



HE'LL BURN THE WORLD  
TO MAKE HER HIS QUEEN

# QUEEN OF THE NIGHT

A DARK ROMANCE NOVEL

USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

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AND

MOLLY BRIAR

# Queen of the Night

Molly Briar, AN Stauber

Corgidor Publishing

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## Dedication

This one is for the Queens. The ones who needed a push to wear their crowns like the badasses they are. The ones who have been burned, and through it all rose out of the ashes to conquer all.

## Author's Note

### **CONTENT GUIDE**

This mafia story is NOT a clean romance. I do NOT condone any situations or actions that take place in this fictional story.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Saoirse (Sur-shuh)

Aoibhean: (Ee-ven)

Eoghan: (O-wen)

### **WARNINGS**

This book includes but is not limited to: violence, explicit language, and sexual content. There is also murder, torture, and descriptive mention of off-page physical and sexual abuse.

# Prologue



## **Aoibheann**

I sat at the table in the hall, my lips scowled in distaste. Made men, both Irish and Russian, filled the grand room, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. This was a wedding, but the men here were evil.

They were the reason for the cage I had been locked in, the reason arranged marriages were still a thing, and why we were gathered here today. First my own arrangement, now this one. Rose Vasilieva and Alastair Green. My late husband's spawn of a nephew had just married the Pakhan's daughter.

We were all to smile and pretend that this marriage was a union of love. I scoffed, it was everything but that. Even her father had protested. He stood in the middle of the ceremony, screaming. He looked like a damn fool, distraught as if he didn't understand the implications of his actions—what it meant to sign over her life to a Green. Didn't he agree to the marriage? These things—these weddings—in the mafia world were made between the men as business arrangements.

It was too late now. I sat in my seat at a table on the Irish side. Though, I wasn't sitting with Eoghan Green, my former stepson. Tonight, I was sitting at the table that held the Boston clan. The Murphy's were my blood, and when my husband died, they'd reclaimed me.

I was set free only when the devil claimed my husband back to hell. Now, Rose would suffer the same fate. My heart broke

for her. I didn't believe the smile she wore was genuine. How could it be when she was marrying the namesake of my abuser?

My curls were wild as I sat with a full glass of red wine in front of me. My dinner had gone untouched, now sitting cold in front of me while the guests meandered about. My nephews and niece, who had brought me to this event practically against my will, were dancing around. Meanwhile, I was alone—much like I always seemed to be the last seventeen years.

A low huff sounded from my right. I turned, looking for the source of the sound, and I saw him, his hair disheveled from the hair pulling he'd been doing. He'd lost the jacket of his suit at some point, the top few buttons of his crisp white shirt undone, and the tie missing.

He had every right to be angry, to hate himself for this union. I blamed him too. I wanted to go to him, shake him and ask why? Why would he give his precious crystal to the monsters that lie within the Green Mansion? Didn't he love his daughter? If my father had been alive, he'd never have allowed my marriage to Alastair.

Another huff left his mouth, and he turned, catching sight of me staring. His eyes narrowed at me. I wanted to look away but couldn't. Not when his eyes seemed to hold as little emotion as mine did. He built his walls thick.

I could read the auras of everyone in this room, sense the energy and vibrations they put off without trying hard. I knew how to read anger, hostility, grief, joy. I could pinpoint

emotions, yet he had none. It was black, darkness. And I didn't know what to think of it. The darkness was where I thrived, but I didn't know if this was the kind of darkness I wanted to be near.

He took a sip of the clear liquid in his glass, vodka probably, and continued to stare at me. I still hadn't been able to look away. He smirked, clearly interested in the accidental attention I was giving him. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. "You look miserable. Would you like to dance?"

I didn't answer.

"No? How about if you come sit on my cock and bounce? Would that make you happy?"

Appalling, but still, it wouldn't break me. I heard worse things spoken to me in the long years I was married to Alastair.

"What is your name?" he asked, clearly too daft to catch a hint.

I opened my mouth to answer but closed it just as fast. It wouldn't be smart to give up that information freely. Though, I supposed it didn't matter. He could ask any of the Green men here and they'd tell him I was the wiccan who put their boss under a spell. I was the mysterious redhead that hummed them to their unfortunate demise. He'd learn of me either way, if he didn't already know.

"It's Aoibheann," I said.

He snorted, peering into his glass. “Fucking really? That’s a potato-licking name, if I ever heard of one. Let me guess. It’s got every letter in the alphabet except for a V.”

I stared at him, blankly. I didn’t think anyone could have been more crass than the Irish, yet the Russian who just gave his daughter away was easily the most presumptuous man here. With just four sentences he’d manage to become the most hated man in the room. And that was saying something, when Eoghan Green was here, staring at me from across the way.

Eoghan was almost as horrid as his late father.

My gaze landed on him, and I growled under my breath.

“You don’t like the Greens,” the Russian father said.

I ignored him, tilting my head to the side as I narrowed my eyes into slits and tossed daggers toward Eoghan. His blonde hair was gelled with a side part, and his eerie, dark eyes watched me. I turned to the Russian.

I wouldn’t give him a reaction. I learned early that’s what they wanted. Weak women who whined and cried. Somewhere along the way, I had become that, but still, I refused to react. There would be no slight clench of my jaw, no tears as I was touched, no screams of terror as they hurt me.

“Tell me,” the Russian said. He stood and chose the chair beside me to occupy. “Are you the one that the Irish fear?”

I didn’t let his words get to me. His finger reached out and he placed it under my chin. Without much force, he tugged my

head toward him. His brown eyes bore into mine, as if he was trying to learn all my secrets. He would never know them. I kept them locked away from even the worst of tortures.

His lips twitched. “You’re the witch.” He released my chin, then sat back in his chair, a soft chuckle escaping.

Still, I didn’t respond.

“I need to know your secrets, Evie. Tell me how you’ve led the Irish to believe in false magic. How do you lure the men into your trap?”

My name coming from his tongue was butchered. I forced away the urge to clear my throat.

“They say you tricked your husband into marriage. And then you put a hex on him. That you killed him.”

I turned my head. This did deserve a reaction. “I did not kill my husband,” I said with such finality, that I willed the statement to be true. Then, I stood and left the tyrant Russian to stare as I walked away.

# Chapter One

## Jericho

Being the head of the Bratva was a bit like herding cats ... if the cats were in heat, after snorting a line of coke and armed with more than just sharp little claws. I woke up every morning wanting to suck start a pistol.

“Do me a favor.” I leaned into my sister Yuliya. “Stick an ice pick in my temple.”

“I’d love to,” she said with a wry smile. “But then who’d be the next Pakhan?”

That was always the question, wasn’t it? I never wanted this job.

I used to be free. Running around the shadow world by myself and choosing my missions as a former CIA agent who decided to hang up my own shingle. I was making a great go of it until I became the father to a twenty-two-year-old MMA champ, Rose.

She pissed off my half brother, Anton who was the Pakhan at the time, and he put a target on her back. The only way to stop him was to start a war and take his crown.

For Rose. Because that’s the type of thing a father does for his daughter. That was the kind of father every daughter deserved. Truly, I had to figure out a way to hand Yuliya the position, because I was going to rot here. Power had little appeal to me. Action was all that mattered.

Now I was in Boston, ready to meet more Irish cunts for reasons I didn't understand. All I knew was my sister wanted me here, so I came.

I checked the pistol on my hip. It had one in the chamber, primed and ready to be used, in case things went south.

“You ready, boss?” My sister arched her brown eyebrow, laying her fingers on the door handle of the private room.

“Don't call me that,” I told her, rolling my eyes.

She smiled before opening the door and gliding her way in. My sister was a tall woman. She was only an inch shorter than me and just as muscled. Her weapons were tucked under her blazer, and they weren't small. She just had broad shoulders that hid them well.

“You son of a bitch! Welcome back to Boston!” The loud voice of the Governor of Massachusetts echoed down the hall as the jovial pretty boy strode over to take me in a man-bro embrace.

He hugged Yuliya as well, and she stiffened in his arms. He held her for a moment too long, before pushing her away, holding her biceps as he looked at her face. “You changed your hair.”

I looked at Yuliya's hairdo. It was a bit fuller of a braid than she normally wore. To my surprise, Corbin was right. Her hair had changed substantially and I, her idiot brother, hadn't noticed.



Her hair had once been straw yellow. It was now a multi-dimensional brown with striking blonde highlights that emphasized her thick waves. Corbin pulled a fringe that framed her cheekbone and tugged as he pushed it behind her ear.

“Saoirse had me change it,” Yuliya grumbled.

“I like it,” Corbin said, before he turned to me and became serious. “We need to talk about financing.”

“Picasso still offline?” I asked, inquiring about the money launderer we hired to fund our little projects. She had been raking it in hand over fist for years, but something had spooked her. She went underground, and though she started sending in the cash again, it wasn’t near the small fortune she had done before.

“She’s online, but just ... underground.” Corbin was pussyfooting around the information. Picasso was his contact, and he was still a part of the agency. “She’s not going to be able to fund things the same way as before.”

“I’m sure you already have a solution for me,” I said, crossing my arms.

“Of course,” Corbin said with a sly smile. “You’re Pakhan now. You have the Bratva’s resources at your fingers. No one would bat an eye if you ...”

“You want me to use my position to fund operations?”

“From your position, you can help take down everything.” The sudden force in his voice was curious. He rarely cared this

much. Or maybe he did care and had just kept it under wraps before.

We said we lived in the shadows. Me, Corbin, Rose ... Even Yuliya was a part of us now. We weren't beholden to an agency. Just opportunists, trying to fix things that other agencies couldn't. My own little obsession was dismantling crime organizations within my beloved homeland.

"Shall we quit gabbing like hens and get in there?" Yuliya said, drawing us back to the task at hand. "I'm sure the Irish are getting restless."

She had a special hatred for the Irish. One that she kept close to the vest, just like the rest of her emotions. But I knew her as only a brother could.

She strode into the conference room with authority, checking the room's vulnerable spots for threats. She took being my second in command, and my bodyguard, very seriously. I liked to think she did that because she liked me, and not just because her fate was inextricably tied to mine.

Not only did I love my sister, but I liked her too. If we weren't genetically linked, I liked to think that we'd be in the exact same spot we were in now.

At a large conference table were four faces I loathed to see again.

On the left was the auburn-haired Callum Murphy, the head of the Boston Irish. In the middle was the yellow-haired, black-eyed Eoghan Green, my vile son-in-law's cousin, and

the head of the New York Irish. His eyes were so dark that they looked haunting. The guy was spooky. He had a reputation for sadism. If the Countess of Bathory had been a man, he would have looked like Eoghan fucking Green. He was probably a vampire.

Standing with his hands clasped in front of him was Scotty, a former Navy SEAL, and the only Boston Irish that was worth a damn. To the very right was the man I wanted to kill more than anyone else in the world—Alastair Green. The asshole who stole my daughter from me, just when I had found her. Just when she and I had settled into our partnership.

He bore a remarkable resemblance to Eoghan, except that his eyes were blue. If Eoghan was a vampire, this man was a nightwalker. They both needed to be burned alive.

Yuliya took a seat at the table, and I sat to her right. She placed a large forearm on the surface and looked at me, then back at the boys.

“Hello, nephew-in-law.” She nodded at Alastair, giving him a fond smile, then smirked at me. *Fucking traitor.*

*Did I say that I liked her? I take that back.* I playfully punch her in the arm.

“Hey, Yuliya.” Alastair’s British voice was casual and amiable. As if I wasn’t sitting here, contemplating a hundred different ways to liberate his skin from his pathetic body. “Hey ... *Dad.*”

I narrowed my eyes at him while grinding my teeth. “Don’t ever call me that again, you potato-sucking, daughter-stealing son of a bitch.”

Everyone chuckled. My hands itched to grab my gun.

I could have been traveling the world, freelancing for the company with my daughter by my side. But instead, this bastard had to ruin it all. My position wasn’t totally his fault, but he was an easy person to blame.

“Why am I here, Irish?” I scowled at them.

“Ouch,” Corbin said, taking a seat beside Yuliya, and feigning offense. “I’m Irish too, and on your side!”

“Still a potato-sucker,” Yuliya said with a smirk, but didn’t look at him.

Corbin’s eyes darkened as he stared at her cheek.

“We’ll get to the point, Jericho.” Eoghan cleared his throat, then smiled. Unlike his cousin, his voice was as Irish as a leprechaun after his lucky charms. “We’re here to discuss the alliance.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ve already sacrificed my daughter to this ...” I pointed at Alastair, “asshole.” Alastair didn’t even have the grace to appear offended. “What more do you fucking want from me?”

“That’s just it,” Eoghan coughed. “Alastair here wants to step back out of the mob and head back to Europe with Rose in tow—”

“—Absolutely not!” I warned. No way was he taking my daughter out of the country.

“Or at least out of the city.” They were used to my outbursts, I suppose. Eoghan didn’t miss a beat and continued. “Which means that there’s no alliance. Nothing tying us Irish to the Russians, in New York, or in Boston.”

Ah. So that was why I’d been summoned. Yuliya had tentatively taken a stranglehold of the Boston Russians after the Murphy girl’s drama. With the aid of my former colleague and, I’m embarrassed to say, best friend, Corbin McClellan, she had a proverbial boot over Boston. All done in my name as Pakhan, of course.

“I have been nothing but accommodating to our alliance, Callum,” Yuliya spoke, leaning in, her broad shoulders threatening to rip her blazer at the seams. “How is your sister, by the way?”

“She’s grand,” Callum said. “Won’t shut up about your visit tonight.”

“She’s been talking about her plans for your hair,” Scotty said with a smirk. “And has been sharpening her make up brushes, or whatever it is women do to prepare for these girly visits.”

My sister smiled fondly. She had been getting more girly ever since she started visiting with the Murphy girl.

Like always, the women were far better than their male counterparts. Yuliya was superior to my late brother, Anton,

and yet, her gender prevented her from taking over his shoes. The fact that she was allowed to be my second was only because I threatened to kill any man who questioned it. The women of these families—the Vasilievs, the Murphys, the Greens—just made much more sense than the men who spent more time swinging dicks than solving problems.

“I think we’re pretty fairly tied.” I crossed my arms. “What? Are one of your brother’s setting their cap for Yuliya? I promise, they’re not good enough for her.”

“That’s right,” Corbin said, with too much conviction. “No one’s good enough for our girl.”

Yuliya rolled her eyes, then said with a sly smile, “I’m not into corned beef and cabbage. My tastes run darker, and spicier.”

Corbin’s hand tightened into a fist on the table.

They didn’t think I knew what little game of *fuck-fuck* they were playing. The two of them were always sneaking off into corners and exchanging angry looks. They stared longingly at one another when they didn’t think anyone was looking.

“If not her, then ...” Callum let his sentence hang there, looking over to me.

They wanted *me* to get married? Were they insane?

“Your sister is already married to the only one of you that’s not a complete moron.” I rolled my eyes. I meant it too. Saoirse’s husband had a military background, so we at least had a professional understanding between us since I had been

a CIA spook. “And there’s no women on the Green side, unless you’re hiding a sister or daughter I don’t know about.”

Eoghan seemed uneasy for a moment, but not because I hit close to the mark. He was uneasy with whatever was going to be said next.

“I have an aunt,” Callum offered, then nodded to Eoghan.

“My late father’s second wife,” Eoghan said, staring down at his hands as if he was seeing blood on them.

“She’s lovely,” Callum said, which was a sure sign that the woman was a nightmare.

I rolled my eyes. So, she was a mammoth? A walking homunculus? A wingless harpy with rows and rows of extra breasts?

“And where is this lovely creature?” I asked, trying to hide my smile. She had to be hideous. Otherwise, she’d be here, presented as a prize.

“We’ve got her hidden away,” Callum side-eyed Eoghan.

“She’s ...” Eoghan said, under his breath. “Different.”

“Different, how?” I pressed. Probably disgusting, covered in warts.

“Don’t say it.” Callum sighed, pressing his thumb against the bridge of his nose.

“She’s got powers,” Eoghan said, with both reverence, fear and loathing in his voice.

Callum smacked his forehead with his palm. Alastair shook his head.

“It’s true!” Eoghan shouted. “She’s put a curse on ...”

“Oh stop,” Callum rolled his eyes. “She’s not a witch.”

“If she was a witch, we wouldn’t be keeping her in a secure location until you leave town,” Scotty said behind a hand that wiped his mouth. Then he looked off to the side, as Eoghan turned around and glared at him.

It seems the Irish are divided on this woman. Maybe that was worth exploring. My general hatred of Eoghan and his almost-clone cousin knew no bounds. Especially since he had the audacity to marry my daughter.

“Just because you don’t believe,” Eoghan put his hand on his chest, and made a little sign of the cross over his heart, “Doesn’t mean that it’s not true.”

