going to run this time, little *Cillian* O’Callaghan?”

I had imagined this scene many times. Watchin’ them strangle on their own blood while reachin’ out for a hand that would never hold theirs back. Keepin’ them barely alive and shackled to a bed. No food. No water. Nothin’ but their own filth to rot in.

Starin’ at their faces, all I wanted was for them to finally be dead, hell not even far enough between them and my family. Maeve had changed the course of my retribution, and it was all about keepin’ her safe.

I pulled the gun out of my pocket and pulled the trigger so fast, both of their faces registered shock before they fell to the ground. I sank my hand into each man’s hair before their last breaths and exposed their throats, slicin’ each one with somethin’ close to a ferocious joy.

After draggin’ their bodies close to a tree and proppin’ them up, I ran back to the restaurant. A crowd had formed inside. I couldn’t see my wife. Bodies moved out of my way as I forced my way through. I took a breath of air when I spotted her in the center of the crowd, an older woman’s hand on her shoulder.

Maeve’s eyes locked with mine, and I could see the woman had to hold onto her tighter. “Cian,” she almost cried.

“Are you her husband?” The woman’s wide eyes took me in as I grabbed Maeve, and she rested her head against my chest. She took my bloodied hands and stuffed them in my hoodie.

“I am,” I barely got out.

“Your wife was attacked,” the woman said shakily. “But she fought him off.”

I looked down and Maeve looked up.

“Dermot,” she said.

“We called the police,” the woman said. “They’ll be here any second.”

“I’m going to sit down outside,” Maeve said. “Wait for them. I need some fresh air.”

I all but picked her up, hustlin’ to get outside. Once I sat her down, feelin’ all over her body for injuries, she shook her head at me.

“I’m okay. I did just like you taught me. Except he got away.” She looked down at my hands. “Where are those men?”

I nodded to the street over.

Sirens wailed in the distance.

“We should go!” Maeve said, tryin’ to stand but not findin’ her footin’.

I picked her up again and rushed toward the other side of the street. I sat her in the passenger seat before I took off. I pulled up in front of where Spider and Web looked like ghosts sittin’ against a tree. I picked up Spider and set him in the trunk, then did the same to Web. I took off toward the clinic.

Maeve was quiet, starin’ out of the window.

We didn’t have much time.

As soon as I stopped in front of the clinic, Keenan and Fiona rushed out to meet us. Keenan had an egg-sized lump on the side of his head. My guess, Dermot had gotten loose and

knocked him out. That was goin' to be a sore spot for a while. Not the actual lump, but his pride.

Neither of us said anythin' as we each grabbed a corpse and took it to the back of the place. Fiona was already back there, the flames of the fire stoked and waitin' for somethin' to turn to ashes.

Salma and her sister had no idea we used their property for this when we had the need to. Higgins knew, but he didn't want his wife or sister-in-law to ever know. It was easier that way, he'd said. We paid him extra to use the big oven.

Once Spider and Web's bodies were in, I could no longer see the flames takin' 'em back to hell, but I imagined it.

My wife's arms came around me, cold and shiverin'. "Cian?" she whispered.

It was hard for me to look away, but I did.

"It's over," she whispered. "Let's go home."

When we got home, there was more smoke and ashes.

Oran Craig had set fire to our house.

CHAPTER 37

MAEVE

It was irrational to feel this way, but...I couldn't help feeling guilty about the way things had gone down with Spider and Web.

Fiona had told me their names. She'd said the last time Cian had seen them was the night they killed his parents. Oran kept them hidden, thinking Cian would go looking for them, drawing him out. It was Keenan who had, but he couldn't ask around too much or Oran would know.

I wondered if, as Cian was killing those awful men, the boy hidden inside of him had his hand on that knife too. If he felt a deep satisfaction knowing the men who stole his life were bleeding out at his feet.

It was a short satisfaction, though.

As soon as they were dead, he'd come for me.

Which was why guilt was gnawing at my conscience.

All those years, and however Cian imagined that moment playing out, it seemed to happen too fast. When he was staring at the oven that took the two men back to hell, it was like he'd been transfixed. The flames dancing in his stormy eyes had lit him up from within.

Again, though, I'd pulled him away from it, worried that he'd stop talking. That he'd hide deep within himself to find safety, and all would go quiet.

I sighed, because even though I knew it was irrational of me, I wasn't sure if it was to him. He became inward after,

keeping to himself, hardly saying a word. Even after a month had gone by.

Keenan told me to give him time.

Fiona told me to give him time.

Delaney noticed but didn't say anything, only held my hand whenever she would come over to help me cook dinner. She was so excited about the babies that she could barely stand it. She was already bringing over designing magazines for inspiration for the nursery.

She thought I was being too quiet about it all.

One day, while we unpacked groceries in the new kitchen, she took my hand. "I don't know what happened after my wedding, but...both of you have changed," she whispered. "Let me just say this. You can carry a grudge with you for your entire life, but death is not going to change how you feel. It's not going to make it better. Death doesn't kill the hurt. It lingers, Mae. It might even feel worse. I know this from experience. I carried so much hurt and anger around for that abuser, and after I found out he died, you know what I did?"

I shook my head.

"I fucking cried." She wiped her eyes, turning away from me for a second. When she turned back, her cheeks were damp. "Yeah, I cried for him, how about that? Or I thought I was crying for him. It took me hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars' worth of therapy for me to figure this out...I wasn't crying for him, per se, but for the entire situation. Some situations have no closure unless we heal the holes emotionally. Because the loss is so senseless. Why did he have to beat me in the first place, Mae? Why couldn't he just love me? Those are the questions that haunt me, still sometimes, because they'll never have answers. I'm sure whatever Cian is going through...it's the same for him, even if he doesn't fully understand it."