I suddenly remembered who it was: the late Alastair Green’s widow. What was her ridiculous name? It sounded like ‘Evening’, if you had a mouth full of phlegm, or whatever bizarre string of Gaelic sounds they slapped together. The witch with the fiery hair.

I had drunkenly offered to let her bounce on my cock at Rose’s wedding. It wasn’t my finest moment. But I blamed my son-in-law for that. I wanted to break his neck, and the feel of the eccentric red-headed woman would have eased my sorrows while also distracting me from the need to murder.



Eoghan was really shit-scared of this woman. That tickled me. Callum was still shaking his head. Alastair looked like he landed somewhere in the middle. He cleared his throat, not adding to the conversation. If she was able to scare the Green boys, then maybe this woman would be worth it after all.

She was pretty, in a strawberries and cream kind of way. Pale as paper, with hair as red as the fiercest sunset. And that body was nothing to scoff at either. She was nothing like my daughter, a professional fighter, or my sister who had the body of a stuntwoman.

Her lack of resemblance to the women in my life was another strike in her favor. I tapped my finger on the table, thinking ... then made my choice.

“Bring her to New York, and I’ll meet her,” I said, getting up from the table. “If she’s good, I’ll take her in, and we’ll plan the wedding.”

“She’ll stay with the Irish until the wedding.” Callum’s brow creased.

“Not with me, she won’t,” Eoghan disagreed.

“Are you trying to protect her virtue?” I asked sarcastically. “She’s been married before, Lucky Charms. I’m sure she’ll know how to take care of herself. We can’t get to know each other if she’s all the way in Boston. And she can’t stay with Eoghan since he’s obviously shitting his pants.”

Eoghan had the good sense to blush.

“Rose and I will move in until the wedding,” Alastair supplied. “That way, we can make sure she’s well treated. You won’t mind that, will you, Dad? More time with Rose?”

I narrowed my eyes. That son of a bitch was right. I wanted Rose in my house, under my roof. She had *chosen* to live with her husband in New York City, and I tried, and failed, to respect her choice. I did consider kidnapping her several times and going back on the run. Maybe I could convince her to leave him if she came and stayed with me at the compound.

“Then our discussion is over,” I said, coming to my feet.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” Callum said off-handedly.

“Shall we go for drinks?” Corbin asked over Yuliya’s head.

“Sure,” I responded.

“Not me,” Yuliya said, finally coming to her feet and buttoning her blazer closed. “I have a date tonight.”

“A date?” Corbin looked surprised.

“Yes,” she said with a small smile. “Even people who aren’t as pretty as you go on those once in a while.”

She walked from the room, Corbin’s eyes trailing her. He sauntered after, and I watched, knowing that I was drinking alone tonight.

“By the way,” Alastair cut into my thoughts, before pulling something out of his blazer’s inner pocket. “We have some news.”

He slid an envelope toward me. I opened the blank white paper, and pulled out a shiny, black roll of photos. On it was the name *Rose Vasilieva*, with her birthday, but it wasn't a picture of her. The picture was grainy, black and white. A sonogram.

“We did the blood test,” Alastair said, a smug grin plastered on his thin lips. “At least one of them will be a boy.”

I looked at the two little dots. My breath caught in my throat. Rose was having twins. My hands shook, as I brought the picture closer to my face. I could feel Yuliya leaning over to look as though either of us could unearth secrets from this blurry image of two little bean-shaped blobs.

“Rose says he'll be named Jericho.”

*Fuck.* She'll never leave him now.

## Chapter Two

## Aoibheann

“Smells lovely in here.” My niece’s voice was soft, like a lullaby.

Saoirse Murphy, my eldest brother’s daughter, was my favorite of the Murphy clan. She resembled me the most, with vibrant red hair and green eyes. Though my hair was wildly curly and hers was straighter. We were both tall, with slender builds and high cheekbones, and when I looked at Saoirse, my heart ached with the striking resemblance of her namesake—my mother.

I longed for my ma every day that I woke and remembered she was gone.

Saoirse was standing next to me now, watching as I continued to tend to my babies—my herbs.

I smiled, though I didn’t pull my attention from the work ahead of me. The soil beneath my hands was cool as I potted the last of the lavender into its new home. I preferred my garden in the ground, growing outside with natural sunlight but this was what I was working with.

“What are you using the lavender for?” she asked.

I wanted to be mad at her, but she was trying to build a relationship. I was living in her home, away from the only place I knew, and I wanted that. I wanted to know about the young woman that was allowing me to live with her. I longed

to find out if she was anything like my mother, and I ached to find human connection. I just didn't know how.

Not after all the things *he* did to me.

Saoirse's hands traced the pot resting on the windowsill. This was the only room in her entire home that let in enough light for my plants. It was also my niece's favorite room. It held bookcases and an oversized couch where she loved to sit and read, so we spent a lot of time together here, even if I mostly ignored her when she spoke.

It wasn't that I didn't like her. I just had nothing to say—how could I when I never truly got to know her? My late husband made sure of that, secluding me from the only family members I had in America. He'd taken me from my homeland when I was just a lass, only eighteen. I was locked in that Green Mansion with him and his awful son.

Memories flooded my brain, and I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing away any ill thoughts of those horrible men.

“Aunt Aoibheann?” Saoirse spoke again when I didn't answer.

I acknowledged her by pulling my head from the pot in front of me and turning to make eye contact.

She offered me a smile. “I hope you're happy here,” she said, her voice filled with compassion that I hadn't seen in nearly two decades.

I reached out and took a strand of her hair. I twirled it around my finger, and I plastered a smile on my face. “I have the

plants. I am happy.”

She dipped her chin in acknowledgement. “What will you do with them?” she asked again. “They’re herbs, right?” Her fingers grazed the rosemary.

I hummed as I nodded. “Some will be used for essential oils to make candles. Some are for medical purposes. I’ll drink them too.” I reached for the thistles. “This is for my tea.”

“You’ll make me some?” she asked, cocking her head to the side as she made eye contact with me.

I shook my head, reaching for her left hand, the one that held an engagement ring with a wedding band. Flipping her hand over, I ran my index finger along the line of her palm that started below her pinky finger. I traced the line that ran along the outer edges. One, two, three, lines staggered from the marriage line.

“You’ll have children,” I said. “You will not drink the thistles.”

She allowed me to continue to inspect her palm. “Why?” she asked.

“Prevents children.” My gaze ran along the various pots I had that were crowding the windowsill, until I found the chamomile. “This one is for you, okay?”

“Sure, Aunt Aoibheann. Whatever you’ll make me.” She nodded, a smile still plastered on her face. “I can have a warm cup of tea and curl up with a blanket on the couch. You’ll sit with me?”

“Not today, lass. I have to get the candles ready.”

“I’d like to help. I’ve never done anything crafty before.”

I shot her a skeptical look. “You build things. That’s crafty.” Saoirse was an architect. She had built the hotel she owned herself.

She laughed, shaking her head. “I draw the plans and I boss the men around to do the building.”

I smirked, nodding my head with approval. “Your granny would have enjoyed that.”

Saoirse wiggled her brows playfully. “I don’t remember her. She died when I was young. What was she like?”

I sighed, shaking my head. I didn’t want to walk down memory lane right now. It would only turn into grief, and I wasn’t in the mood to cry. My skin prickled with dread. I’d do it anyway. Telling the stories would keep Ma alive. I hadn’t had anybody to share the stories with, and Saoirse was asking.

I decided I would indulge her questions.

“She was superstitious, that one,” I said, clipping the rosemary to make essential oil for my candle scents. “She taught me all about herbs and how to use them for spells.”

“Spells?” Saoirse asked, intrigued. “What kind of spells?”

I chuckled. “We Irish hold grudges, you know?”

Saoirse nodded in agreement. “Oh yes. I know. I still haven’t forgiven my husband for the hell he put me through.”



I scrunched my brows. Her husband was polite to me, and he doted on Saoirse whenever I saw them together. I sometimes watched them in awe, wondering where a man like him came from and what Saoirse did to get him. Did God drop him in her lap? Was I just destined to be punished and that's why I got the man I did? "Scotty? What has he done? Shall I hex him?"

Saoirse laughed, shaking her head. "He hasn't done anything lately. I'll get back to you on that one, though. Tell me about the spells Gran taught you."

"I'll not share the cursing ones," I said, shaking my head. "But I have some books you can read."

"Witchcraft books?" She asked, her eyes widening with excitement. "Please. I'd love that."

I nodded, dropping the clippings of rosemary into a small container. "Good. For now, I'll teach you about essential oils. Starting with rosemary. It's good for your skin, and memory."

The front door opened, voices traveling through to where we were. I stiffened, not recognizing the second, a woman. Whoever it was laughed as Scotty spoke. "He's an asshole. Don't know what you see in him."

"Nothing. That's why I'm going on a date with someone who is not him," the woman said.

They entered the living room, Scotty hurrying to Saoirse's side. She pressed a kiss to his cheek, then hurried to the woman, pulling her into a friendly hug. I wanted to relax,

knowing that my niece felt comfortable in the presence of this person, but couldn't. Strangers meant danger to me.

Though, this one seemed familiar. She was tall and large, and I recognized her from the wedding. She'd been with that bonehead Russian. The one who gave away the bride to the young Alastair Green. I turned back to my plants, suddenly not wanting to be in the presence of her.

"Aoibheann, this is my good friend Yuliya," Saoirse said, grabbing me by the shoulders.

And though I was older, though I was her aunt, she directed me as if I were a shy school-aged child, turning my body toward Yuliya. Then she gave me a little shove.

"Hi," Yuliya said, offering me a smile.

If I were a starving dog, Yuliya was a carefree human, extending her handout with a treat. I'd snap. Maybe even bite her hand. But I wasn't, so I pushed away the feral urge and focused on forcing a pleasant smile. I could play nice, I did it every day of my miserable marriage. It didn't mean that I wanted to.

"Nice to meet you," I said, dipping my chin in acknowledgement. I didn't offer a hand to shake. She was so strong, she'd probably break my brittle bones anyway.

"Yuliya came by to get ready for her date. Aoibheann, you should help us pick out her dress."

"No. I'm not wearing a dress," Yuliya cut in, her eyes wide. "Lip gloss is enough."

Saoirse ignored her, reaching for the blue hair tie at the end of her braid, and undoing it. She ran her fingers through the notes, then fluffed it around her face. “You’re wearing lipstick, not lip gloss. And a dress. Come on, I had a couple sent over in your size.”

Yuliya shook her head frantically but didn’t fight it when Saoirse grabbed her elbow to pull her down onto the couch. Saoirse glanced my way, a grin plastered on her face. “Aunty, make sure this one doesn’t run away while I go and get the dress rack.”

Then she sauntered away, leaving me with someone who was probably a cold-blooded murderer. Oh, lovely. I sighed, crossing my arms over myself. Yuliya feigned annoyance with a sigh and an eye roll, but her smile gave her away. She wouldn’t leave, she was enjoying whatever game she and Saoirse were playing. But even if she did, how was I to stop her from leaving even if she wanted to? She’d trample me in a heartbeat.

“Have you been on a date before?” Yuliya asked me.

I smiled, nodding slowly. I’d been on plenty of dates as a teenager and young adult. “It’s been years.”

Saoirse returned with a dress rack, all of them a baby blue color. There were different styles, some less revealing, and some too revealing. Yuliya shuffled through some of them, then turned to me.

“Come help me?” she asked, eyeing me with a pleading look.

I chewed on the inside of my lip, but finally headed toward them. My hands shuffled through them, landing on one that seemed to show the least amount of skin. Saoirse took it from me, then nodded her approval. She shoved it at Yuliya. “Go put it on, then I’m doing some makeup. Just a little.” She held her hand up as if to silence a protest from Yuliya, who huffed her annoyance before hurrying out of the room.

I giggled when Saoirse stuck her tongue out in response. The two seemed to be close, almost like sisters, and I longed for a bond like that. I didn’t think I’d ever get it, not in a friend or in a relative. I’d been kept away in my cage for too long. Now, I didn’t know how to act around people. And the family I did have around seemed to know this. They tended to baby me. But maybe I needed more. Maybe, I needed someone willing to push me out of the nest and let me learn to fly.

I sighed, walking back toward my plants by the window. I glanced out the window, toward the front yard, where Saoirse kept a bird feeder that hung from a tree. My eyes squinted, not sure that I was seeing it properly. But it was there. A single bird with white on its chest and the tips of its wings. Its head and back were black, the tail and wings held a streak of blue. It was a magpie, and my heart stopped beating for a split second. My spine straightened, before a shiver ran through me.

“Aoibheann? Is everything okay?” Saoirse asked. She peeked through the window, trying to figure out what was wrong.

“One for sorrow, two for joy,” I whispered through my disbelief. I glanced, desperate to find its pair, but there was no second bird.

## Chapter Three

## Jericho

They were going to deliver her like some captive Beauty, and I was the beast in my cursed castle. Christ, how low had I fallen? Just a few months ago, I was the best covert operative money could buy. As Pakhan, I was the head of a bunch of ragtag mafia types, and up to my eyeballs in petty disputes.

Now, I was getting offered a bride to make an alliance. How medieval could we get?

I liked being Brett Bradley. It had been my cover name for over a decade. I had inhabited his amicable persona for so long, I didn't know where he ended and I began. And I had been solo. Free as a fucking bird, visiting my sister once in awhile and only working in a team as a last resort.

Bunch of lone wolves. Pippa Fox, Ajax Leblanc, Joe Amadol, Corbin McClellan and all the rest of us inhabited the shadow world of Ungoverned spaces trying to make things right, putting bad guys away. We saw a wrong, tracked it down, hunted it like predators and went home into the dark shadows where no one knew our names.

Until my Rose came into my life. Rose Marie was my mentor's daughter, left orphaned and alone in the world after he was executed. She had refused to purposely lose an MMA fight to my half-brother's bastard son in the Underground Arena. It was a stupid, reckless, and absolutely admirable thing to do.

So, I adopted Rose, christened her Jubilee Bradley, and for a brief time we traveled the world as a father-daughter team.

But our sins have long shadows.

I had to get back into my Bratva ties when Anton, the idiot, decided to go after Rose again. It was war. And I won. In the battle, I was crowned the new Pakhan.

But old habits die hard. I was still a spy down in my bones. Still the assassin I had been.

So when my fiancée's boxes came, I snooped through every single one of them.

Good god, she was a fucking strange one.

I worried that I was marrying one of *those* women. The kind with black nails, an unhealthy love of Harry Potter and a deep-seated belief in the nonsense of astrology, and crystals. The kind that thought coincidences were fate and that fairies were real.

They were like the adult women who were absolutely obsessed with Disney. Insufferable. No wonder the Irish wanted to pawn her off.

First were the candles. Stacks and stacks of candle making things, and then thousands of dollars' worth of receipts for specialized candles from a Killian Rose company that specializes in—care to guess?—making candles.

Why would any woman spend this much on fucking candles was beyond me. I searched on, rummaging through her clothes.



Her clothes were black, or deep purples and burgundies. Like an Addams Family set. There was a pair of black, translucent underwear, the kind that gave full coverage but still formed to the body, leaving nothing to the imagination.

She was tiny. And from the undergarments, I could tell that she was sensual. A woman didn't buy these things for men. They wore it for themselves, to feel empowered and sexy. I had learned that from my years of working with undercover women who wore their undergarments as a mental shield. It boosted their confidence, especially when they had to command a room and lure a mark.

Who, I wondered, was this little Irish witch's mark? It couldn't have been me. I am a red-blooded male, but I didn't get this far as a covert operative by being easily seduced.

There were plants too. A lot of them. I identified one as lavender and then couldn't figure out any of the others. Little pots of shrubs and herbs, some fragrant, some menacing.

I had asked the Murphys why these plants were sent. I already had a greenhouse, or solarium, depending on how you feel about it, right off the library.

But that boy, Declan, had decided that the damn vegetation was important to her, and the delivery men were paid extra to be careful not to harm them in transport.

"They're her babies," Declan had said over the phone. I wanted to punch him, even though he was the easiest Murphy to deal with. Other than the Murphy girl, who was close to my

Yuliya. The Murphy boy had simply said, “She loves those plants more than anything.”

No wonder she was insane.

Other than these boxes, she seemed to have nothing else. No bank account to her name, we checked. No certificates or degrees other than some secondary school in Ireland. She had no volunteer hours, no hobbies, hadn't signed up for a class or even so much as a gym membership in over a decade.

She didn't even subscribe to any streaming service.

No driver's license. Just an ID card. The woman lived a completely dependent life. She had no marketable skills and, as far as I could see, no life experience.

And then there were the fucking books. One enormous box was just books, which I admire. I liked a woman with a deep mind, but as I flipped through each one and checked their synopsis, I realized she was an entire asylum worth of insane.

Books on magic, witchcraft, and botany. One book was called *Queen of the Night*. It was more worn than the others. The pages were dogeared to hell, the spine full of white folds where it had been bent back for too long.

I flipped through the pages as I always did, waiting for a secret message or folded note to fall out. She had nothing like that, but there was an inscription. It was another spy trick, to use a book to pass messages.

But that wasn't what I found.

Instead, the book defaulted to opening on a blank page near the front. There was worn out script written in black ball pen ink. A love note signed by a single name. Ryan.

From all the insanity I had seen this far, this was the craziest thing of all.

I opened the book and ran my fingers over the brittle, brown, aged paper.

A lover. My little witch had a lover. An old one, by the looks of it. And since this book was more beat up than the others, and the fact that the book habitually opened right at that section, I knew that this had been read and re-read over and over again.

That didn't speak to an ongoing affair, as much as it was probably a thing of longing.

Had the affair been in force, we'd find phone messages, emails, secret accounts, maybe even some notes passed back and forth. My bride seemed like a sentimental kind, so she would have saved it somewhere, probably in a hidden compartment.

All I found in the false backs of her boxes, or under the velvet lining of a jewelry box were amusing little crystals, and needles.

Had she opened this page and run her fingers down the script? Had she read it over and over again in her secret moments?

Either way, my woman got a lot more interesting.

## Chapter Four

## Aoibheann

The sorrow came. It curled itself around my body like a heavy blanket, and I wilted like the petals of a dying flower. The walls that Saoirse was working to burn down were built again. This time the sticks were replaced with bricks. Nothing would unbuild the layer of protection I was now armed with.

I was on a private jet, headed back to upstate New York. It's just dinner, Callum said. Dinner with a Russian man in a Russian home. Alastair and Eoghan Green would also be there. There was nothing but dread settling in my stomach. The spirits and the earth were trying to tell me something. The omen was bad.

I closed my eyes, the vision of a single magpie from two days ago floating to the surface of images. It soared through the sky, crying as it searched for its match. I felt as hopeless as the bird. Empty.

"It's here," I whispered.

"What?" Callum asked, twirling the tumbler in his hand.  
"What is here, Aoibheann?"

The amber liquid swirled.

I pulled my gaze from the whiskey to his face, staring into the green eyes of my mother. My nephew was evil. I knew this because of the markings that covered his body, the gun he kept holstered at his back. I knew this because while his brother,

Declan, saved me from the Greens, Callum was flying me back to them.

Yet his eyes weren't evil the way my late husband's were. Callum's held hope and wonderment. He wasn't scared of me the way the men in New York were, either. He was intrigued, he wanted to know the way my mind worked.

Still, I hated him for what he represented.

"Death," I said, narrowing my eyes at him as an intimidation tactic. I'd turned my love for witchcraft into my weapon. It always worked with the men around the Green Estate. I used it to shield myself, but here, Callum wouldn't shy away from what the Irishmen deemed odd. He'd probably laugh.

Still, I tried. My eyes didn't leave his. "You," I said, pointing, "are a puca."

Callum chuckled, nodding his head. "Aye. My da told me the stories of the puca. Creatures of the night that took the shape of dark horses. They would bring destruction in their paths." He turned to Declan. "They were quite the bedtime story."

"I *am* a puca, Aoibheann. But know this." His voice dropped an octave, and he rested his elbows on his knees, leaning forward to get closer to me. "I do not bring destruction to my family. I bring it to those who cross me. I do everything to protect my blood. I'd never put you in harm's way."

I hissed at him. "Is that why you bring me back to the evil men? To protect your aunt?"

“Eoghan does have those beady eyes,” Declan said, seeming to agree with me.

“You say the Greens are evil, but you do not speak of what it is they’ve done to you,” Callum said.

“The Murphys are the ones who are truly evil,” I said. “It is your father who forced me to marry him, after all.”

His body grew tense, yet he peered at me with true wonderment. “Da never told me that.”

“I speak the truth, lad.” I tilted my chin toward the sky with confidence.

I was Callum’s aunt, but he was no lad. He was six years older than me, and I was treading dangerous territory. I didn’t care. The pain I had was too much to bear, and if I was going back to the monsters, I’d rather be killed at the hands of my nephew now. Less suffering.

Declan placed a hand on my shoulder. “Aoibheann. You won’t be left alone with a Green. *Ever.*”

Declan’s eyes were blue, soft like the ocean, and kind. I believed his intentions were true, but I knew he couldn’t promise me that. Especially when we were flying toward the same men he promised never to leave me with.

“Then why are we in New York?” I asked.

A bell chimed, and lights dimmed. We were landing on the tarmac, and I was one step closer to the impending doom I felt deep within my bones. I glanced out the window as the plane jolted and rolled through the pavement. It was a rough landing,

that was for sure. My fingers gripped the arms of the chair, black painted nails digging into the leather.

“To meet with Jericho Vasiliev,” Callum said.

That name. That man. He was a bloody idiot. The crude things he said to me at the wedding.

My head whipped around, and I gaped at my nephews. “The Russian father. Whatever for?”

“He’s invited us to dinner, Aoibheann. And you will behave.” Callum lifted a finger as if in thought. “On second thought. I think he may enjoy you, just the way you are. He too, has a distaste for the Green men.”

I snorted. “I gathered he had a disdain for all Irishmen when he pointed a gun at your head while his daughter married the namesake of my late husband.”

The man was vile. He had said gross things to me, but if he hated Alastair and Eoghan Green, I would give him a chance.



The house was beautiful. I stared out of the window in awe. No, this was not a house. This was a castle. With an old stone exterior, and beautiful green vines that trailed up the sides. The roof was dark and pointed in places, and it tickled my dark fantasies of what I’d want to live in, if I ever had the chance to run away. The window trims were painted dark, and I grinned, taking in just how many windows there were.



If this home wasn't crawling with plants inside, I would be disappointed. The vehicle came to a stop in front of the home. Stone stairs led to the front entrance, and there were large columns etched with detail that gave the mansion character. And ... I pressed my hands to the glass window, my heart beating fast. *Yes*. That was a gargoyle perched on the far right balcony.

I ripped my seatbelt off, opening the door before Callum and Declan. Maybe Jericho was a horn dog. But I was intrigued to learn how this home was decorated on the inside. My feet hit the stone driveway, my gold strappy heels sinking into the ground. It didn't stop me from taking in the fresh air. We weren't in Boston anymore, that was for sure.

As much as I hated my life being stuck in upstate New York, I had missed this. The days where I was able to walk the garden, the chill in the air that sent a shiver up your spine, and the crisp scent of woods. I giggled, twirling in my black gown.

This felt more like home than that stuffy brownstone in Boston. Saoirse's house was beautiful, but it couldn't compete with the bubbly feeling growing inside my stomach right now.

"Aoibheann," Declan cut through my thoughts. He was standing with his hand outstretched at the bottom of the steps. "Let's go inside. I'm hungry."

My stomach growled, agreeing with him. I nodded, taking his hand. He led me up to the front of the home. The French doors swung open, and the couple from the wedding stood in

the foyer. Alastair Green and Rose Vasilieva. Rose was smiling, but I ignored her to glare at Green.

My steps paused, and I clung to Declan like a life raft.

“What did I say?” he asked, squeezing my hand. “I’m right here.”

“Nice to see you again, Aoibheann,” Alastair greeted, trying to flash me a deceptive smile.

I reached for Rose, taking her hand in mine. “You can do better than this man, lass.”

“What the hell did I do?” Alastair mumbled, his eyes going heavenward in exasperation.

Declan and Rose snorted together.

“You sound like my father, Aoibheann,” Rose said, pulling me into a hug.

“Speaking of Jericho,” Callum said, catching up to the top of the porch. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his suit. “Where is the man?”

“He got caught up with some business. He’s on his way and will meet us in the dining room,” Alastair spoke.

His blonde hair, and the similarity of his cheek bones. The resemblance to my late husband had me filled with rage.

I wanted to stab him, but I had nothing with me to do so. I may be in tune with the spirits, but I had no real magic. I couldn’t just conjure up a knife and get all stabby. The elements didn’t work like that, though I wished they had.

“Come in,” Rose said, gesturing for us to enter.

I stepped inside, my head swirling to take in the old home. My heels clicked against the marble floors, though I was disappointed not to find any houseplants in front of the large windowpane across the foyer.

“You need more plants,” I said to Rose.

She shot a look at Alastair, who shrugged. “There’s a greenhouse connected to the library. Rose can take you to see it if you’d like.”

I gave him a side-eyed glare but turned my attention to Rose. Her name was as lovely as her. I smiled and nodded at her. “Do we have time?”

“Of course. Dad can meet us there, instead.” She grabbed my hand.

I froze, the warmth of her skin radiating up my spine. Despite the way everyone spoke of the underground fighter, her soul was kind. The energy her aura gave off was positive. I liked her.

Together we walked down long hallways littered with natural light shining through painted glass. Still, no plants, and I sighed. *What a shame.* We reached the library which had tall ceilings that were covered in bookshelves. All four walls were made of built-in shelving, and the top of the walls held brass railings where a ladder could be moved about. The opposite end of the library had glass doors, and through the doors, my

heart fluttered with joy. The conservatory was what my dreams consisted of.

Alastair, my late husband, never had such a beautiful room in his home. This was ...

My breath stopped, taking in the curved walls, and detailed trimming of where the glass panes connected. The trim was bright—white—which wouldn't have been my taste. But there was a door that led to a garden outside.

I imagined opening it in the summer and letting the birds fly through this space. There were two ugly couches in the center of the room. White. I scrunched my nose as Rose led me to them. “How are these not dirty?” I asked.

Rose laughed. “I don't think anyone uses them.”

“I'd sit here for hours if this were my home,” I said, plopping onto a cushion. I reached for a snake plant that was beside me, my finger delicately tracing the leaves of the plant.

“Yes, it's a lovely room, isn't it?” Rose sighed, glancing around. She turned to me, her eyes making contact with mine. “I'm sorry to hear about your late husband. I never met him, but my Alastair speaks of him.”

I stiffened. “My Alastair was not a good man.”

“Mine is,” Rose promised.

I reached for her hand and placed it over her stomach with mine. “The children are lucky to have you,” I said. My gaze wandered the room. Yes, this room would be filled with young

children running. I could sense the presence of giggling and tiny feet pattering along the ground.

“This is a good room. One where your boy will chase his sister until he catches her.” I nodded, enjoying the thought.

“Sorry?” Rose spoke low, a hitch in her voice.

“Your babies,” I said, squeezing her belly. “Did you not know?”

She smirked. “I knew. But how did you?”

“Their aura is strong. Like their mother’s.”

A throat clearing came from the library doors. I turned my attention away from the Rose beside me, and it landed on a tall man. He was in a dark suit, with perfectly shiny black dress shoes. My gaze slowly lifted from his shoes to the long legs, then the hands. Strong hands, I could tell even from here, the veins popping as he clenched one hand into a fist. The other held a bouquet of flowers by the stem, he was pointing them down, holding them with no concern of their health.

I continued my assessment, reaching a slim fit black suit jacket with a white dress shirt under. Men in suits were never something I liked. I preferred the navy trousers and sweater vests that my Ryan wore. The son of the owner of the bookstore I frequented in Ireland. Ryan made my heart flutter whenever I entered the store to find him behind the register.

Ryan was plain, less intimidating than this man. My line of sight continued upward until I met his face. Jericho’s jaw was chiseled, and he had a strong chin. He held no expression in

his blank face, and his brown eyes gave nothing away. I couldn't read him, not in the way I read everyone else.

His walls were thicker than mine, and I wondered what caused him to build them.

Something was happening in my stomach. A butterfly fluttering like when I got on the plane ride as we ascended into the air. Was it anxiety, or was it attraction? I didn't think I liked either of those answers.

My mouth opened to speak, but nothing worked. Maybe if he smiled I could be less scared of him? Maybe if I could see through his eyes I'd know—was he like my husband? A monster beneath the suit. Or was he like his daughter? Tough on the outside but soft beyond her layers.

I wanted to find out. That was, until he opened his mouth, and reminded me just how utterly rude he was. "Shall we eat? Or should I be worried you'll hex me too?"

## Chapter Five

## Jericho

“This is a good room. One where your boy will chase his sister until he catches her,” she said as I approached the opening into the greenhouse.

The creepy, and earth-scented room had never been my favorite place. But she had made herself comfortable, her pale skin against the white leather of the sofa.

She had her hands on my daughter’s flat stomach. Her wild, green eyes glowed like a siren. Her red hair curled like the twists of flame. It was almost orange in the light. She had a strange, ethereal quality about her that made me understand why all those men thought she was a witch.

She was unsettling in her beauty. In her slimness. In the way her eyes darted around, taking every detail in as if her life depended on it.

“Your babies.” She looked dreamily up at Rose and tilted her head. “Did you not know?”

Rose gave her a little smile. “I knew. But how did you?”

“Their aura is strong. Like their mother’s.”

How the fuck did she know my daughter was having twins?  
How did she determine the gender?

The doctor reported that there was evidence of a male chromosome, so at least one of the buns would be a boy. But until they were further along, at least fifteen weeks, we



couldn't be sure of the second. But was she telling us the other would be a little girl? My heart went up to my throat.

I hope they named her Jubilee. It was selfish, I know. But the name I gave my daughter when we were undercover sprang to mind as an homage to our short time together, alone. Before the daughter-stealing Alastair Green came and lured her away.

*A little girl?* I could imagine her. A cute little black-haired thing, with a nose like Rose, that would scrap and fight just like her sibling. It was like I could gaze into that strange woman's skull and see what she was conjuring. Some bullshit about auras and premonitions ...

I didn't like it. The world was black and white. There's no such thing as magic or curses. But there was something about this woman that made it hard not to fall into her spell.

Maybe she really was a witch. So, did that mean that she had killed her husband? With her spells and her incantations? Surely, that wasn't real. Was it? Fucking superstitious Irish were worse than the old-world Russians with their *Rusalkas* and *Dvoynoyes*.

Now, here she was, staring at me like I was an alien when she was the one in my home. It was all ... unsettling. I didn't like this. Whatever was happening with this arrangement, this woman in my house wasn't going to work.

"Shall we eat? Or should I be worried you'll hex me too?" I turned on my heel, forgetting about the stupid flowers in my hand, and marched to the dining room.

“Sorry, Dad’s not great around new people,” Rose apologized to the woman.

How wrong she was. I was great with new people. Just not strange little witches that could read tea leaves or whatever the fuck she did.

“What about Eoghan?” I heard my son-in-law ask.

“We’re going to start without him,” I called over my shoulder as I heard them moving from the solarium, following hard on my heels.

The table in the dining room was a large, red mahogany. It matched the wood panels on the walls. The ceiling was wooden too, with great beams giving it an ominous, sectional feel. My great-grandfather built this manor. He had very gothic, and frankly, dramatic tastes. The man should have been writing dark, Russian fiction instead of heading a Bratva. Or maybe that sense of drama and love for the macabre was what made him a good Pakhan. I wasn’t sure.

The dining room could seat a dozen people, and the walls were shaped in a way so that conversation could carry and bounce off the walls. A person could whisper from the far end and be heard clearly across the room as though they were seated right next to them.

Servants lined the walls in their polished black suits and white gloves. I didn’t often employ servants. A lady came occasionally to clean. But there was no regular staff. The large space was mostly used by just me and my sister, if she was available. A huge, creepy space for one guy. If I felt lonely, I’d

blast country rock in the ballroom, and dance around like Hugh Grant in *Love, Actually*. An underrated movie.

“Yuliya will also be late, as she was handling some business in the city.” She was torturing some Italian guy this morning, and I don’t know if she finished or not. It was never a good idea to interrupt her or rush her during that task. I’d sooner stick my hand in a tank of hungry piranhas than tell my sister how to properly interrogate a man.

I stood behind the chair at the head of the table, dropping the flowers off to the corner, now thinking it was inappropriate to give her the offering.

Alastair moved to a seat, pulling it out for Rose. She sat down graciously to my left. I reached out a hand to hers, smiling at my daughter, and she smiled back, clutching my knuckles for a moment, before settling in her seat.

“Hi, Dad,” she said.

I never grew tired of her saying that to me. “Hey kiddo. How are you feeling?”

“Nauseous?” It wasn’t a statement, as if she wasn’t sure if she was feeling nauseous or not.

“You should drink peppermint tea.” That *voice* carried over to us. She didn’t speak, so much as sing without music. Her voice was paced, like the steady rhythm of a metronome and the notes of a fucking symphony. Her voice didn’t travel. It haunted the space. “It will ease your nausea considerably.”

“Thanks!” My daughter said, looking at me for approval.  
“I’ll try that.”

I made a note to order her some, even though I loathed to listen to the witch.

The chandelier overhead gave a dim, golden glow. Despite that, Aoibheann’s face was silver like the moon. She was studying me, staring at my hands, then my face. Could she see the blood on my hands? Did it frighten her?