Her words made sense to me, even if I knew Keenan and Fiona wouldn't get it either. Those awful men had to go for safety reasons—Oran Craig too—but I knew Delaney was

right. Death didn't mean automatic healing. It might mean being torn open even wider.

Nothing was going to heal the pain because his parents and his brother or sister were never coming back, no matter how many times he killed the men who did it.

Maybe Cian was feeling guilty because of that, wondering why it hadn't stopped the pain of losing his family. Oran Craig wouldn't stop it either once he was gone.

Maybe Cian thought if he had been able to savor it...he would feel the satisfaction he always dreamed of feeling, but he had to come after me. It was rushed.

I sighed again. My husband's mind was a mystery that I was having a hard time solving these days. He was closed off, not letting anyone in.

"I would offer you a penny for your thoughts, but I have an idea where your mind is." Keely, Cash's wife, nodded toward the window I was looking out of.

Boston had turned white with snow, the dark bark of winter turning the tree trunks and branches onyx, the leaves sealed in ice diamonds. Smoke purred in the distance from some far-off fire. The kitchen even smelled smoky, and like the clam chowder and fresh baked bread I'd made for Kee, Cash, and their two kids, CeeCee and Ryan.

After the situation with Keely's brother, Lachlan, had been somewhat settled, Cash came back to speak to Cian, who he still called Cillian sometimes. Except Kee, as she told me to call her, wanted to come too. She was a fierce redhead with eyes as blue as an empyrean sky. She was tall and statuesque, and she seemed to take zero shit from anyone. Keenan had told me she was one of the most dangerous archers alive. I could believe it. I could tell life never ran her, but the other way around.

Whatever was on her mind, she didn't hold back, but she wasn't overbearing. She was fun, and I was glad to have her around.

Cian and Cash were out in the yard with the kids. Argus and Grania were barking like mad, thoroughly enjoying CeeCee throwing the ball for them.

“Stall the ball.” Kee used the Irish term, basically meaning, *hold up*, then laughed some. “Do those men cut fine figures or what?”

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” I breathed out, fogging the window.

“I didn’t think I would.” Kee claimed her seat at the table, going for her cup of tea. “I know we don’t know each other well, but I’d like to. I’m sure Cash will have business in Boston, and Cian will have business in New York sooner or later, but...I’d like to keep in touch even more than that. Cash doesn’t have much family. It seems like Cian doesn’t either. It would be nice for our kids to grow up close.”

“I’d love that,” I whispered. “I don’t have a big family either. My dad, Delaney—the woman I worked for at the bookstore—and her husband, Keenan and Fiona...we have them close, but I really enjoyed our lunch.”

“Me too! The food was soo good.” Kee smiled, studying my face. “These men are not always the easiest to live with, especially when they’re determined to end something. I can tell Cian is determined to end whatever is going on in his city. Especially after what happened with Lach.”

That was a mess, and I’d only heard bits and pieces of it, but Lachlan had worked for Oran Craig for a short period of time. Somehow diamonds were thrown into the mix, and Oran had agreed to trade Lachlan for them after he found him in Ireland and brought him back to Boston. Except something went awry when Lachlan took Oran’s men to wherever the diamonds were supposed to be hidden in New York. Oran flew back to Boston—figuratively and metaphorically speaking. Then it was all about getting Dermot back, which was why Oran set fire to our house.

Or part of the reason.

I was learning in this war that it was hit for hit, which was why I assumed Cash had come to speak to his cousin. Cian had made good on his end of the bargain, but it seemed like Cash wanted to help, since he had it in for Oran too.

Deep down, though, I thought Cash just liked Cian and wanted to see how he was doing, cousin to cousin.

Two hours later, after the Kelly's left and I finished cleaning the kitchen and putting away the leftovers, I went back to the window. Cian was wearing a long, dark coat, and he was staring straight ahead, but his eyes seemed too distant. I was willing to bet his thoughts were caught up in a battle between the past and the future.

I could almost hear the falling of the iron petals as they drifted to the sound of the clock ticking in this war. I shivered and grabbed my thick jacket off the peg. Argus and Grania's heads popped up when I walked outside. They were too busy sniffing around the backyard to stop what they were doing and greet me, though.

I sighed out a warm breath that sent a cloud of smoke from my mouth. Even if Cian had heard me, which I was almost positive he had, he didn't turn and acknowledge me. His eyes were in the distance, on the setting sun. It broke around the clouds, and it seemed half of the world was still touched by the light, and the other half was already in frozen, solid darkness.

I was going to wait him out, but when I really started to shiver in earnest, my blood started to heat with determination. I wasn't going to allow whatever he was feeling to come between us. I bent down, rolling the biggest snowball I could, and flung it. It hit his back and exploded, leaving a telltale mark on the dark fabric of his coat.

He became stiffer than he was before. I wondered if he was even breathing. Slowly, he turned around and faced me.

I already had another ice ball prepared. This one was smaller, but I thought it was going to be faster. I stuck my tongue out at him and then whacked him with it. This one hit his thigh. I was a terrible aim, but I was still hitting my target.

My laughter echoed in the air when he blinked at me, like he didn't understand this game.

I opened my arms. "Let's see what kind of aim *you* have, O'Callaghan." I turned around, bending over to scoop up more ice, when I felt something cold and hard *whack!* me on the ass. *Oh no he didn't!* I felt my behind and...*oh yeah, he did.* Packing a big one, I turned slowly and said, "Feel my wrath!" I threw it at his balls, but he was too quick. He dodged just in time.

He was much better than me. Every time I'd bend over to make another ice ball, he'd somehow get me on the ass. It was like his favorite target. By the time I started running away from him, my pants were soaked and I was laughing so hard, I was screeching. The dogs were barking. And Keenan and Fiona were shaking their heads at us. They ducked inside when I started throwing balls at them.

I went to run around a tree to get a better hiding spot, but the ground was slick, and I started to go down. Cian grabbed me by the back of the jacket just in time and kept me up, my feet still looking for purchase. Then something must have happened because he went down, but instead of me hitting, he used his body to pad mine. I ended up on top of him.

For the first time since he'd come face to face with Spider and Web, he grinned at me.

I unbuttoned the hood of my coat from the collar, and lifting his head, set it underneath. "There's my husband," I breathed. "I've missed you, O'Callaghan."

"I've been here."

"Have you?" I whispered.

Snow started to drift between us, collecting on our faces, on our lashes, in our hair. He reached up a hand and smoothed my hair down, shaking some of the snowflakes loose.

"I'm never far from where you are, Maeve, even when I lose myself to the past for a time."

"Are you..." I looked away for a second, but he turned my face toward his.

“Talk to me.” His voice was gruff, like his throat was tight from the cold.

“Are you mad at me? Or maybe mad isn’t the right word. After what happened...I just...I feel like it’s my fault you didn’t, maybe, do what you planned with those awful specimens.”

His stormy gray eyes stared into mine for so long, I looked away again. But he didn’t give me much time to collect myself. He turned my face toward his again.

“Never.” He took a breath, and it purred in the air like the smoke from someone’s chimney. “Those *specimens* were just reminders of what I stand to lose. If this is a story as old as time, Craig’s is tangled in the pages of mine. It’s time for his chapters to end.”

I studied his face, every beautiful bone, the light scar he had on his chin, the color of his eyes. Stormy was perfect to describe the color, but so was wintry. A silver that was only possible in Boston in December. I tucked myself deeper into his body, my arms against me, and his arms wrapped around me even tighter. I inhaled him in the cold, demanding his essence cling to my lungs like icicles clung to the trees.

“Please don’t ever leave me,” I whispered. “You’re my life too.”

He lifted my face and placed a soft kiss on my lips. Sitting up, he stood and helped me to my feet. He picked up my hood and set it on my head. It was crooked, but the wind was too strong to keep it straight. Or maybe it was my hands. They were trembling.

He turned out all the lights in the house, and once we were in our room, he started a warm bath and undressed me. I didn’t want him to leave me alone, so I undressed him too. We sank into the warmth of the water, melting the clutching ice from outside, and we relaxed into each other as he held me against his chest. I turned my face and we kissed.

The kiss progressed, and after he brought me out of the water and dried us both off, he set me on the bed. He moved

inside of me like a storm, claiming every inch of me as his, but I couldn't claim he did any damage. If anything, his storm had brought life to me, just as he said I'd done to him.

His storm of life came in the form of the two babies taking up space in my womb.

The next morning, I was sore and tired, and when I reached out for my husband, what I found was as hard as steel.

A box.

Tears ran down my cheeks when I realized what it was.

The shoebox full of special items I'd thought we'd lost in the fire. One of the only pictures of my mom with me, and one of the only pictures of Cian with his parents. The rocks he'd collected on that hill before his life had been stolen from him. The little buck his Mom used to tuck into bed with him when he'd sleep.

A note from Cian was in the box too. In it, he told me that, after he saw how important the memories were, he'd bought a fireproof box in case something should happen—just like it had. He told me his life and memories were inside that fireproof box, which had the ultrasound pictures of our twins tucked inside of it now too. He'd even written their names. Baby A was Camden, and Baby B was Caitlin. He said he just had a feeling.

Then he told me the box was like me. No matter what happened, I'd keep him safe. Unlike the shoebox he used to cart all his things around in. It had never fully protected him.

But me? His wife? I was going to keep him alive no matter what happened.

Either way, he was going to be fine, and he'd always be with me, just like he was with me when I'd been sitting at Oran Craig's table without him.

A soothing lie.

I'd never be fine without him.

The end.

CHAPTER 38

CIAN

S now danced in the headlights of my car as I found a parkin' spot close to Oran's house in the darkness. I parked and cut the engine. I'd never done this before. Just sat outside of it in silence.

All the lights were turned out. He probably had a man or two sittin' on it, worried about fire retribution. He burned mine down. I'd burn his down. It was the only place he owned free and clear. It was bought underneath his name. He had an attachment to it.

I wasn't goin' to burn it down. I was goin' to kill him and then buy it. Use it as a place to host my cousin from New York whenever he had business in Boston.

That was retribution, because men like Oran Craig always clung to things when they left this world. They carried them around like baggage to the other side. Created their own hells out of them.

In the silence, I felt two poundin' heartbeats.

His.

Mine.

After tonight, only one would exist.

The actual place where it all went down was beside the point. He was hidin' out at a bar that was his. It swarmed with his men, who were armed to the teeth. I'd get there later.

I'd come here to not only sit in the silence, but to imagine my wife walkin' up those stairs, sittin' at his dinner table,

fearful of the next second because she knew time was tickin’.

My parent’s and sibling’s deaths were still clingin’ to me, but the thought of somethin’ happenin’ to Maeve O’Callaghan and my babes was keepin’ me grounded, even when her soft pleadin’ voice asked me not to leave her.

It was an internal battle I was fightin’ as hard as the one on the ground.

Maeve had twisted everythin’ around in my life, including my priorities and the reasons why I was doin’ this.

I caught the noise in the backseat a second too late. The cold steel of a gun pressed against the back of my head. I withdrew my gun and pointed it at the man who’d snuck in behind me, but he would’ve had the jump on me if he’d pulled the trigger.

“Your mind is not straight, lad,” Keenan said, stashin’ his weapon. “You had no clue I was even back here.”

Your mind was on straight when Dermot hit you with a tire iron? It was on the tip of my tongue, but it wasn’t the time to swap jabs.

I turned toward the windshield. He sighed, gettin’ out of the car and takin’ the empty spot next to me. A surge of smoky, cold air clung to him for a second before it faded. He stared at the profile of my face until I turned and met his eyes.