“We’re having chicken. Something your cousin, Lea, sent over. She’s heard your good news.” I turned to my daughter. “I hope that’s okay. She said this chicken dish was the only thing her mother could eat when she was ... *gestating*.”

“Lovely.” My daughter rolled her eyes then gave me a weak smile. She was only twenty-two. In my opinion, about ten years too young to be married and having kids. But that bastard ...

I glared at Alastair Green. His slick blond hair and amiable smile was all a front. He was the vilest creature that ever existed.

I stared at my bride-to-be, seated between Callum and Declan Murphy. Were they trying to protect her from me? I smiled at that thought. Even at what was meant to be a casual dinner, battle lines were being drawn, and I wanted to poke at their defenses.

“Shouldn’t you be sitting with your own kind, Irish?” I said, pointedly toward Alastair, nodding my head at the Murphys.

“I’m sure Rose has had enough of sitting beside you.”

“Dad!” Rose scolded, kicking me slightly under the table.

“I prefer to keep him in my sights,” Aoibheann said through clenched teeth.

She truly hated my son-in-law. Her eyes were fiery when she glared at him, and those pouty, cherry lips curled in a snarl. I chuckled, enjoying someone being on my side when it came to hating Alastair.

“If you’re going to kill him with your mind,” I warned her, “do it when he’s further away from my daughter. I don’t want her getting blood splattered all over her when she’s in a delicate state.”

“Dad!” My daughter yelled as I laughed outright, slamming my hand on the table.

Eoghan barged into the dining room then, hard on the heels of a uniformed servant. His eyes darted all over the room as if he expected to see ghosts in every corner. And maybe he did. When his eyes landed on *Aoib-whatever-the-fuck-her-name-is*, he paled and looked like he was about to pass out. He kept his front toward her as he skirted around the dining room to the vacant seat at the foot of the table.

“Nice of you to join us,” I told him, hiding a smile behind my fist as the man stared at my potential bride like she was a rattlesnake, coiled and ready to strike.

“Traffic,” he said lamely as an excuse, his black eyes unblinking as he took his seat.

I gestured to the servants with my hand, and wine was poured.

A small amuse-bouche of lobster toast was placed before us.

“Can you have seafood?” I suddenly asked, staring down at the tiny dish. “Or is that ...?”

I wanted to slap myself for not checking the menu. I had heard that women couldn’t eat crab or lobster. Something about their mercury content could hurt the baby. Why didn’t I look this shit up as soon as I knew she was pregnant?

Rose wrinkled her nose at the dish in front of her, gently pushing the plate to Alastair.

“I don’t think it’ll settle with me,” she shrugged.

“Damn it.” I ran a hand over my face.

“I really can only keep toast down, it seems.” She looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want to inconvenience you ...”

“Rose, damn it.” I leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “Inconvenience me, please! I’m your father, for fuck’s sake. I’m supposed to take care of you.”

“I think that’s my job, actually,” Alastair said, stroking a hand around her hair.

“And you do a piss poor job of it.” I threw my napkin down at the table and stood up. “Wait a minute.”

I skulked down to the kitchen where the catering staff was bustling around. I grabbed three pieces of bread from the

pantry and plopped them into the toaster. After a minute, the toast was spat back out with a light, golden sheen. Just the way Rose liked it. Barely warmed and slathered in butter.

I grabbed some butter, hard cheese, and strawberry jam then piled them in the crook of my arm as I went back upstairs.

I placed them in front of my daughter, who bit into the toast gratefully, almost moaning in satisfaction. She grabbed a knife, cut off a piece of the cheese, put a dollop of jam on top, and ate it, her eyes closing as she sighed.

“You’ve got to tell me what you can eat, kiddo,” I warned her sternly. “I’ll make sure you’ve got it while you’re here.” I grabbed her wrist where it lay on the table. “Maybe you could stick around here until the kids are born. I can get a doctor on standby to come to the house.”

She hummed, “Thanks, Dad,” as she chewed a mouth full.

Everyone else had finished their lobster, and I waved mine away, sympathy for my daughter souring my appetite.

I felt a burning sensation on my cheek, as the siren’s eyes stared at me. I looked up and her mouth was open, looking at me like I was some kind of demon.

“Sorry, witch.” I lifted a brow. “Should I pop into the kitchen and see if they’ve got some eye of newt?”

Her mouth closed and her expression blanked again, taking on that look of majestic serenity. Interesting. She kept her feelings close.

The room quieted as the main course was served.

“She’ll curse you too,” Eoghan said under his breath, as though he was warning me.

“For fuck’s sake.” Callum rolled his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose like he was getting a headache.

“It’s true.” Eoghan stared daggers at the woman. “We all know she killed my Da’. Why are we tap dancing around it? Mark my words, Russian, she’ll sing you to your death.”

The woman turned her eyes from me, then smiled at Eoghan. He flinches under her heated gaze. Then, she started to hum a sad, simple song.

*“Gold on his lips, fingers through flame.”* Her voice was beautiful. Haunting. *“Eyes cannot see that hate’s born from shame ...”*

“Stop it!” Eoghan slammed his fist on the table, and the glassware danced because of the impact.

*“Father and son, bridegrooms undone.”* She continued, her melody sounding like those ancient Irish songs that belong in castles, and ancient meadows. *“She’ll wear red to your funeral.”*

“You bitch!” Eoghan stood up, the shine of his golden wedding band glinting in the candlelight.

He moved to Aoibheann. Declan stood, but I was faster. I rounded the table in a few large steps. My hand came to Eoghan’s collar, pushing him until his back hit the far wall.

“Where is she?” Eoghan screamed, fighting to get me off him. But his emotions made him shaky, and weak. Even if he



had been stronger than me, feelings were clouding the connection from his mind to his muscles. “Where did you hide her, you fucking bitch!”

“Calm the fuck down!” I screamed at the man, shaking him by his collar.

“I didn’t hide her anywhere.” The witch’s voice was low, like a whisper. “She’s living free.”

Eoghan pushed my hands away from his collar, and I let him.

“You’re sitting at my table,” I warned him, demanding his attention back to me. “It was *your* idea to have *another* marriage alliance. I fucking warn you, Irish, if she becomes my wife, I will kill you for talking to her like that.”

# Chapter Six

## Aoibheann

*Wife. Wife, wife, wife. Wife.*

The word rattled through my head while I sat in shock at the large dining table. The commotion wasn't what bothered me. I had sat through much more dramatic meals while married to Green. This was nothing in comparison.

My late husband had once spread the brain matter of a soldier who betrayed him against the dining table, then forced me to eat my meal. At any slight sound of a whimper, he reached out and jabbed me in the side with his fork.

Marriage. Wife. Death. That single fucking magpie ...

Hot energy surged through me. The day Alastair died, I was no longer a pawn for these men. I did my time. Sixteen years married to a man who treated me like a pet instead of a woman. I would not marry another.

Rationality was out of the window as I fisted the small, steak knife in my hand. It was small, the blade jagged. *If Jericho was dead, I would not have to marry him.*

I stood, no one paying attention to me. They were all too focused on Eoghan's outbursts. It wasn't easy to stalk up to him because he was tall, even for my five foot nine inches, and I had heels on.

"I will not be a corpse again!" I screamed through tears, my arm raised.

The knife in my fist slammed, and I struck through the material of his white shirt. The knife didn't get deep, but blood pooled around the wound. There was no crunching. I hadn't even hit bone.

I pulled away, gasping and stumbling as I realized what I had done.

And he did not move. He hadn't even flinched, the knife still sticking out of him.

He cocked his head to the side, and for once I caught a flicker of emotion in those brown eyes. He was curious.

"You stabbed me," he said, walking toward me.

My eyes widened. *No! He'd lash out!*

I knew what was coming, knew how badly I screwed up. My heart sank and with each step of his approach, I sulked back until my arse hit the edge of the dining table. I was trapped, caged like a feral animal. Except instead of fighting my way out of the corner, I took the loss.

I shielded my face with my hands and braced for the strike. An involuntary whimper left my mouth, the agonizingly long wait of his hand meeting a part of my body making me want to die.

But he didn't hit me. Fuck, fuck, *fuck!* He wasn't choosing a physical punishment? Did this mean he'd take away something of mine?

I needed to beg for forgiveness. Beg because that was how to survive. There's no pride when it comes to survival.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t ...” I sucked in a breath of air through the crying I could no longer control. “Please, don’t punish me.”

He didn’t respond. He just stared. I was too emotional, too high-strung to decipher the vibrations he was putting off. I couldn’t even begin to look into his eyes to read the emotion in them. Fear made me blind.

Jericho placed a hand over the handle of the knife, and slowly, he pried it from his massive chest. He grabbed the hand I used to stab him and placed the knife in the palm. Then he closed my fingers around it.

“You need to aim here.” His voice was gravelly, and his jaw clenched as he gave me a hardened look. He was angry with me, but I didn’t think it was because I stabbed him. It was because I had failed.

“Into the fifth intercostal space, right here.” He pointed to the left side of his chest, not far from where blood was gathering.

His other arm reached out, taking my hand that wasn’t holding the knife. It shook as he pressed my finger to the rib below his clavicle.

“One,” he counted, then dragged my finger over a rib, into the next space. “Two.” And he did it again, my hands hearing against his muscular pecs until we found that fifth space. “When you stab someone, you go between these ribs, and hit the heart.”

My heart pounded, while our skin touched. Didn't it hurt to have our hands pressed so close to the wound? Yet, he was unconcerned that he was bleeding.

"Next time, you don't miss," Jericho said, using a tone I'd heard before. One that was a warning, a threat, and a promise all at once.

With Jericho, my adrenaline didn't spike from fear. The voice soothed the frenzied nerves that were collecting inside of me.

I said nothing. I couldn't speak, so I stared at him, my mouth dropped. Don't miss? Was that a warning? Was he letting me go on my first offense of betrayal? I peered down at the knife, his blood dripping from the blade.

Then I ran.

I lost my shoes as I traced my path back toward the front of the estate. Once I found the grand staircase near the entrance, I was able to find my way to the library. I gravitated toward it, toward the ugly room that was somehow filled with peace.

I didn't go to the couch this time. I headed for the windows, stopping when I reached the end of the room. It overlooked a garden, but I couldn't see much with nightfall approaching. I wrapped my arms around myself, sniffing.

I felt it deep inside of me that something bad was coming. I trusted Callum when he promised me I'd be safe. But it was a lie. These men and their lies. I chewed on the inside of my cheek, tears falling, for what seemed like an eternity. Was

Saoirse in on this too? Was there no one in my life I could trust?

All this talk of hexes and witches, couldn't they see I had no power of the universe? If I had, I'd be living above a bookshop in Portstewart with a sweet boy named Ryan. If I were truly a witch, I'd have seen this in one of my visions. I'd have known my life would be miserable, lonely, traumatizing.

Maybe I could have even stopped it.

"Aunt Aoibheann?" Declan's voice was near.

I dipped my chin to catch a glance at him over my shoulder. "Please take me back to Boston," I said in a soft whisper. I sniffled, hating how weak I sounded.

Declan sighed, his hand coming to rest on my shoulder. "I tried to tell him," he said. "He's right though, Aoibheann."

I turned, my brows scrunching. "I thought you were on my side."

"I am on your side. Blood first, always. But Eoghan is convinced you killed his father. He's ready to kill you."

I lifted my head and with conviction said, "I didn't kill my husband."

Declan grinned, the ocean waves in his eyes crashing along the shoreline. *Portstewart*. His eyes were soft and calm like the harbor town Ryan and I dreamed of living together. Declan was a kind soul, even if he wore a scowl to pretend he wasn't.

“Whether or not it’s true, Eoghan believes it. He’ll have you killed. Callum thinks this is the only way to keep you safe. Jericho will protect you.”

I sighed, the sadness taking over. “Death will come. I will not hide from it.”

He shook his head, a scowl on his face. “Jericho has agreed to marry you, despite the hole in his chest. You’ll take the protection he is offering you. Trust me, I don’t like it either. But Eoghan is unhinged right now. This is the best way.”

“Let him kill me. I haven’t lived in a very long time,” I said. Fuck, I hadn’t lived since the day I married Alastair Green.

“Stop with the vague spirit shit for a moment. Open your eyes and take the protection. Jericho has offered you your own room. This marriage is on paper only. And you saw what he did for you with Eoghan.”

I turned away from Declan, looking out into the night through the glass. “I vowed never to marry after the things he did to me. I won’t do it now.”

He scoffed. “Does your life mean so little to you? That you’d take a slow and painful death over a marriage of convenience?”

I turned to fully face him and placed my hands on either of his shoulders. Then I squeezed. “How does one value life when they’ve never lived it?”



## Chapter Seven

## Jericho

The witch ran. The younger Murphy, Declan, followed after. I sat down in my seat, picked up my fork, and tasted the ginger chicken on a bed of white rice.

“Can you eat this?” I asked my daughter, who fisted a knife in her hand.

“I’ll go get the skin glue.” Rose got up from her seat and left in search of the first aid kit.

I looked across to Eoghan, still huffing and puffing near the far wall, his blond hair un-gelled, spiked like a porcupine, his tie loose.

“Take a seat,” I ordered him. At his hesitation, I added, “Or get the hell out.”

That snapped him out of it. With a shaky hand, he smoothed his hair down, straightened his tie, and tugged on his lapels.

“I’ll be going,” he said, his eyes narrowed. “I wish you well with your new situation. May you have the fate of better men before you.” He coughed, turned, and walked out the door.

“Eoghan,” I said, before he crossed the threshold out of the dining room. “I mean it. You disrespect my *wife*, and you’ll find yourself on the sharp end of my bullet.”

Eoghan didn’t say anything. I heard his footsteps resume down the hallway, refusing to turn my head to look at him.

I had walked into this dinner unsure about the girl, or this plan. But the look in her eyes, the fear, the ferocity revealed a soul in great torment. She had stabbed me. But I had seen her eyes in that moment. Truly *seen* them. She wasn't stabbing *me*. She was lashing out at what I represented. Her dull, distant, and devastated eyes spoke to a pain so deep, it could displace the ocean.

It turned my stomach.

She was physically weak. Not like my Rose or Yuliya. My girls were warriors. The witch had stabbed me with all her might and only buried it half an inch into my chest. Barely even in the muscle.

I wanted to laugh, but she crumbled so quickly, retreating, covering herself as if I would hit her back. I wouldn't hit her any more than I would hit a child.

But it was clear someone had hit her. No. Someone had *tortured* her.

I glanced at my son-in-law who was still staring at the door Rose had exited.

“What did your uncle do to her?” I said bluntly.

The man flinched, turning his gaze to me, then to Callum Murphy.

“My uncle was a fierce man,” he said, slow and steady. “And I don't think he was a great husband.”

Callum clenched his fist.

So there were some problems between the two Irish families. Interesting.

“I think ...” Alastair sighed, putting his utensils down with a clatter and leaning back into his seat. “I don’t know what he did to her. But if Rose ever looked at me the way Aoibheann looked at my uncle, I’d cut my own wrists and set her free.”

I continued to eat my chicken, pondering.

“And what does she have to do with Eoghan’s wife?” I continued.

“No one has seen his wife since the late Alastair Green died,” Callum supplied. “Some people think she’s dead. Others think she’s stuck in a dungeon.”

Callum leaned back in his seat as well. We were three dejected men trying to piece together the puzzle that was the witch I would make my wife.

“As you can see, it’s likely my step-aunt helped her run away.” Alastair put the pieces together for me. “And between thinking she killed his father, then helped his wife run away, Eoghan is ready to kill her.”

I took a sip of a bittersweet white wine. I noted that someone had poured Rose a glass, so I downed mine and started in on hers. I snapped my finger and ordered a server to bring her a ginger ale.

“You pawning her off on me had nothing to do with an alliance.” I concluded. It wasn’t a question.

“Partially, it was,” Alastair said.

“No, it wasn’t.” Callum answered at the same time.

I looked at the two Irishmen as they stared at one another.

Rose came back in, her crimson dress floating behind her as she pulled her seat up to mine.

I pulled at my collar until my shirt opened, revealing the cut. She dumped alcohol on it with the gentleness of a bull goring a matador.

“Christ, thank god you’re not a nurse like your cousin,” I winced, “your patients would be begging for death.”

She gave me a dirty look as she took the skin glue to me and pieced the wound together.

“You kind of asked for it,” she said under her breath.

“I asked for it?” I shot back, incredulous.

“You could have been nicer to her, Dad.” She lightly punched my wound, and I winced. “She’s obviously troubled.”

Kiddo was right. She patched me up, slapped a bandage—hard—onto my chest and pulled her seat back. Her chicken had gotten cold.

“They can reheat it...” I was about to gesture a server when she stopped me.

“It’s fine,” she rubbed her belly affectionately. “I’ll be able to eat this.”

“Can you protect her?” Callum said, leaning in. “She’s my blood, but I don’t think she’s safe with me.”

“Why is that?” I started eating my food, staring blankly at some of the candle flames at the center of the table.

“Eoghan, technically, has more rights to her than I do,” Callum said, with a sigh. “He’s got more claim to her as her stepson. He could compel me to give her up to him, and I couldn’t do anything about it.”

“You’d do it? Even if she didn’t want to? She wouldn’t have a choice?” I thought about this. Sure, the Bratva had similarly sexist ideas about women as property, but as we tore ourselves from the old world past and moved from mainly criminal endeavors to more clean, legal ventures, the old ways were dying with it.

“If I thought she could defend herself, maybe,” Callum sighed, “but she can’t. She’s sheltered... She was confined since she was a teenager. She knows nothing of the world, and she lives in her head.”

The room went silent, and I looked at my daughter. What would I want for her?

It was a ridiculous thought, after all. Rose could fend for herself, in or out of the mafia world. She was a fighter. She could punch, shoot, and kill her way out.

These Irish had done a great disservice to their women, if they weren’t similarly capable of surviving on their own. But that was a lesson I had learned when my sister disappeared. I found her strung up, wires around her thumbs, pulling her onto her tiny tiptoes. She was just a kid. Ten years old. Thank God,

I found her in time, because she was getting ready to amputate her own thumbs to get herself free.

Alastair Green, Sr. had been responsible for her kidnapping and torture. Her, and a dozen other children, picked because they were a soft target. And from that moment on, I swore I'd never let her be defenseless ever again. She would never be easy prey for anyone. And she took to it like a duck to water. Now, she was the predator.

“With you, Eoghan would have no higher claim. And he wouldn't dare go against you,” Callum interrupted my thoughts.

We ate in silence in the half empty dining room, our forks on the porcelain echoing like discordant music around us.

“Dad?” Rose whispered.

“Yeah, kiddo?”

“You should talk to her.” It wasn't really a suggestion coming from my brat. “And maybe give her the flowers.”

I wiped my hand over my face. “You're not going to let me turn her out, are you?”

“Nope,” she said, taking a bite from a piece of toast. “I like her.”

“And what makes you think I'd do what you tell me to, Jujubean?”

She winced at that hated nickname. But she beamed, put her hand on her belly, and with a pout. “I'd hate for baby Jericho

or his baby sister to be stressed, because their mom is worried about her new friend.”

She tilted her head down and spoke to her belly, even though I was pretty sure she still had a six-pack under there.

“Right, babies? We don’t want mama to be sad, do we?”

“You’re weaponizing my grand-babies against me?” I was baffled, but also a little impressed by the audacity.

“We’d hate for Grandpa Jericho to make mama upset, right?” she continued, as if her kids could really consent to any of this. “Grandpa should talk to the pretty red-haired lady, and make sure she’s okay, right babies?”

“You truly are a complete pain in the ass.” I got up from the table and pawed at the bouquet of flowers. A few sad, dark maroon, almost black, petals fell on the floor.

I trudged my way to the library, then on to the greenhouse where I already knew she’d be. How did I know? Because I could read people. Good old CIA tradecraft. It was *not* because I could feel her.

She sat on the white couch, her elbows on her knees. Her long, red curls obscured her face, falling over her pale, creamy shoulders.

Declan sat beside her, his eyes boring into me like I was here to light them on fire.

He moved to get up, but she reached out to him with long, curled fingers. Her eyes pleaded for him not to go.



“Declan,” I greeted him with a nod.

“Please don’t go,” she whispered to him, her lips trembling, her eyes glued to his face.

“If you want to stay longer, I’ll set you up a room near her.” I was surprised that I said it. I did not want the Murphys here longer than necessary. But it spilled out of my mouth before I could stop it.

“I think that’d be a good idea,” Declan said, putting his hand over hers.

“You’ll stay?” The witch looked at him like he was her only defender. We’d have to change that soon.

“Yes, aunty. I’ll stay.”

I felt like an intruder in my own house. Like I should slink away and leave these two alone so I didn’t disturb their peace.

I did want to bring her peace. It was an unsettling feeling. I didn’t feel that way about Rose or Yuliya. With them, I wanted to rattle their cages until they were spurred to fight. Until they were able to take on the world with one hand tied behind their back.

I didn’t like weakness. Not in men, and especially not in women. Not because it was less palatable in someone of the other gender, but it invited more danger to them.

It was clear that no one had ever taught her to be strong. Worse yet, they had stripped her of any strength she could have had, until her only way to live was within the confines of

the walls she built around herself. And I wanted to stand in front of that wall and fight off her attackers.

I thrust the flowers out to her, and more petals fell with the movement. “These are for you.”

She blinked like she expected a snake to come out of the bouquet. The long-stemmed black roses still had their thorns, and the leaves were still attached, fluttering in the space between us. She reached out and cradled the flowers to her, touching the soft petals.

I turned around and walked away, knowing there was nothing else I could accomplish there that night.

“Thank you,” her soft voice wafted to me like a sweet perfume. “They’re lovely.”

I turned around to look, just as she violently decapitated the flowers off each stem and placed them on her lap.

This witch was obviously bat shit crazy.

## Chapter Eight

## Aoibheann

I stayed in my room the next day. Last night, Rose had brought me up and gave me a tour. It was a grand room. Fit for a princess. Large, bright, airy. Nothing at all what I would want for myself.

I did enjoy the balcony. The doors were open now, letting in the crisp air. It was cold, but I didn't mind, and my plants needed the light.

Declan came this morning and shared breakfast with me on the terrace. Boxes of my things left at Saoirse's had arrived shortly after, and I spent the day unpacking. My plants were placed on the balcony for the fresh light and air, and I'd bring them in before dinner to keep from the frost.

The dried herbs for tea had been buried in one of the boxes, along with all my recipe books. I had probably fifty or so books on practical magic and witchcraft, essential oils and aromatherapy, crystals, palm reading, Irish Celtic histories, tea making, and so much more. They all served their purpose, but they were also beautiful and meant to be showcased.

I placed them on the bookshelf by the writing desk and settled a potted lavender plant beside them. I didn't know who was responsible for making sure my items arrived so quickly, but it made this transition just a little smoother. Almost as if it had been planned, and Declan had stowed them away on the plane without my knowledge.

Now it was nearing the evening, and I hadn't been bothered. Maybe that meant Jericho would leave me alone. He hadn't summoned me yet, and I wanted to believe it was because he was nothing like Alastair. But a part of me deep inside thought maybe he was putting on a show. He was tricking me into signing the marriage certificate, and then he would show his true colors.

Though, I didn't pick up on the evil in this house the way it swirled through the halls in the Green Mansion. And Rose ... his daughter. She was sweet and clearly adored her father. The way he was with her was soft and loving. I couldn't decipher it.

I'd never seen such an angry man be so accommodating... so loving.

I hummed to myself, packing the rest of the herbal tea I mixed for Rose into filtered tea bags. Poor thing would probably lose weight rapidly if her appetite from last night was any indication of how this pregnancy would go for her.

The peppermint, rose, and ginger root would soothe her nausea enough to allow her to place something in her stomach. The rose would even help if she had cramps.

Though, if they truly believed me to be a witch, her father may not allow her to drink what I've made. Eoghan was convinced I poisoned his father with my herbal teas. I shrugged. It was still a peace offering I wanted to extend. Rose was nice to me, allowed me to touch her belly even though she was unsure of me, and I knew I needed her in my corner.

She could convince her father not to hurt me, if he was really so soft with her.

A knocking came from the door. “Come in,” I sang from the desk as I sealed the last tea bag.

The heavy French style doors pushed open, and Declan strode in. He was in a different suit from yesterday, and his beard had been freshly trimmed sometime between breakfast and now. I wondered if he had his things brought over and asked for mine at the same time.

“It’s time for dinner,” he said, coming to a stop a few yards from me.

I turned my head to look at him over my shoulder. He was empty handed unlike when he came for breakfast. “Where’s the food?” I asked, turning back to the tea. I placed the thirty tea bags I had created into a tote for Rose. Then, I started sealing the containers of dried herbs to put away.

“Vasiliev has requested us to join his family in the dining room.”

“No.” I didn’t know where it came from, but my voice was strong, filled with courage.

“He said he won’t let you have dinner in your room. You’re to come down and get to know the family.”

“Not hungry.”

I struggled to place the containers back on the shelf above me. Declan reached around me and grabbed the bins. He

placed them overhead easily, then squeezed my shoulder. “Twenty minutes, aunty. Then you need to come down.”

I shook my head, not wanting to see him. I stabbed him and he handed me flowers, and now we were to have dinner together? As if I were marrying him of my own will, as if I didn't try to kill him.

Declan sensed my hesitation. “He's not mad at you.”

I cleared my throat. “He's mean.”

“He's sarcastic.”

I turned my head, eyeing my nephew with questions brewing under the surface. “What?”

“The things he says aren't serious. They call it dry humor. When you're not sure if it's a joke or the truth.”

I nodded, my brows furrowing. “Him asking about me killing Alastair with my mind ... the eye of newt comment. They were ... jokes?” I bit my lip, unsure of how I felt. Those comments before had always been made of fear, and cruelty. But Jericho was saying them to ... flirt? God, the man was odd, and that was rich coming from me.

“Yes.”

“Eoghan says those things and means them. He's scared of me.” Eoghan's name on my tongue felt bitter. He'd been my stepson but was cold and unwelcoming. I truly had been alone in that mansion, with no one to turn to.

“Jericho is not scared of you. He is intrigued by you.”

“Is that good?”

A soft laugh left his mouth. “When a man is intrigued by a woman, yes. It is a good sign that he likes you.”

“Why would you be mean to someone if you liked them?” I asked, appalled. I shook my head frantically, in denial.

There was no way a man like him would like a person like me. I had been sheltered, with little experience in the world. The outings I had the past sixteen years were controlled by Alastair. Shopping in any place I saw fit was often my reward for not embarrassing him in front of company.

Dinners out were rare but occurred if he felt like showing off his crazy wife. I was entertainment, laughter for his friends. No one found me ... intriguing.

“No,” I asserted. “That isn’t right.”

Declan sighed, shaking his head. “Please come down in twenty minutes. I’d like an uneventful evening ... unlike yesterday.”

“Will the Green men be attending?”

“The son-in-law will be there. I have a feeling your ex-stepson will never be allowed back here again.”

I nodded, my stomach lightening with relief. I could handle Alastair. He at least pretended to find me normal. He tried, even if he found me off putting.

The man was an incarnation of his uncle, the appearance uncanny and unsettling. If the gods answered my prayers, his



children would look nothing like him.

Declan turned to leave, but I stopped him. “Is it allowed ... for me ... to make jokes back?”

He turned around and offered me a grin that shined brighter than a star. “I think it would be unexpected and very much welcomed if you joked with Jericho, aunty.”

I nodded, though I wasn’t sure what I could say. Especially when I didn’t know if he was actually joking. I’d need to get better at reading him.

My feet drug as I headed for the closet to get ready. I chose a midnight blue top. It was a sheer, lace turtleneck, with a midnight blue pattern of flowers. Under it I wore a silk camisole to cover my chest and stomach, making sure anywhere I had scars were covered.

It was a blouse I could wear with a sweater and jeans to be casual, or I could dress it up by wearing a navy skirt. I chose the latter, made from a velvet material. The skirt clung to my midriff and flowed well past my knees.

I sifted through my jewelry, finding a labradorite crystal that dangled from a rose gold chain. It would go perfectly with the moon crested earrings I already wore.

I had a gift for Rose to bring to dinner—the tea—and I knew I should bring something for Jericho. The flowers he’d given me were lovely, and if Declan was right about his ... feelings ... for me, then I needed to extend the same olive branch.

My hands dug through the bottom of the wooden jewelry box, and I paused when my fingertips brushed along the black obsidian ring.

My mouth parted in shock. I grabbed it, bringing it to the light to inspect. The day I chose the iron welded ring carved with crowns on either side was still etched in my memory, though it had to have been a decade ago.

It was my first trip to the small crystal shop a few hours away. I couldn't remember the name, or even the town. Alastair had drugged me pretty well the evening before with painkillers.

He'd taken me to the shop as an apology for his behavior. He had whipped the same place on my right shoulder blade over and over until it drew blood.

Then, when the sun rose, he was sorry. I remembered the way it hurt to move my arm, how the skin was hot to touch, how I wept myself to sleep. But it earned me a trip to the crystal shop. It was right when I'd learned of the mental benefits, and I wanted to learn more. I craved the human interaction that came with the small shops. Yet there would be no interaction this day. Instead of sending me with one of his soldiers, Alastair had come with me because he had business in town.

I wasn't to speak to the clerk who was a male. But this ring had spoken to me. It was too big for any of my dainty fingers, clearly fit for men. It didn't matter because the crystal spoke to me. It was meant for me to hold. Meant for me to keep safe

until its rightful owner entered my life. I insisted on coming home with it, even though Alastair made fun of me for choosing something so ugly.

Now, I swallowed, sliding the ring onto my thumb. It still didn't feel like it was mine, but I knew who it belonged to.

I scrunched my face in protest. Yes, the signs were there. For the first time in my life, I refused to acknowledge the vision. I channeled my inner stubbornness and yanked the ring off. Then, I tossed it back into the box and swiped at the evil eye bracelet.

It was made with beads from lapis lazuli and in the center was a golden pendant. The Egyptian eye. The blue beads paired with the gold well, and I knew that this would do.

Sighing, I was dressed and physically ready to head for dinner. Mentally, I was anything but. Still, I grabbed the tote filled with Rose's tea and slid the bracelet into the bag. Then, I headed to dinner.

I reached the dining hall, loud fits of laughter escaping its walls. I didn't have to channel my energy senses to know that the people inside were happy.

My chest hummed with the desire to hear more. The need to be included fueled me and pushed aside the reserve I had for this arrangement, even if just for tonight.

I entered the same room where I had stabbed the man who owned this home. He was seated in the same spot as last night at the head of the table. Rose sat to his left again, Alastair

beside her. Declan was seated across from Alastair this evening, and I hesitated. There was an empty seat with a place setting to Jericho's right, and I knew it was meant for me.

"Good evening," I said, heading to round the table and take my seat.

"Nice of you to finally join us," Jericho said. His tone was flat, unimpressed. "The soup is cold."

*Say something funny.* I sat in the chair, clearing my throat as I got comfortable. "I'm sorry I was late. I was busy sharpening my knives."

Jericho eyed me, one brow drawn, and a slight curve of his lips, but he said nothing.

Declan snorted beside me. My lips twitched with pride. At least someone thought I was amusing. A soft giggle left my mouth in response to the pride bubbling in my chest. Rose joined the laughter while Alastair paled.

I set the tote on the table and pulled out the bundles of tea. "Declan brought me my things from home. I made you some tea, Rose. As an apology for my behavior last night. I ... I wasn't thinking properly and let my emotions drive me."

Rose glanced at her father. She waited for his nod of approval, then reached across the table and took them. "Thank you, Aoibheann."

My name didn't sound quite right, but she was trying, unlike her father, and my heart felt warm at the attempt. I squeezed her hand before she pulled away. "I mixed it special for you.

You'll let me know if it works? If it doesn't, I'll find something that does."

"What's in it?" Alastair asked, his icy blue eyes holding skepticism.

"The peppermint and ginger root will help with nausea. The rose petals are for cramps," I said.

"You blended them?" Jericho asked. "Specifically for her?"

I turned to him and nodded. "Aye. I'd usually mix it with a tea leaf, but I figured the caffeine would be bad for the babes."

I reached into the bag and pulled out his bracelet. "I have something for you too." When I made eye contact with him, he was staring at me, his jaw set, but I made an effort to see past the walls. Golden eyes watched me with wonderment. I didn't know what it meant, but I did take the victory that his walls were letting me in.

He didn't take the bracelet in my outstretched hand, though.

I glanced at Alastair, then back to Jericho. "It's to keep the evil away. I thought you could use it since you're in business with the Greens."

I was being serious now, but he chose to laugh like I was joking. "I don't think some beads on a string will keep anything away."

"They're not beads," I said. I was growing embarrassed for trying with him. He still hadn't accepted the bracelet, and my hand was still out in offering. "They're crystals, and they work." I touched the pendant on my necklace.

It wasn't a coincidence that I broke the barriers of his defense while wearing the labradorite. "Lapis lazuli is said to hold the spirit of the gods. Paired with the eye, it will ward off evil." I tossed it at him, then glared at Alastair.

"It's thoughtful, isn't it, Dad?" Rose asked, and I thought she gave him a light kick under the table.

"What did you bring me?" Alastair asked, a smirk pulling at his mouth.

Was this serious or sarcasm? I wasn't sure. I took it as the latter. I turned to Rose, shaking my head. "If you ever need to leave him, I can help you, Rose."