“This started long before you, lad. The blood with Oran Craig goin’ sour. You’re just carryin’ your Da’s portion of it. I deserve to be in on this night. Fiona as well.”

“I need you to take care of my family,” I said.

“Oooh, in the unlikely event, is that it?”

“You did it for Mam and Da—with me.”

“I’ll do it for your family as well, but we didn’t spend all this time plannin’ for your death, Cian Cillian O’Callaghan. We planned this for you to have a life after Oran Craig. You’re your Da’s son. I want what’s best for you, just like he did.” He stared forward, watchin’ as the snow swirled in the darkness. He cleared his throat. “Mona dream-hopped. She’d mostly go

to Fiona, cryin' about her boy, wantin' what was best for him. After Maeve...she stopped comin' around as much. Maeve gave you some peace, and therefore your Mam. But I feel your Da lately. He's been around. He knows you're not as focused as before. As hungry. He's unsettled. It's my place to keep your boots on the ground here and outta that grave."

Silence froze between us, and the only sounds to challenge it were the moanin' of the wind and cars drivin' by on the wet roads.

I cleared my throat, shatterin' the quiet. "My head is fucked. I keep hearin' my parents cryin' from the grave from the past, and my wife's voice askin' me not to leave in the present."

"Love makes us human, lad. That's why so many men like us refuse to fall prey to it." He sighed, wipin' a hand down his face. "Hard priorities soften when our hearts do. It's a vulnerability that can cost us everythin' if we can't figure out how to keep each life separate, but present in both. I've been watchin' ever since Maeve came into your life. You've figured it out. You're more careful about your steps now. The Beast of Boston walks more quietly."

"Fiona makes you human." I didn't pose it as a question. I refused to let him wriggle out of this. I started the car, put it in gear, and smoothly pulled away from Oran's house.

Keenan sighed. "I know you're just gettin' used to the etiquette when it comes to conversations, but there's a time to be quiet and a time to talk. We passed the time to talk."

"You're skirtin' around the truth."

"I'm not fuckin' skirtin' around anythin'. It's just none of your business, is all."

I poked him in the shoulder. He whipped his head to mine and narrowed his eyes.

"Touched that vulnerable spot?" I roared with laughter.

He started cursin' under his breath, going on about manners and him bein' my elder. He complained all the way to Maeve's old place, the one she lived at with Pauric. He grew

quiet as I put the car in park and prepared to get out. He put a hand on my shoulder when I cracked the door. The lights came on and I shut it.

“What is it?”

“Fiona,” he said. “Better just tell you now. I’ve always been in love with her. There. I said it. Truth set free and air cleared.” He rushed out of the car, the cold air surgin’ inside, before he shut the door.

I grinned and shook my head as I followed him out. He’d admitted that to me like a man who was admittin’ defeat. I didn’t need to know specifics. That was between them. But lookin’ back, there were things I’d probably missed between them, not recognizin’ them for what they were.

A look here.

A touch there.

Feelin’s.

My feelin’s for Maeve had put the truth to the actions—two people who felt deeply for each other.

He stopped close to the door of the apartment and turned to face me. “What are we doin’ here, lad?”

I shrugged. “I just wanted to see where she lived before me.”

As soon as I opened the door, the scent of her seemed to welcome me inside, includin’ the undertone of shaved wood that was always present. The place was old, but in good condition. It also had plenty of marks left by Pauric. Some areas seemed to be touched by a mad inventor.

Keenan and I both stopped in their woodworkin’ room. Pauric hadn’t sent her all the figurines she’d been workin’ on. Some of them were stained. Others hand painted. Maeve’s work stood apart from Pauric’s. Even though his were good, hers were above top notch. She gave the faces whimsical details that made them come alive.

It made my chest feel hollow to leave behind the ones he didn’t send.

“Grab that empty box there.” I nodded to it.

Keenan handed it to me, and as delicately as I could, I started standin’ them up in the box, one by one. I set it to the side and then took a seat. Keenan took another one and crossed one leg over the other.

He looked around. “So many fuckin’ clocks,” he whispered. “It’s like time is pushin’ in on us here.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Like you can feel the seconds tick by.”

“Feel them? Hear them.”

Click. Clock. Click. Clock.

They were all in sync, and all at once, they went off at 12 o’clock.

The silence was deafenin’ afterward.

Keenan cleared his throat. “What’s it to be, lad? Ready or...”

I picked up the box and he followed me out.

CHAPTER 39

MAEVE

The last petal from the roses Cian had given me last week trembled as the door shut behind Fiona and Cash. It was twelve o'clock, and the clocks in our old apartment seemed to go off inside of my head at once, like I'd been programmed to keep track of time.

This second felt like a dagger dangling over my head.

Cian didn't even have to tell me what he'd left to do. Finish the war.

I sensed it.

From Keenan and Fiona giving each other glances that were equal to conversation between them, to Cash and Keely returning to the house, seemingly at Keenan's invitation. Kee's friend, Mari, and Mari's husband, Mac, were with them. A few minutes later, Delaney and Robert showed up.

The house was quiet—the kids were sleeping—but my breath was stuck at 12 o'clock, sensing that, at 12:01, the last petal would drop.

Delaney sat with me in the dark, silent kitchen, holding my hand. No one asked, no one brought it up, but we all knew what was happening.

"Hey," Kee breathed as she entered the kitchen. She took a seat across from me. Then she popped up, but for as tall as she was, and as rushed as she was, she didn't disturb anything. "How about I make us tea? Does tea sound good?"

"I think tea sounds great," Delaney whispered. "I'll help."

After turning on the lights, Kee put on a pot of water to boil and started rummaging through the cabinets with Delaney. Delaney asked her what she was making. Bread. Kee's friend, Mari, came in and started helping them.

When the whistle for the kettle howled, I jumped from my spot. "I have to do something," I whispered.