Her mouth gaped. She glanced between her father, then me. "Both of you? Really?"

## Chapter Nine

## Jericho

The witch had a sense of humor. That was delightful.

With Eoghan out of the way, she wasn't actually bad to talk to. She lost that cornered dog look and even made a joke.

I looked at the bracelet that she had tossed near my hand. The evil eye to ward off the Greens... including my son-in-law. That made me chuckle. Maybe I should drape it around my daughter to keep him away from her.

“For the record, Aunt Aoibheann, I never really talked to you until now,” Alastair said, his hands up in surrender. “I was in the SAS by the time you came along, and when I visited, you were always silent.”

“Because speaking within the Green household was forbidden,” she hissed. If she could have spat on him, she would have. “On pain of ...”

And her face faded off, losing what bravado she had, retreating into memories. Very unpleasant memories.

“I know my uncle wasn't a good man.” My son-in-law's Irish accent grated me more than the British he normally used when he wasn't pretending to be a member of the mob. I needed to send him back to Scotland with the private security company he worked for. Preferably, leaving Rose here, with me.



Alastair cleared his throat. “I know he must have been a vicious husband. And ...” He sighed, as if his next admission pained him, “I know I’m his spitting image. But I’m not him.”

As if to prove his point, he put his hand on the nape of Rose’s neck and massaged it gently, then looked at her with that infatuation that I always hated to see.

“I married Rose out of love,” he continued. “And I’d slit my own throat before harming her.”

“She’d beat you senseless before you’d have a chance,” I interjected, staring proudly at my daughter who, up until the pregnancy announcement, was still the underground MMA champion. The number of dollars that changed hands when she fought was enough to prop up a country’s economy. Though she had better stop fighting, now that we had two confirmed Vasilievs in her belly. *I refuse to think of them as Greens.*

The main course was served. Beef Wellington for most of us, but something was made special for Rose, to accommodate her stomach. A bland, starchy meal of rice with a lemon and vinegar beef.

“What’s that?” Aoibheann asked, leaning over to look at the sautéed onions, thin strips of beef and bed of white rice.

“It’s bistek, and jasmine rice.” My daughter was being very amicable to this woman. “Something from my home country. Comfort food.”

When I first had Rose in my care, she was stoic, guarded, untrusting. But now she was affectionate, loyal, and laughed so freely that it warmed my heart. I took full credit for it, because the alternative was that I'd need to give credit to Green. That would never happen.

Aoibheann smiled. "Oh! So, you were born in..." She blushed, her cheeks turning as red as her hair. "I'm sorry, I have no idea what your home country would be."

"No, it's okay. With a name like Rose Vasilieva-Green, how would you know?" I flinched at my daughter adding that last name to her moniker. It wasn't a legal change, just one she used for social occasions. "I'm from the Philippines."

"Oh," Aoibheann looked at me, then back at my daughter. "So... I... are you...?"

The woman's mouth opened and shut after several unasked questions started, then died on her lips.

Was she afraid of offending me?

"I'm sorry." She cleared her throat and pierced her beef Wellington with her fork. "I shouldn't have... never mind."

"My father was in the shadow world. He worked as an assassin." Rose was intent on putting the woman out of her misery. "You're going to be family soon, so you should know."

Aoibheann looked at me, her eyes wide with fear.

"My father was killed, and I was alone," Rose continued. If Aoibheann's black heart could break, I bet it splintered at that moment. "But before he went, my father made Jericho promise

to take care of me. I won't bore you with the details, but the only reason I'm here and not in hiding is because Dad was protecting me."

The witch seemed to sputter in disbelief, "Protect you? By bringing you into the mafia world? How isn't that harming you?"

Before Rose could answer, it was Alastair's turn to intervene.

"The former Pakhan wanted Rose to lose a fight on purpose." Alastair smiled, because this was a story he loved telling. It could paint him as a hero, though Rose would have been just fine without him. "But she didn't do as she was told." He looked at Rose and winked. "Bad girl." He turned back to the witch and continued, "She trounced her opponent, flipped off the former Pakhan, and fought her way out of the arena." He leaned down to kiss her cheek. "The woman was a gladiator, I tell you. It was the sexiest thing I had ever seen."

"Hands to yourself, pretty boy." I growled across the table.

Rose rolled her eyes, and Alastair continued to nuzzle her neck, daring to defy me.

"So shouldn't you be as far away from here as possible?" The witch was enthralled by the story.

"The last Pakhan became obsessed with hunting down Rose —" Alastair continued.

"And they found me even though I had changed my name and gone into hiding with Dad." Rose continued where he left

off.

“So, *Daddy Jericho* decided to wage war with the Pakhan, and took the crown, recognized Rose as his daughter so that no one could harm her.” Alastair finished the tale with flourish. “And I helped.”

“At a price that was too high.” I grumbled, remembering being coerced into allowing this marriage.

“But... to become Pakhan... that’s not a position you gain from just killing the last one. Is it?” What the fuck was her name? I still had no idea, though I had heard it several times. Ay-vo-eeen? E-yo-vee-eeen? The spelling was even worse. Eve. Her name was Evie, now.

Fucking Irish nonsense. It was as dumb as pronouncing E-O-G-H-A-N as Owen.

“No. The last pakhan was my brother.” I stated matter-of-factly. “That’s why the position became mine.”

I knew she wasn’t going to like that answer. Not one bit. Terror filled her eyes. She looked over at Declan, as if begging him to take her away.

There was silence in the room, as we waited for her to digest the information. She sucked air through her nose, her breaths shallow and fast.

I put my hand over the lapis lazuli bracelet, slipping it onto my wrist, and held her gaze.

“There is nothing I wouldn’t do to protect my family,” I told her. “Rose is my daughter. I also have a sister, Yuliya. Both

women can defend themselves, but I will still stand between them and hell if I must.”

Still fear was etched on her face, clearly so terrified that if I touched her with the barest graze, she would have crumbled like a sculpture made of ash.

“You’ll be my wife.” I leaned toward her, and she recoiled. “We’re going to fix this whole, doe-eyed and scared witch routine. And you’ll also be a person under my protection.”

“Our protection,” Rose corrected. “Speaking of which, the wedding. We want sooner, rather than later, yes? Before I get too fat, please. Have you thought about a dress?”

Evie wasn’t through with the discussion, and Rose’s ham-fisted attempt to change the subject wouldn’t soon make her forget that I was a killer. Guilty of fratricide. Although my son-in-law was the one who put the blade in Anton’s throat, I had started the war.

And I would do it again. Gladly.

“My wedding dress will be black,” Evie said, hesitantly, looking at her food and pushing it around the plate.

“Because it’s also your funeral?” I added, sarcastically.

“There is more than death that lies in the color black.” She smiled to herself, as if in a daydream. “It’s sleep. It’s deep, endless, and it’s only in the darkest of nights that the stars can reveal themselves. Too much light, and the glory of the heavens becomes hidden from our view.” She hummed, before adding, “Black is a happy color.”

Her voice haunted me like a melody that rode in the wind over an ocean. Had I heard her voice before? Maybe in my darkest, most fevered dreams?

“It is the color of death, but it is also the sign of power.” She continued, her voice rising in confidence. “It brings protection and wards off negative energy. There will be no evil despite being in a room full of a thousand men who wish to see me harmed. I am more than Alastair Green’s widow.”

We held our breath, her story was like a spell, holding our attention like she was a serpent and we were the mice. Was this her power? This strange fucking magnetism?

An image of her crossed my mind, of her clad in nothing but black, transparent silk cloth that wrapped her body, her creamy breasts poking through, begging for me to taste them. Would she dance? Her hips dancing like a wood nymph as her low, throaty voice wove tales of magical things? I felt myself harden under her spell, and I adjusted in my seat as I tented against my trousers.

“Jesus,” I said, clearing my throat and leaning back. “No wonder the New York Irish are terrified of you.”

“I am what they fear. The fisherman in Ireland fear redheads. It’s said if you see a red haired woman on the way to the boat in the morning, it will bring you an unlucky trip. Eoghan Green and his men believe that.” She looked at me, then smiled. “You will wear red.”

“What does red mean?” Rose asked.

The witch continued to stare, eyeing me up as if she were assessing my worth. “Health. Competition. War. It is the color of the root chakra.” She turned to Rose, her hand gripping her fork. “He is stability. Without him, the men will fall to ruin.”

I chuckled and brought the glass of Finlandia vodka to my lips.

After I swallowed a gulp, the burn going down my throat, I reached over and placed my fingers under her chin so that she was forced to look at me.

“If you think I’m hot, you should just say so.”

# Chapter Ten



## Aoibheann

The next three days flew by. I was shocked to even admit that. Time stood still in my old home. Hours felt like a lifetime, and the decade and a half living there was an eternity. Here, I was welcomed.

Each morning I ate breakfast in my room with Declan, then wandered the halls throughout the day, learning the layout of the castle. At some point during the day, I always found myself in the conservatory. It was more than just the presence of the plants that drew me here. It was the serenity of the garden. I could see the beauty of nature without entering the cold winter air.

Rose had even made sure there was a table set up in there to work on my candles.

Each night, I sat beside Jericho at dinner, and I laughed. There was no consequence to the giggling or the singing, there was no backhanding for asking a question, or for giving my opinion. Each night I felt myself coming out of my shell.

The scared witch routine, he had called it on the second night. I wouldn't call what I'd been doing all these years an act. It was a learned behavior—a mental shield to protect myself—but I was realizing I didn't need to rely on my ability to frighten the living shite out of grown men here. I was learning, remembering who I was before I had been broken.

I didn't have to protect my body, therefore my mind relaxed.

I was also learning how to handle Jericho. The things he said were offensive, but once Declan put it into perspective for me, I realized he was being ... *sarcastic*. Quickly, I learned to read the signs of humor that lay beneath the dry tone in which he delivered his insults.

When he grabbed my chin, and he told me that if I thought he was hot, I should say so, my insides flamed. Had it not been for Declan, I would have probably internally slapped the insufferable man speaking those crude thoughts out loud. I wouldn't have shown Jericho a reaction, but I would have built up another layer to protect me from the hurtful things he was saying.

Instead, I allowed my cheeks to heat, and I offered him a soft laugh. He returned it, pride flashing in his eyes. I preened at the positive attention. I wanted more of it. I'd noticed in the mornings as Declan and I ate on the terrace of my room that Jericho and Rose were taking morning runs. Then, they would train in the center of the garden.

The first morning I was concerned for her. He had grabbed her by the back and brought her to the ground, but then he released her and they both laughed.

Now, I was glancing at the clock and ready to finish our morning on the terrace as quickly as I could. I was eager to go downstairs and get a closer look. I yearned to know what they laughed about, craved the attention he was giving Rose to be given to me.

If I went to the green room, I could get a look from the ground level but still stay out of their way.

Yesterday he had taken his shirt off, despite the cool weather. He used it as a rag to wipe at the sweat dripping from his forehead. My body reacted in ... an unfamiliar way. Energy and heat swirled in my stomach and even to ... to other places.

And today, I watched him run around the terrace without Rose. He wasn't wearing a shirt at all today. Each time his back faced me, then he made the sharp right to the edge of the garden where my balcony was facing, he'd glance up and smirk, or lick his lips.

He was taunting me. He knew I was watching with my mouth gaping open. My body was betraying me while my mind was telling me not to be foolish.

Now, he rounded the corner and glanced up, this time waving at me. I gasped, realizing I'd been caught openly staring. He winked as he looked up at me, then he dipped his chin and continued his run.

I brushed back the wild strands of my hair, my heart pounding so hard and so fiercely that I could barely think straight. I finished the fruit bowl in front of me and pushed it away. "I'll take these downstairs," I said, standing.

Declan shrugged, piling up the dirty dishes. "I've got it. You sit and enjoy your morning."

"I want to take a walk. I'll do it." I grabbed the plates from him, practically yanking them from his grip.

He gave me a strange look, then stood from the table. “Are you feeling okay?”

I squealed but nodded. “I’m fine, Declan,” I said, my tone a little too short.

I had to hurry.

He continued to eye me, as if trying to break through the barriers and read my mind. I’d read a few books on telepathy, and the way he was staring at me was making me itchy. Was he doing it now? I didn’t believe there was any true evidence of such magic, but I wouldn’t dispute it, either.

“What?” I asked, irritation in my tone.

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head. “Today is my last day here. Saoirse and Haley are coming tomorrow to help you with the wedding planning.”

I froze, my hands shaking as I gripped the tray. “But ...”

Declan sighed. “Saoirse will keep you company, and Haley is better protection than me. She’ll keep you safe.”

“Is the husband coming? Jameson?”

Declan’s smile grew. “Scotty wouldn’t leave Saoirse alone in Irish territory for even a second. He’s not about to let her stay under the roof of the Russians without him.”

“Fine,” I said. “You can leave your poor aunty to fend for herself. Just know, if Jameson takes your place in my good graces, you’ll have no one to blame but yourself.”

I was teasing, and Declan knew it. He chuckled, wrapping me in a hug. The dishes in my hand clattered and he pulled away.

“Here I thought I was the favorite nephew.” Declan walked beside me as we headed inside.

“When will you leave?” I asked.

“Before lunch. Saoirse and Haley will be here tomorrow after breakfast.”

“Will she bring the babes?” I asked, hope fluttering in my chest.

Callum’s wife, Haley, had given birth to twin daughters who were only about six months old. They were the cutest little things with round chunky faces and were at the stage in their life where they were finding their voices. Little baby laughs were the best medicine to mend broken souls.

He nodded. “She will.”

My heart leapt for joy, a smile spreading across myself. It was good to allow myself excitement, to be able to show it instead of hiding it. “Good.”

Declan opened my bedroom door and bent to give me a kiss. “I’ll come whenever you need. Until then, I’ll see you at the wedding?”

“Aye.” I nodded, unable to embrace him back with the heavy tray in my hands. “Slán leat,” I said. *May health be with you.*

He dipped his chin. “Slán agat.” *Safety at you.*

Declan turned left while I headed to the right for the stairs. It was an odd sensation. The Murphy family was mine by blood, but we weren't close. Yet, I already missed my nephew.

I was truly okay with him leaving. Though I was skeptical to trust Jericho, I knew already my life could be better here than it ever was with the Greens. I still didn't want this marriage but I couldn't deny the benefits that were happening over the last few days.

I hurried to the kitchen to get rid of the dishes. Excitement was bubbling in my chest. If I was fast, I'd make it to the library and into my favorite room in time to catch Rose and Jericho training in the yard. I decided I'd even open the windows to catch their conversation.

I was longing for laughter, for more of the lightness that happened in my chest each time I allowed that emotion into my soul. This past week was the happiest I had since I was a child living in Ireland. That was probably depressing, considering nothing eventful was happening here, but I didn't care.

I just craved the healing that I desperately needed, and I knew Rose and Jericho were trying to give that to me.

I reached the library, and I searched the room for a book that would hold my interest. The covers were all gorgeous, leather-bound history books. They were old like the manor, and I was nervous to touch them. They held no dust, which meant Jericho had someone who came and cleaned the shelves. In the center of the room was an empty table for studying, and

straight ahead, to the right, before entering the conservatory there was a red leather couch.

It was my first time noticing the section, as I usually went right to the glass paned room. A box on the ground caught my attention. On the side, marked in thick black ink was *Evie*. I tilted my head to the side, approaching the box. Jericho had called me that the first time we met at Rose and Alastair's wedding. It must have been his handwriting, since he was the only one who'd ever called me that.

Flipping the lid open, I smiled. It was filled with the books I had been missing. I wondered where they had gotten to after taking inventory in my room and realizing I only had about twenty that were sent up.

I reached for the book on top. *Queen of the Night*. It was the book I was reading in my bed while Alastair took his last breath. There was no correlation of the death he was given and the reason I was reading this specific book, other than the message scrawled under the dedication.

It was one I longed to read over and over while I received the horrible treatment I did. A book I refused to ever hold in the presence of Alastair. If he had known, he would have tossed it in the fireplace. I opened it, my chest growing heavy as my fingertips brushed along the words.

*My sweetest Aoibheann,*

*You are my moonlight.*

*The pathway that lights the darkness and leads me toward the day. When I open my eyes, I find that my dreams have led me to you.*

*Each day I wake to learn you have chosen me is a day that I will never take for granted.*

*Yours forever,*

*Ryan.*

I gently closed the book, pressing it to my chest. Jericho couldn't find this book, either. I sniffled, wishing I had brought something to hide it in. It couldn't stay in this box. He'd find it too easily. I figured I'd be able to get it to my room easily enough, so tucked it under my arm and headed for the green room.

The room was warm from the heat of the plants, and I was alone, so I slipped off the cardigan I was wearing, dropping it against the couch.

The sun sparkled against the glass as I walked toward the far end. I reached the table set up for my candles and set the book down. It would be safe there until I headed back to my room.

My gaze fell toward the garden, looking through a windowpane. I frowned when I realized Rose and Jericho weren't outside today. Had he finished his run already, and decided to skip their fighting? Disappointment was there on the surface, and I huffed in response.

“What's the matter, witch?” Jericho's voice taunted me from behind.



I let out a yelp, the shock of his voice penetrating my ears so violently that it startled me. Clutching my chest, I turned to stare at him.

He drew a brow at me, as if waiting for my poor heart to settle was boring to him. “Cat got your tongue?”

“You scared me,” I said, eyeing him nervously.

My mouth dropped, taking in the beads of sweat dripping down his forehead. It reached the curve of his neck, a vein pulsating as his chest heaved. His breathing was labored, but he wasn't struggling to take in air.

My tongue darted out, licking my lips, as I tried to tell myself I didn't really long to taste him, or to inhale his oaky scent. It was just a chemical reaction. It meant nothing.

I cocked my head to the side like a curious puppy. He'd just been in the cold air, but I was sure if I touched him—felt the hardened muscles of his chest under my hand—he would heat my body like a furnace.

Desire tugged at my insides, heat coiling in my center.

I didn't like these thoughts, but I couldn't keep them away. They haunted me, and I hated that my body wanted him in a way that it shouldn't.

I took in the tattoos of two stars on each of his shoulders and wondered what they meant.

His body was cooling from his run, his heart rate still elevated. I glanced around the room, noticing the door in the corner that led outside was opened. Had he come in before

me? Was he waiting for me? My gaze turned toward the book. Did he see me come in with it?

Of course, his line of sight followed, and he narrowed in on it. “You found the box,” he said.

I swallowed, my throat becoming thick. “Yes. It was kind of you to bring them to the library. Thank you.”

He nodded. “Of course. This is your home now too, Evie. I expect you to utilize it.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. *My home*. The words sank in my stomach, and I tried to force the burning in my eyes to go away. I hadn’t had a home since my parents died.

I went to the couch, not wanting to acknowledge the sadness. I think I much rather preferred the *intrusive* thoughts of Jericho before this, and that fucking scared me.

# Chapter Eleven

## Jericho

She was watching me. Her intense stare caressed my skin like sunlight through a magnifying glass. I hated that she took two out of three meals in her room, with no one but her nephew. Sure, they were blood related, but still. The only man she should be having her meals with was me.

She blushed when I was around, a red hue on her soft face that made me crave to color the rest of her skin, to see the way her flesh changed as I gave her pleasure. My presence intimidated her, for reasons I knew probably stemmed from her past. I was sure her first marriage had carved her idea of what a husband and wife were to be.

There would be no power struggle between us, and I was desperate to show her that her opinions—her happiness—were a priority to me. I had gone from disliking her, to needing her to understand the kind of man I was.

Her tongue darted out to moisten those strawberry lips. I stifled the knee jerk reaction to run my thumb along her dainty lips. The woman was guileless. There was a childishness in her. She had never learned tact. I suppose that made sense, since she married young and was a caged little thing to a master that abused her.

What kind of abuse? I wasn't sure yet. Emotional, definitely. The way her hackles rose with every unexpected interaction. It was like her soul flinched away from those around her.

Psychologically? Oh, that most definitely happened. She had all the symptoms of someone coming out of a POW camp. Sexually? Physically? Probably. But I didn't know to what extent. I wasn't sure I wanted to know either.

She was, in essence, a woman kidnapped for decades, learning to be in the world again. Newspapers, documentaries and made-for-tv movies lead us to believe that the stories always ended when they escaped. That with freedom, came joy. But that was far from true.

My previous occupation had taught me that. Escape was just the beginning in a long, long journey.

I had a habit of picking up strays, and taking them in. First, Ajax LeBlanc, who I found when he was thinking about getting out of the Navy SEALs. Then, Rose. Now, the little Irish witch who, quite obviously, didn't have a family to look out for her before now.

That Murphy boy was too little too late. Now that they'd dropped her at my door, she was mine to take care of. Mine to take on this long journey to recovery.

I stared at the book she tried to shield from my view—*Queen of the Night*.

I smiled to myself, knowing why she hid it from me. Ryan. The cute, little faded inscription from a past lover. I was sure of it.

I shouldn't have snooped. It was a violation of her privacy. But once a spy, always a spy. I had flipped through each book,

then looked up their titles to get some insight into the dark, twisted mind of the witch that my life was now woven with.

The titles and synopsis told me what she read, but not why. It still left me curious to know why she chose the subjects she did. Was this book the reason? Did Ryan feed her with tales of witches and things that went bump in the night?

Who was Ryan? I didn't know. But at the rate the ink had deteriorated and faded, he had written that little inscription to her decades, not years, ago. Maybe she had an affair? But that didn't sound like it was possible.

Like the nosy bastard I was, I had tracked the ISBN to a small publishing house in a coastal town in Ireland. That publishing house had sent a copy of those books to one of five different bookstores: Killaloe, Kinsale, Dunfanaghy, Portstewart and Adare.

I could track down where that Ryan had bought the damn thing, but I didn't. I had snooped enough, for now.

I was embarrassed by my curiosity. The witch was a fascinating creature. Just when I thought I had pulled off one veil, there was another layer underneath, and another under that. I wanted to frantically tear them off until she was bare before me, her supple, translucent, white flesh exposed for me to hold, to taste, and to worship.

After being a spy, I knew that few people in the world were mysteries. But she was a whole fucking enigma.

She was in nothing but her pajamas—a black silk shirt and pants, with lace along the trim. She toyed with the table covered in her candle making *things*. I had no idea what the hell they were. Wax molds were sculpted to the shape of skulls, crouched animals, women with crowns, flowers, and bats. They had the strong aroma of woods, flowers, and other intense scents that filled the large glass enclosure.

“That’s a lot of candles,” I said off-handedly.

She gave a small laugh. “I also buy some, once in awhile, from a sculptress who makes them special for me.” She smiled to herself. “Declan’s been giving me an allowance to order them. Sweet lad.”

I rolled my eyes. “You won’t need an allowance from him anymore. I’ll get you your own bank card, so you can order them for yourself.”

*Like a fucking grown up...* I refrained from saying the last bit out loud.

She was out of place on that white couch. I could already see the stains of her lavender oils, and the wearing down of the pristine, egg-shell dyed leather. The damn couch was hideous, which is why I had pushed it in here—a room I barely inhabited.

I made a note to replace it. I’m sure she’d prefer something black or deep purple, like the lipstick she wore.

“You should start taking your meals outside your room.” I ran my hand through my sweat-soaked hair. “Start joining the

family. Breakfast and lunch are informal, but Rose and I take it in the kitchen.”

“Why?” She asked, her eyes defiant, but her voice was a throaty whisper.

I contemplated her question, wondering what it was she would need in order to lure her out of the room she treated like a cave. I watched as she stroked that fucking snake plant, her fingers grazing the leaves with almost reverent, sensual attention.

Was I jealous of a fucking plant?

“Because I asked you to.” I told her, and she turned her shoulder away to reach for an item across the table. In the moment it took her long, slender arm to grab a piece of string, several straight marks peeked from under the lace of her silk tank top. Marks that had lightened and faded. I knew what they were. I had seen them a hundred times over in the many ungoverned spaces around the world.

Whip marks.

In the blink that I saw them, three horizontal lines, I could tell they’d been administered by different whips. At least one must have been done with a cane. The difference in coloring and fading also meant that they had happened at different times.

My stomach roiled with the thought that someone had taken this defenseless creature and caused her physical harm. Only decades of tradecraft kept me from grabbing the nearest items



that weren't bolted down and throwing them across the room with rage.

My vision clouded, but I forced myself to level out. My anger would do no good here. She'd cower back into herself and undo the miniscule amount of progress that was made.

Someone had tortured her. That shit should have been a fucking war crime. No, I was declaring it an act of war now. Any man who still breathed and caused my precious witch any mark on her body would die.

If I could dig up Alastair Green, bring him back to life, then torture him to death, I would. I'd do it again and again. Frankly, I'd do that to my own son-in-law on principle. Just because he *looked* like her late husband.

I grabbed her chin, needing to touch her. She didn't flinch away. That was progress. She had every reason to flinch from a man. A man like me. A man who would be her husband.

Turning her face toward me, my thumb stroked her porcelain cheek.

"What will I get if I do what you say?" She asked, her curved brow raising halfway to her hairline. Her green eyes sparkled. She had some of that old-world grace and beauty that deserved to be committed into a portrait. Something in oil, and huge, framed in gold and placed over a fireplace like a queen.

"I'll think of something." I allowed the corner of my lip to tip up, giving her a reaction.

She'd deserved one from me, had earned the right inside of my mind, even just for a sliver of a second. Her mouth fell open as she drew in a labored breath.

"You won't regret it." I dropped my hand and turned, before I became tempted to take her right there on the sofa.

I had agreed to a sham marriage. But the more she laughed at my table, the more she smiled, and smelled of lilacs and that mysterious earthy musk that was uniquely just her, the more I wanted a real wife. In my bed.

Before reentering the library, and out of her solarium, I smacked my forehead, finally remembering why I had sought her out in the first place. Other than the need to see that blush of hers up close.

I asked over my shoulder, "Do you want to do your fitting here, or do you want to go out to a shop? Rose, and two of the Murphy girls are flying in."

"You'll ... let me go out for a dress fitting?" I caught the confused tone she tried to hide yet failed.

"Of course." I furrowed my brows, concerned. Did she think she was trapped here? "If that's what you want. The girls, as I understand it, will be enough security for you, between Rose and that Haley Murphy."

"You'd let me leave with just the women?" She wasn't able to compute something, the little wheel in her head was stalling. "Aren't you ... worried that I'll run away?"

"No. Should I be?" I wasn't. Not until now.

Not only would the women stop her, knowing what danger she would be in on her own, but she didn't need to be crated like a dog.

She looked back down at that infernal plant, touching the stems with her fingers. If only she paid that much attention to me. If only I could feel those tender touches on my own skin. On my stem.

I'd have to schedule something whenever she left the mansion for her fitting. Or maybe I'd take her out myself. I needed to do something to show that she was a *person* in this house. Not a pet, or a slave. I wanted her to *live* here, and not just inhabit its walls. If she was going to be a wife, then she'd be the queen of this castle. A role that she'd grow into, with time.

## Chapter Twelve

## Aoibheann

I hummed as I entered the kitchen, fidgeting with the labradorite ring on my right index finger. I woke early, showered, and dressed in something that wasn't black. I chose a yellow dress today. The color of hope. My hair was pulled into a knot on the top of my head with a few curls spilling out around my face. I hadn't felt like dealing with the tangled mess this morning.

Jericho was seated at the round table, a mug in his hand, and a plate in front of him. He was already dressed in a suit for today.

“Good morning,” I said, heading for the seat to his right.

He gazed up at me from his newspaper, that stone faced mask plastered on. He was determined not to let me into his thoughts, but I was equally intent to break down his barriers. If this arrangement was to work, I'd have to get to know him. And, more importantly, I wanted to know him.

I didn't want to acknowledge why I wanted it to work, but I knew that I did. Maybe because if it didn't, Eoghan would come after me for the things I had done to him. He saw himself as the victim in this situation. He didn't see the way his father treated me, or the fear in his wife's eyes when she realized who she truly married.

*I gave up everything for that girl. I'd do it again in a heartbeat.*

“Morning,” Jericho said, keeping his line of sight trained on me while I scooted in.

When I was settled, he reached out, grabbing the side of my chair. He yanked at it hard, the legs squeaked loudly on the wood floors, so I was sitting only centimeters away from him. His oak scent invaded my personal space, and my nostrils flared. I cleared my throat, trying to ignore the sudden heat that crept up my neck.

I reached for the tea kettle in the center of the table. “Did you ... sleep well?” I asked, still trying to get used to being involved in small talk around the table.

“Do you think the Pakhan would ever be able to sleep well?” Even his tone was flat, devoid of emotion.

He kept his gaze on me as I poured hot water into a mug, then pulled a tea bag from the pocket of my dress. I plopped it into the water. “I suppose not,” I said, though I never really thought about it.

I reached for a slice of rye toast and buttered it, then slathered it in jam.

“You’d suppose correctly.”

“What ails you?” I asked, reaching for the string on the tea bag and twirling it in the water.

“Nothing your dried herbs can fix. Thank you for Rose’s tea, by the way.” A small tilt lifted at the corner of his mouth. That

little millimeter of change did wonders for his face. A slight smile on him was worth more than the most effusive compliment from anyone else. “She’s eating, feeling much better.”

I nodded. “I’m glad. I’ll prepare more.”

“What’s in your tea bag?” he asked, as I dropped a splash of milk and mixed in some honey.

“Oolong leaves, thistles, orange peel, and rose petals.” I swirled the metal spoon in my cup mindlessly, waiting for the thick honey to dissolve.

“And what ‘ailment’ is cured with thistles?” He narrowed his eyes.

I paused, my spoon still in the air as I held it. I wasn’t about to tell him it was to prevent children in the event he ... I shook my head, not wanting to even think the thought and will it into existence. I didn’t want to believe he’d force me to do things I didn’t want to. That he’d take his privilege as a husband by force. But yes, in the event it happened, I was preparing for it.

I had told Alastair it was to help with conception when he asked. He told me I was a stupid girl and to stop believing in the magic books he bought for me. The fool had thought I was infertile. 16 years and no children? Though maybe that was a curse too, as he decided, after a while, that I was only good for one thing.

I shuddered at the memory, but those magic books let me get my revenge, eventually. I hid my smirk every time because he

was the one who was truly stupid.

“Evie?” Jericho said in a stern voice. “What is it for?”

My mouth opened, and I spouted out a lie. “Liver health.” Then, I set the spoon down and brought the cup to my lips. I made sure not to let my hands shake.

He drew a single brow and shot me a knowing look. “Try again. Without lying.”

I shook my head, refusing to look at the man. Jericho’s hand reached out and grabbed mine, enclosing around my wrist. I caught the shine of the metal on his wrist that belonged to the watch he wore. It drew my attention, and I noticed today he was wearing the bracelet I’d given him.

My heart soared, excited that he accepted the gift. Even if he didn’t believe in its healing properties, he was wearing it. I bit my lip to prevent a smile.

Sure, I felt guilty for lying now that he was wearing the evil eye. I swallowed, not wanting to admit my lie. I would buckle in deep if this were Alastair. But it wasn’t.

His hand left my wrist and he placed a finger under my chin the way he seemed to do whenever he wanted me to look at him. With a single nudge, he was forcing my head up and toward him.

Our eyes met, mine darting between each of his as I tried to gain a read on him. He was commanding my attention with a single finger, and my insides were buzzing with electricity.



Those brown eyes were as deep as the earth. His brows furrowed as he concentrated, looking for any twitch or change that would reveal all my secrets. I was drawn to him, eager for more of this attention, while also loving the close proximity—the way our knees were touching since he had scooted my chair so close to his. It was comforting to be so close to someone when they weren't the devil themselves—when they showed you even just an ounce of kindness.

His finger stroked the underside of my chin in a soft tempo, and my heart was beating so fast, I was sure it couldn't be healthy.

“Jericho,” I whispered, my mouth parting with a gasp.

If he dipped his head just a slight bit, his mouth would be near mine.

“The thistles,” he said again, his voice deep and holding the same authority as that single finger did when pressed against my chin. “I'll just go and look it up anyway. So, tell me now.”

It was suddenly hot in here, and I was barely able to think, let alone string along words for an answer. I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't think I would be strong enough to look him in the eye when I admitted it out loud.

“It causes temporary infertility.” The words came out thick, and they didn't sound like they were coming from me. I was trembling under his scrutiny, and I didn't dare open my eyes. I didn't have to because I could sense the burning of his stare.

He moved his head. His breath was against my cheek as he breathed. “Good girl,” he said against my skin.

I shivered against him. And then his lips were against my cheek, placing a soft kiss. I dropped the mug against a plate, the clattering sound filling the silent room.

He chuckled darkly, his mouth still against my skin. My chest was humming, churning the gravitational force, pushing me toward him, desperate for more, but still so very scared to act on it.

I whimpered, not sure what to do, or say. I was on sensory overload, and while I was enjoying this interaction, a part of me was scared that I was in the middle of a long dream. That I would wake up and be lying next to the evil husband. What a sick joke that would be.

The finger supporting my chin moved to brush back a few loose strands of hair from my face. He twirled a curl around his thumb, coiling it even tighter, and I turned my head into him. He took it as an invitation. Our lips crashed in a frenzied meeting.

He held the back of my head in place to take control, and shoved his tongue inside, and I moaned into his mouth. Jericho drank up the sounds, holding me against him while I fell apart. I was limp against his chest, not sure what to think.

His tongue tasted of coffee and butter, warm and incredible, jolting sensations in me that had long been dormant.