Mari put a soft hand to my shoulder. "From experience, that never helps."

Kee stood straighter, flour on her head. "I'll do whatever I need to do," she said.

Delaney looked between me and Kee and shrugged. She didn't know what Kee had meant by that. But I knew. She was talking about what she could do with a bow and arrow. She was the twin to Keenan, as far as how excellent she was.

I reclaimed my seat, but softly, not wanting to disturb the night around me. Delaney slipped me a cup of tea, but my throat was too tight to drink it. I was glad to have something to hold onto, though. I felt like the last petal, trembling with no idea what was going to happen once my time ran out and I drifted to the ground.

I took a deep breath, softly releasing it.

All I could do was anticipate and wait.

CHAPTER 40

CIAN

The windshield was distorted with slush and snow, a combination that seemed to absorb the red brake lights as cars stopped at the sign before turnin' the corner.

I'd parked not far from where Oran's hideout was. It looked like an old Bostonian bar, but it wasn't listed on any business pages or maps.

Keenan handed me a black ski mask. I'd tuck it in my pocket and only use it if I needed to blend. This wasn't going to be a few shots and done. Oran was keepin' a gang around him for protection.

The glow of red brake lights smeared across the windshield again as a car parallel-parked into a spot in front of me.

Fiona.

She stepped out in a breath of smoke, stomping her boots. She was in her usual uniform of black, except I noticed sparks of silver tucked behind her tulle skirt. Her knives were hidden behind the fabric, probably secured to her legs with holsters.

"Though she is small, she is fierce," Keenan almost whispered. His eyes didn't hide how he felt about her. He looked at me and shrugged. "She's cute, isn't she?"

"Time and place, Keenan Ere," I said.

My eyes narrowed on a rock-solid figure who stepped out of the car. Cash's face was distorted through the icy muck, but

his green eyes met mine, and he nodded as he adjusted his black sweater.

“Keenan,” I said, already reachin’ for the keys hangin’ from the ignition. “Who’s keepin’ my wife safe?”

Keenan put a hand to my arm. “We wouldn’t have left her without protection. And it’s none of yer men either. The man goes by the name of Mac Macchiavello. Cash asked him to come. There’s history between them, and he’s capable. He’s from New York. His wife and child came with him.” He glanced at Cash. “He’s your blood. We can trust him.”

I looked at Keenan.

“The lad went through the spin cycle himself. I remember, you know? How hurt you were when you never saw him or his twin after what happened that night. The lads were taken to New York by Maraigh. Ronan, his Da, I mean. *Ach*. It’s a long story that’ll have to hold for now.” Keenan stepped out and held the back door open for Fiona.

She slipped inside, and he slid in beside her. Cash took the seat next to me.

“Doesn’t hurt to have another giant next to you, does it?” His grin came slow. “We’re about to hunt down some trolls.”

“Mac Macchiavello,” I said.

“Trustworthy,” he said. “I wouldn’t have left my wife and kids behind if he wasn’t.”

He spat on his hand and so did I. We shook.

“Grand,” he said, his breath flowin’ out like smoke. “Just fuckin’ grand. I’ve been anticipatin’ the night Oran gets dethroned from his Boston seat. It’ll be good to see you sittin’ in it.”

“Everythin’ look good at the door?” Keenan asked.

“Oooh, yeah,” Cash said, all excited like. “I made sure of it.”

When Cash had come to visit me, and I told him of our plan, he offered to blow the door. He was skilled in explosives

and thought it was an easier way for us to charge in.

“Nothin’ that’ll cause real damage,” he’d said. “It’ll just get you in without havin’ to dodge oncomin’ bullets before you even step up to the door.”

“We have to move fast,” Fiona said, her knee bouncin’.
“Explosives aren’t subtle.”

“How long?” I asked.

Cash checked the clock on the dash. “Ten minutes. We should start walkin’ in five.”

Silence swallowed the four of us. It seemed like we were all reflectin’. My wife was always with me, but I’d never felt her this close, like she was pressed against my chest, her heart beatin’ against mine. I savored the memory of her face, the taste of her kiss, her scent clingin’ to my lungs.

The only woman I’d ever love.

The quiet must have gotten too tense for Cash. He leaned forward and turned the radio on.

Merrick.

Keenan cursed and said the man was as hauntin’ as a fecking musical ghost. Fiona’s eyes lit up. Cash went to change it, but I stopped him.

My wife enjoyed his music. It had been a part of our love story since the beginnin’. It felt right to keep it on.

Cash turned the radio off at the four-minute mark. “Let’s fuckin’ do this,” he said.

We all stepped out at the same time, decidin’ to don the ski masks, as we were keepin’ to the darkest areas of the sidewalk. Cash held up a hand when we were standin’ across the street from the bar.

He breathed out the seconds until the explosion, and as the door flew off its hinges with an explosive *BOOM!*, and the chaos started, he said, “Cheers!” before we all charged the bar. Some of Cash’s men and some of mine converged, and it was

an all-out bar fight as opposin' sides came together in a clashin' battle.

Some men were fightin' it out with fists, others had pulled guns and were shootin' blind just to hit a body and take it down. Keenan made eye contact with me and nodded toward the steps. There was a secret passageway between the walls, and if Oran got to it, he would have the advantage. He could shoot at us or hide out. Settin' the place on fire and havin' him run out was another plan, but timin' might be an issue with how we'd made an entrance.

I was about to take the long, dim hall to the steps, but a man grabbed Keenan from behind, gettin' him in a chokehold. Fiona announced herself with a banshee cry and jumped on the man's back. With her teeth bared, she slit him from ear to ear.

I rushed the hall, takin' the steps two at a time, and caught Oran in his office right before he made it to the secret passageway. Whoever was ahead of him had closed it off. He banged on the door, cursin' whoever it was. He turned and faced me with his gun in hand.

Our weapons were pointed at each other.

We started to circle.

"Your father stole from me," he said, sweat drippin' down his face like a storm raged in his head and the rain was comin' from his hair.

I grinned at him, and refusin' to mess around with useless words, pulled the trigger. He pulled his too, but it was too late. My bullet struck him in the head first. He had a sword hangin' on his wall. I removed it from its place and disconnected his head from his body. Using his hair to lift his head, I kept it high as I moved.

The men all stopped fightin' as I walked through.

They all knew.

I'd won my spot as the Beast of Boston.

The Craigs were out.

The O'Callaghans were in.

Just to make sure they understood, I rolled his head like a bowlin' bowl against the counter. It stopped in the center, the glossy eyes starin' at the men. The bartender made a screechin' noise and then hit the floor. My eyes scanned the crowd, attemptin' to make eye contact with each man who had worked for the Craigs.

Fiona and Keenan came to stand next to me, along with my men. Cash and his men surrounded us.

Sirens cried in the distance.

Cash touched me on the shoulder, then squeezed.

We had to move.

Outside, the air smelled frozen over with smoke and blood.

Keenan and Fiona hustled to get to the car. Cash was right in front me. I took the rear.

My breath was comin' out in pants, and my heart pumped as if it were still after blood.

I felt it, though, a second too late.

Someone behind me.

A tap on my shoulder.

I barely had enough time to turn around, but that brief second caused the knife to stick in my shoulder and not my neck.

The knife sliced down, tearin' my skin from muscle. The same spot that had just healed from the gunshot wound.

I went down to my knees with a roar.

Through the fog of the moment, I heard whistlin', and then three arrows pierced the man who was screamin' at me—*You stole her! You're going to die! Not much of a BEAST now. You're—*

Wack, wack, wack!

His hand.

His arm.

His side.

Maybe he stumbled off.

Maybe he didn't.

In the confusion, it was hard to tell. The world was as distorted as the frozen windshield absorbin' the blood red of brake lights.

I groaned when my wife fell to her knees beside me, screamin' for help. Then I took a shudderin' breath and let the pain take me under.

CHAPTER 4I

MAEVE

As soon as the last petal fell, I knew I couldn't just sit around and do nothing. I told Keely we could just drive past the bar. If nothing was wrong, we'd keep going. If something was...I needed to be there. Keely had loaded up her archery set, and we left.

Mac, Mari's husband, was only there to keep enemies out. Either he didn't know we'd left, or he felt it wasn't his place to stop us. I thought it was the latter. He was too intelligent for the first theory.

I drove as Keely searched out the window, as nervous as I was, it seemed. We pulled up to the bar just in time to see Dermot stalking behind Cian, and then the moment Dermot lifted the knife and came down with it.

Keely wasted no time jumping out of the car, grabbing her gear, which was ready to go, and hitting Dermot three times in quick succession. She was so quick, it was hard to tell how fast she'd reloaded, and she was so precise, she was able to hit Dermot in an area that made him drop the knife.

I'd already started running and fell next to my husband.

One minute I was crying out for help.

The next, the men were carrying him to the car, and Keenan told me to step on it. He was basically holding Cian's body together, trying to staunch the flow of blood. Cash and Keely were following close behind as I sped to the small seaside town to see Dr. Higgins and Dr. Estrada. Fiona was on the phone with one of them.

I kept mumbling, asking, *begging* for help.

It felt like my heart had melted underneath my skin, but it was still pounding.

“Concentrate on drivin’, Maeve,” Keenan said in a calming tone. “The lad’s skin is a lot tougher than most.”

No one stopped me this time. Even if they had, it would have been a high-speed chase. This wound seemed a lot worse than the first. The amount of blood...I had to breathe through it. I took the corner of the street where the practice was on two wheels and then came to a screeching halt. I threw it in park and jumped out.

Cash and Keely pulled up to our bumper. Cash rushed to the opposite side of the car we were standing on, and between Keenan, Fiona, Cash, and the two doctors, we figured out a hasty plan to get Cian inside.

Once inside, Dr. Higgins started directing Dr. Estrada, who was giving her sister directions. The door slammed in our faces, and we all seemed helpless. From what I’d learned last time, the room was reserved for Cian, or whoever needed it. It was always kept clean, and no animals used it. I stared at the closed door the longest.

Fiona took me by the shoulders and all but forced me into a seat. My leg rarely bounced, but in that moment, all my anxiety seemed to be trapped there.

An hour passed, but it felt like a century.

My stomach didn’t feel right. It was cramping. I had to use the restroom. I stood up and sat directly down again, that cramp feeling like a knife through my womb. I breathed through it until it disappeared.

“Maeve,” Kee said. “What’s wrong? You look pale, but you’re sweating.”

I shook my head. “I’m panicking. I need to use the bathroom.”

She nodded. “I’ll come with.”

She stood up with me, holding my arm. Fiona took the other. The three of us went to the bathroom. The practice had been converted from a house, and it was just a bathroom. No stalls. Fiona and Keely said I could go first. They were going to wait outside.

My head felt light, and when I touched my thighs because they felt wet, I pulled back dark smears of blood. It wasn't the dried and caked blood from my hands either. It was much too fresh.

I called for Fiona just as my head went woozy, and I collapsed in her arms.



VOICES. They kept entering my head and then leaving. Or I couldn't stay awake long enough to put the conversation together. I just felt tired and extremely weak, like I was losing vital pieces of myself. I was freezing cold, but the cramps in my womb felt like they came with scalding hot knives cutting through tender flesh.

I was almost afraid to open my eyes.

This entire night can't be real. Can't be real. It just can't.

I wish my mom was here with me to hold my hand and tell me it was all going to be all right.

I wish my dad wasn't so far away, so he could rustle my hair and tell me this wound was too far from my heart.

I want my husband.

Cian. Oh God. Cian.

"Mrs. O'Callaghan."

The unfamiliar voice pulled me closer and closer to the surface, but I didn't want to break it. I didn't want to disturb anything. I wanted things to go back to the way they were the day before.

“Maeve!” Fiona screeched at me, and I heard the true panic in her voice. She took me by the shoulders and started shaking me. “Maeve! Time to wake up! You’ve been sleepin’ long enough now.”

The unfamiliar voice told her to stop, but she wouldn’t. She was losing it.

“Fiona,” I barely got out.

“Maeve!” She pulled me close and set her head on top of mine. “Tell me you’re still breathin’.”

“I’m still breathing.” My voice cracked. “But barely. What’s going on with...me?” I forced my eyes to open. I was in a proper hospital. The light was bright in my eyes, and I was hooked up to an IV and one of those monitors that takes blood pressure readings. The smell of antiseptics clung to my nostrils.

The unfamiliar voice belonged to an unfamiliar doctor. She went to pull up a seat when chaos erupted outside.

“That’d be her husband,” Fiona rushed out, getting to her feet. “Wait till he gets in here to speak.”

The doctor nodded, but her eyes were on me. I shifted mine to the side, waiting for Cian to come through the door. He crashed through it, tilting like the world was unsteady, and collapsed into the seat next to my bed. He was wearing a sweatshirt, but I could see the bulge of thick bandages underneath.

“Cian,” I barely got out, and tears rushed down my cheeks.

“Hush now, baby,” he whispered, pulling my head against him. “You’re all right. You’re still breathin’. You’re here with me.” He turned toward the doctor. “What’s going on with my wife?”

She cleared her throat. “We did an ultrasound. The babies are fine...right now. The bleeding could be normal, or not. We’re waiting to get the test results.” She looked at me. “If your levels are off, you might need medicine to keep them normal, and bedrest until we tell you otherwise.”

“If that doesn’t work?” I whispered.

She sighed. “There’s nothing else we can do. These things just happen sometimes. Nature can be cruel.”

Cian went to go after her, but I held onto his sweater, pulling him back down. His panicked eyes looked into mine, searching for the cure for this, but I didn’t have it. He made a noise from the deepest part of his chest, like he was carrying the weight of the world’s pain on his cut shoulder. I rested my head against his, crying like I’d never cried before.

We held on to each other like the last trembling petal had held onto the time it had left, and hoped it would be enough.

EPILOGUE

MAEVE

Ten Years Later

“**B**ooty and da *ROAR!*” Talula was bending down in the grass, making her little figurines dance. She was doing her own version of her favorite movie: *Beauty and the Beast*, as she called him, da *ROAR*. In five-year old speak, that meant the growl, which translated to the Beast.

A strong wind gushed down from the emerald hill covered in grass, and I squinted against the sun, checking on my family.

Cian and our son, Camden Conor, were hiding behind the fort Cian had built for them to watch for sea pirates. Camden had a wooden telescope I’d made for him pressed to his eye. Cian kept popping up and down, pointing in the distance at what they were “seeing”—a wide ocean filled with dangerous pirates. Caitlin Mona wanted to be a part of the action, but she was torn between playing princesses with her sister or joining her fraternal twin brother and her dad in a game of pirates.

Yeah, Mother Nature could be cruel, but she could also be so kind. I touched my stomach, remembering the frightening time when we didn’t know if our twins were going to make it. I was put on hormones and ordered to bed rest, but...it was nothing to pay for those two little lives who made our lives so big. Their magnificent existences swallowed up all the stuff nonsense was made of and showed us what it really meant to live.

To live Happily Ever After.

I laughed, and Talula did too, not even sure what she was laughing about. She was so engrossed in her beast and his princess, her eyes seemed full of stars. Her little dress was gold, and she had sandals on with it.

As happy as she could be.

I turned in the opposite direction, shielding my eyes with a hand. My dad held our second set of twins, identical boys, Faolan Pauric and Tiernan Joseph (after Keenan). They both started kicking their legs the closer they got to us, their gray eyes lighting up when the sun hit them and chased the clouds away, just like with their Da.

Pretty soon, Cian and Camden were going to have an entire crew to add to their stronghold on their pretend city.

In ten years, we'd had five children, and how sweet it was. Each one not only overflowed my heart but reminded me of everyone we loved.

Camden and Caitlin were a hearty mix of my mom and dad. They both wore glasses since they were little, and they were as smart as whips. Talula, our little singleton baby, looked like me, but she had a big dose of Mona inside of her. She was our romantic daughter, always dreaming of princes, princess, and of course, the Beast. She looked at her Da like he hung the moon in the sky. Faolan and Tiernan seemed like Cian had spit them out—they were identical to him and to each other.

My husband thought he'd given me five purposes.

He'd given me six, including him.

In nine months that number would tick to seven, but he didn't know that yet.

I grabbed Faolan from my dad, and we both watched with grins on our faces as Cian led the charge downhill toward us, the three of them roaring as they did. They came to a stop directly in front of us, Camden and Caitlin out of breath.

“Mam!” they yelled in unison.

They started talking at the same time. I went back and forth, listening to each while rustling their sweaty heads. It was chaos, the way they would go on at the same time, but I understood it. They had captured the pirate they'd been looking for.

“Until tomorrow, when we fight another day!” My dad joined in the make believe, wielding his pretend sword. Tiernan started waving his arms, along with Faolan, and Cian roared with laughter.

“Until tomorrow!” Camden and Caitlin said together, Cian's voice joining in at the end.

“Until they get *mwarried!*” Talula threw in her own shout, trying to pronounce “married.”

We all started laughing, Cian scooping her up and setting her on his shoulder. He never made a big deal out of it, but I always noticed when he rolled his shoulder to try to loosen some of the tension. Dermot had left him with some lasting issues, especially in the hard Boston winters. He'd get stiff and I'd rub him down, hoping to relieve some of the tension. Summer was easier on him, but he still had some muscle weakness and nerve damage. The scar still took my breath away when I looked at it.

“Okay?” I mouthed to him.

He leaned in and kissed me. “Now I am.”

“Mam!” Camden entwined his fingers with mine. He fixed his glasses. “Can we take a ride in the Thing now?”

“Let's go!” I said, giving him a high-five.

The three kids who could walk all started dancing around, and as soon as we were to the garage, they all took their spots in the Thing. Faolan and Tiernan sat in their car seats, trying to grab their toes. My dad took the very back, holding on to one of the bars, having the time of his life.

“Ready?” I breathed toward my husband. He'd never looked so good. So alive.

He grinned and started the engine in answer, and as the sun started to lower, we toured the property on four wheels.

After we sold the castle, Cian decided to buy the acres next to the area where the cemetery was, which we had kept. The opposite side of the property was a continuation of the one the castle was on. We had streams and forests and berries. But it felt fresh, like a new start. We were discovering it together.

We took a month to ourselves in the summer while Keenan and Fiona kept things in order in Boston. Cian never spoke to anyone directly, so all communication had always gone through Keenan anyway. It gave us the freedom to have these days and nights to ourselves.

Keenan and Fiona took a month to themselves before or after we did. They lived with us in Boston, so I was sure a month away from all the kids was needed. Except...a small grin came to my face when I thought about it...Keenan and Fiona both called to check on us every day. They secretly missed our little monsters.

Delaney and Robert too.

Cian bought half of the bookstore for me. While the kids were in school, Delaney and I came together and made the store even more successful than it had been.

Life wasn't without struggles—my husband was who he was—but I could honestly claim in this love story of ours, all my dreams had come true.

We dropped the kids who could run off with my dad in a section of the property they liked to explore together because the stream was just “fascinating” to my dad. He'd tell them stories about faeries while also keeping them rooted in scientific facts.

Cian drove on to a more secluded spot. The field was filled with wildflowers and berry bushes.

“The smell here is indescribable,” I whispered.

“Like Irish Spring,” Cian said, turning forward after checking on the twins, who had fallen asleep. “I can almost taste it.”

“What?” I turned to him, exploding with laughter.

He laughed too, and that distracted me from his odd response, especially when he turned the radio on and caressed my cheek with his calloused thumb. Merrick played softly.

“What’s it to be, Maeve O’Callaghan? You still chose life with me?”

“Forever,” I breathed out.

He nodded, and lifting up some, removed a folded picture from his pocket. After he handed it to me, I realized it wasn’t a picture but an article from a news site in Boston. My eyes devoured the words before I met his.

“Dermot?”

“The night he ran, he must have run to a construction site, where he fell into wet cement. The workers either didn’t notice or didn’t care. Or didn’t want their work to be shut down because of his death. They covered him. The men who were workin’ that day are claimin’ they never saw him. He was just found.”

“They’re blaming you?”

“No.” He shook his head. “The police know I don’t use arrows as weapons.”

Keely. She’d hit him three times with her arrows. She and Cash were coming to visit us in a couple of days. If Cash didn’t already know, it was going to be an interesting turn in one of our conversations.

I set the article on the dash. I didn’t want to see it.

“I have something for you too,” I whispered.

Cian’s eyes grew wide when I handed him another ultrasound picture, but then narrowed. “Two?” he asked.

I laughed. “Not this time. Just one.”

“Like Talula.”

“Yes, like Talula.”

He caressed the picture with his callused thumb, then looked at me when I set another picture over it. He lifted it, studying the two young girls standing side by side, arms around each other's necks.

"I know those faces," he said. "Our children in the features of our Mams."

"My dad found this picture in his closet." My dad lived with us too. "I guess my mom had a box of small belongings she took with her from Ireland when she was a kid. Somehow, the box got pushed to the back of the closet, and well...you know my dad. He collects. He was looking for something else and found this." I turned the picture over. In a young girl's handwriting was scribbled: *Caitlin Shea and Mona Flynn*.

"Caitlin Mona," Cian said, his eyes not moving from the picture.

"Gives new meaning to our daughter's name."

"Yeah," he said. "It does."

"Seems like our moms were friends in school. Not sure exactly what happened, but...they must have lost touch when my mom moved from Ireland to Boston."

"That's what happened," he said, his voice breaking some. "Mam told me. Didn't realize her Caitlin was also your Caitlin."

"Pretty cool," I said.

His eye whipped to mine. "You're definitely gettin' your mouth washed out with Irish Spring."

"What is *that* about?" I laughed, and he pulled me closer, kissing my face.

"I'll tell you later, if you're a good girl for me."

I shoved against his chest as he nuzzled my neck, making me laugh even harder.

"The Beast in this story gets his Beauty." He growled into my neck. "I dare anyone to try and steal her from me."

“Not happening.” I laughed a little more, until it seemed to fade with the breath of the wind.

The wildflowers swayed like they were drunk.

That was exactly how I felt.

Drunk on life.

“This is our happily ever after, Cian *Cillian* O’Callaghan.” I squeezed his hand. “The one we were always destined for.”

He kissed me like tomorrow would never come, then put the Thing in gear, and we picked up our family under a sky full of stars, taking them home to our small cottage surrounded by fantastical lands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bella Di Corte writes criminal romance that will steal your heart. She brings to life stories of men who walk the line between irredeemable and savable, and the women who force them to feel. She's known for her rich world building and strong characters. She's also an International Bestselling Author.

Apart from writing, Bella loves to spend time with her husband, daughter, family, and four dogs. She also loves to read, listen to music, cook recipes that were passed down to her, and take photographs.

Bella was born and raised in New Orleans, a place she considers a creative playground.



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