And then he pulled away and dropped his forehead to mine. “Is this a good enough prize for eating your breakfast with me?” he deadpanned.

I shoved at his chest, another laugh escaping him. It rumbled and floated through the air like a symphony. I quite liked the way he sounded when he found something humorous. It made my entire body light, like I was floating on a cloud.

There was still darkness in this moment, but the stars were shining bright. They were lighting the path for a new journey, and I couldn’t wait to find the end destination.

I flattened my palm against his chest, joining in on the laughter. We stayed like that for a moment, until a throat clearing pulled me away from him, and out of our little bubble.

Rose stood beside Alastair in the entrance of the kitchen. His hand was wrapped around her waist, holding her possessively.

“Good morning,” I said, blushing with embarrassment.

“Good morning,” Rose said, smiling as they entered the room.

Alastair pulled a chair out for Rose, helping her sit, and my eyes widened as I realized my tea had spilled on my toast, and over onto the table.

“Oh no,” I murmured, grabbing the cloth napkin beside me.

I attempted to clean up the mess, frantic to get it taken care of before anyone could yell at me. Before anyone would hit me. But Jericho’s hand reached out and covered mine. “It’s okay. It’s just a spill.”

I glanced at the mess on the table, then back to Jericho. Slowly, I nodded, then set the napkin down. Alastair grabbed the plate and the teacup before he sat, then wiped up the liquid that had fallen on the table with a paper towel.

Alastair retrieved a fresh plate and cup for me, while Rose and Jericho talked about their training routine.

“The babies are suspended in a fluid sack, they’re fine.” Rose insisted.

“How big can the sack be if you’re still fucking tiny?” Jericho countered, looking at her belly. She was starting to protrude, a little, but those tiny pea-sized twins were still too small to impact her muscular frame.

“They’ll be fine. I can keep training.” She almost whined like a teenager. “Come on, Dad. Shouldn’t I be allowed to choose when I stop training.”

“No.” Jericho and Alastair said in unison.

Jericho gave his son-in-law an angry look, as if annoyed that they were on the same side. Alastair quirked a brow, and flashed a perfect, white smile, enjoying Jericho’s discomfort.

Conversation hummed, disagreements and laughter were swapped over the table, accompanied by the clanking of silver on porcelain, and the sound of hot water and coffee being poured. The morning had been very domestic, normal in a sense. But the reality of my life still floated around the air.

I may have briefly experienced joy, but I wondered if the magpie found its other half. But then, I remembered I was

born into the Irish mafia and this man was the Pakhan of the Russian Bratva, and I knew I would always be destined for sorrow.

## Chapter Thirteen

## Jericho

The feel of those rough, spiral curls in my hand made me want to fist them until I controlled her head, so I could keep her eyes on me now, later, forever. Her skin had been cool and smooth in my hot palm, and that kiss ... It was something out of a dream. Like I had drunk cool water after crawling through the desert.

I wanted to trace my tongue over the blush that started at her neck and crept up her jaw, and landed at the sweet, roundness of her cheekbones.

Maybe I would have, if my cockblocking daughter and her piece of shit husband hadn't cramped my style. Children truly have the worst timing.

But something started turning around in my head. My need to get her out of the house and alone somewhere—anywhere.

I canceled the family dinner that night and asked Evie to put on a cocktail dress. She eyed me with suspicion at first, asking who else was coming.

“We’re going out,” I said, putting my finger under that chin. Her eyes gazing at me in that siren way of hers. “Just the two of us.”

“Where are we going?” she asked, and that fear shadowed her face again. The fear that was starting to twist my gut every time I saw it. How deep did her scars run?

“It’s a surprise.” I tried to sound soothing, but she pursed her lips. I probably missed the mark and sounded smug instead. “You’ll like it. I promise.”

She looked skeptical now. Her hand coming to a jutted hip, her fingers resting at the rounded curve at her waist.

“And if I don’t like it?” She asked, challenge in those pretty green eyes.

“If it doesn’t take your breath away, then I’ll owe you one.”

Her eyes widened. “What will I get?”

“What do you want?”

“I—I—don’t know ...” She looked around as if the answer to that existential question would materialize from the walls. She always did that. Searched for an escape when she couldn’t find the right answer.

I put my finger under her chin, and just like every time before, she obeyed the gesture when I pulled her look at me.

“Don’t worry.” I reassured, taking the finger of my freehand and tracing it along the edge of her scalp near the wisps of her hair. “I’ll sweep you off your feet.”

When she came down the stairs that evening, I could have eaten my words. She was gorgeous.

Her midnight blue dress ended in a full, tulle skirt that finished at her calves. It was see-through over the bodice, and cinched at the waist, giving her that soft, feminine hourglass figure. Shiny rhinestones were scattered in a swirling pattern



from her shoulder to her left hip giving the impression she was draped in stars.

Her hair was in a simple twist and her makeup was that witchy, dramatic thing she preferred. All-in-all, she looked like a queen of the night, which was appropriate for where I was taking her.

I drove my Audi A8 down the winding country roads, and she had her nose pressed to the glass the whole time, watching the world fly by.

The Green estate wasn't far from mine, so she should have been used to the surroundings. But she looked like she was seeing it all for the first time.

I turned up the volume of my country rock station, as twangy voices sang of girls and trucks, and dogs. I didn't relate to it much, but I got used to it when I was in the Army infantry, which was dominated by country boys. That was part of the reason I got out and joined the Great Skills program, then transitioned into the CIA.

When we came to the great glass mansion that made up the botanical garden, the trees and shrubs visible through the transparent walls, her jaw dropped.

She was silent as I parked the car, opened her door, and led her by the hand up the marble exterior steps to the entrance.

She could do nothing but sigh and whimper, seeing the exotic flowers and plants, and the butterflies that flapped their

colorful wings. A little blue butterfly landed on her shoulder, stayed a moment before flying away.

“Mr. Vasiliev!” cried a male voice.

A man with gray hair, wearing a black suit came jogging toward us.

“I have a great feeling about tonight,” the man said as he approached us. “Tonight’s the night.”

I grinned at the man. “You’ve said that every day this week, Charlie.”

“Yes, but every day that it didn’t happen increases the chances that it’s going to be tonight!” He clapped his hands in front of him as if he was praying and glanced up at the sky through the glass roof. Then he looked at Evie and seemed confused. “This isn’t Rose.”

“Very astute!” I teased the man. “This is my fiancée, Eve.”

She gave me the side eye as I called her that name. I refused to call her that infernal, impossible to spell Irish name of hers. I had taken to calling her Evie for awhile.

But tonight, she was Eve, the temptation of man, named for the darkness of night that she embodied.

“Fiancée?” Charlie’s eyes grew wide. “Fiancée!” He clapped his hands again. “Now I know it will be tonight. What good luck to have a couple in love here. Come, come!”

He beckoned us further into the room.

I placed an arm around Eve's waist, and whispered in her ear, "He owns the place. He doesn't get out much."

I let my hand drift down the rough fabric of the tulle until they landed on the curve of that delicious rear. She stiffened, going ramrod straight before regaining her composure and relaxing into my side.

Charlie led us to the center of the great glass house. The air was humid, wet, and the scent of earth carried in the air. Eve came alive as if she, herself was one of the many blooming plants that surrounded her. She walked out of my reach to lean over the rails, bringing her face to some exotic blooms with speckles on yellow petals. Maybe it was my imagination, but I swear, the plants leaned back, as drawn to her as she was to them.

I couldn't blame them. I always felt like I was being pulled on my feet, taken off balance when she was near.

She was distracted, flitting from plant to plant, like a dancer meandering up and down a stage, lost in the rhythm of music. I had to grab her wrist to bring her back down to earth. She gasped, and electricity pulsed where we joined. Her eyes flashed toward me, and there was a sparkle I had never seen. It was unmistakable lust.

"You did it," she said, her eyes glassy. "You took my breath away."

I chuckled. "Don't admit defeat yet." I took her chin in my hand. "We haven't even gotten to the best part."

I leaned in to kiss her, our lips touching, and she opened without hesitation, leaning into me, her hands grasping my lapels. I tasted her soft, wet tongue and sucked it into my mouth, wanting to devour her whole. Just when I was about to get lost, Charlie cleared his throat and we pulled apart.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, feeling like a teenage boy caught with his dick in his hand.

“Oh, this is all a good sign!” Charlie smiled. “But I don’t want to miss it.”

“Miss what?” Eve peered at me for guidance. I offered her my elbow and she wrapped her delicate hands around it, embracing it to her chest like it was a life preserver.

We followed Charlie further into the great indoor jungle that he had created until we were in the misty heat of a lush, tropical jungle. Sounds of nocturnal birds and bats came in through the speakers.

“It makes the plants feel more at home,” Charlie commented.

He led us to a table set for two, a small candle in the middle. A white linen cloth draped to the ground and the golden chairs seemed very out of place in the surroundings. The impression was incredible luxury in the middle of a wilderness.

Servers came and placed a dish of partridge and cranberry sausage rolls in front of us, then poured two glasses of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. We may as well have had fast food, for all the attention she paid to it.

And I was paying attention to her.

“This is glorious,” she said, on a sweet sigh, and the plants seemed to shiver in gratefulness at her compliment.

Charlie smiled, kindly, his prominent laugh lines etched deep into his leathery face.

“Have you noticed our star for the evening?” Charlie asked her, leaning down as though they were in a conspiracy, noticing a fellow green thumb.

“There’s more?” Her eyes bugged out, her mouth hung open.

With a palm in offering, he gestured toward a humble, white flower only an arm’s length away.

“Our queen of the night,” Charlie said proudly.

Eve’s eyes grew wide in wonder when she saw the sharp petals of a white, closed blossom. Her hands came to her lips as she gasped in wonder. I swear, a tear started forming in the corner of her eye.

The flower looked completely innocuous to me. It was a spikey, pale thing on top of thick cactus leaves that limply sat to its side or leaned on its neighbors for support. I had it on good authority, from Charlie himself, that this was one of the most prized possessions of any greenhouse owner in the world.

I saw nothing to gawk at. But I knew nothing about plants other than the ones that caused itching and needed to be avoided. The blossom who sat across from me, with her wide green eyes and hair like fire, was far more interesting than any greenery.

A tear rolled down that white cheek, and I frowned.

“Eve?” I said, reaching out to her cheek.

“It’s going to bloom tonight.” Her eyes were wide, like she was giving me the greatest news.

“So I hear.” I looked at Charlie for assistance, hoping for some clarification. Why would that make her cry? But the reverent man seemed to understand her overwhelming feelings.

He looked patiently at me, then explained. “The Queen of the Night blooms only once a year, and it lasts only for one night. By morning it will wilt away.”

Okay. I didn’t think that explained things as well as he thought it did. But I let it go, and looked back at Eve, as another tear trailed down her cheek and hovered on the tip of her chin.

“Witnessing the flower means good luck and joy for a lifetime.” Eve dropped her hands slowly, leaning in toward the flower. Again, I was hallucinating because I swore the flower leaned back. “Even people who grow them may never see it actually bloom.”

As if it was responding to her words, the flower petals that were closed had started to open, releasing a fragrant, sweet perfume. Eve started to shake, her hand thrusting out to grasp mine. Her grip was strong—for her—as she held my palm, squeezing it as if I could ground her.

I placed my other hand over hers so that her cold hand could lay flat between my palms.

As the flower opened, her face lit up like the face of the moon. It was as though they reflected each other's light, growing more luminous in each other's presence.

"I've been waiting for this bloom for weeks," Charlie whispered.

I had been waiting for Eve, my queen of the night, to bloom for days. Days that felt like a lifetime. I wanted to tuck a hand under her chin and turn those eyes back to me, but I held back. She looked at that flower the way I was staring at her now. We each admired our own queens, and once again, I was in a position to feel jealous of a fucking plant.

## Chapter Fourteen



## **Aoibheann**

Jericho's hand wiped a stray tear from my cheek as we entered the library. I hadn't been able to stop the tears for the rest of the evening, even now when we were home. Not since watching the queen of the night bloom. I wanted to stay there until sunrise and watch the petals wither, but Jericho wasn't as impressed as Charlie and I were.

My heart had been in overdrive since the second Charlie pointed out the delicate flower. It was a once in a lifetime event that only a small number of people would ever be lucky to see. And I was one of them.

Thanks to Jericho.

The tears were from both sadness, and happiness. They were from overwhelming gratitude that someone had been so thoughtful, that Jericho who knew me for less than a week was the first person to truly see through the layers and reach inside of my heart.

I'd forever be indebted to him for helping me find myself again after the horrible past I endured for sixteen years.

"The night's not over yet," Jericho said, his thumb stroking my cheek and wiping away my tears.

I stared at him, my mouth gaping open. The bar may have been set low with my first husband, but Jericho was blowing any expectations a woman could have right out of the water.

“What else could you possibly have done?” I finally asked once I managed to seal my jaw shut.

He smirked, and my heart lurched forward. I reached up to trace the outline of his mouth, wanting to remember it, even if the kind man that stood before me turned into an evil monster after our wedding. I loved it when he smiled, when he offered a piece of himself to me without hesitation.

“You’ll see,” he said.

His warm hand left my face, and I winced at the loss. My lips puckered out into a pout, but before I could complain he grabbed my wrist and opened the doors that led to the conservatory before I could complain.

My eyes narrowed in the dark. It was late in the evening and there was a sliver of moonlight shining through the glass ceiling, yet it still seemed ... darker than usual. Harder to see in the nighttime. Jericho went to flip a switch, but I stopped him, placing my hand on his arm. “No, don’t. You’ll wake them,” I whispered.

He furrowed his brows. “They ... they’re plants, Eve.”

“So? They need rest. You can burn their leaves.”

He sighed, shaking his head. “It’s just for a moment, then we will turn it off.” He pulled away from me and flipped the switch.

I went to yell at him, but it was too late. The lights were on, and I realized what he was trying to show me. The room wasn’t as bright as it was in the day. It wasn’t bright at all

actually. Strands of lights lined the panels of the glass ceiling and twinkled like stars. The white couches in the center of the room were gone. Replaced with dark leather sofas. In between them was a new coffee table with books. Potted lilacs sat on each of the four end tables that surrounded each arm of the couches.

The once white trim of the windowpanes on the walls and ceiling were now dark. I squeezed his hand in mine, the flood works starting all over again. When we reached it, my fingers ran along the new plants.

“This is beautiful,” I said. “More ... like ... me.” My voice cracked. He’d meant it when he said this was my home now. I turned to look up at him. “You did this for me?”

His lips twitched. “I wanted you to feel comfortable here.” He pulled me into him, wiping the tears away.

“Don’t cry.”

“I can’t help it,” I said, standing to kiss him. “No one’s ever been so thoughtful to me before.” I was full on sobbing now and Jericho pulled us onto the couch.

He settled me into his lap so I was straddling him and looked up as he brushed the curls away from my face. He didn’t have to silently command me to look at him because I already was. He had my undivided attention. I’d never tear my eyes from him again after this evening.

“Eve?” he said.

The new name he'd given me sent a shiver down my spine. He spoke it so seductively, like a glass of iced tea sliding down my throat on a hot summer day. Jericho's nose nuzzled against my cheek, and my tears dampened his skin.

"Eve? What do you want?" he asked, his tone pained, as if I was hurting him, as if he didn't want to know the answer to that question.

"What do you mean?"

I whimpered when his tongue darted out, lapping up the tears that were falling. A hand fisted into the tresses of my wild hair. He tugged hard enough that it pulled my head back so I was looking at the ceiling.

I gasped, taking in the silver moonlight that shone into the conservatory, and then I was moaning when his tongue slid along the base of my neck.

"I mean," he said, his tongue trailing up to my chin, where his teeth grazed against me.

My hips moved of their own accord against him as I straddled his lap. I was burning on the inside, ready to combust with desire that I didn't think I'd ever feel again.

He released my hair, and his finger grabbed my chin, instructing me to look at him. "I will give you whatever you want. This marriage is an arrangement to protect you, but no one has asked you what you wanted."

"I—I—" I sighed. I couldn't think straight.

Not with his hands all over me, worshiping me. Not after the most amazing night of my entire life. I'd never forget this, never forget how he made me feel tonight.

His thumb dragged along my bottom lip, and he stared at me with wonderment twinkling behind the surface. I yearned to learn more of what he was feeling. I needed to know everything about this man, to understand why he was so compassionate when someone like him should be cruel, maybe even worse than the first man I'd married. I wanted to be able to—with just a single look—understand what he was thinking.

“I need to know what you want. Do you want a marriage that isn't real? That it only exists on paper to protect you from the things you fear? Or do you want a marriage between a man and a woman? Do you want me to know you in all the intimate ways a husband should know his wife?”

His mouth, God his skilled tongue darted out again, this time tracing a path along my neck until he reached the neckline of my dress.

I grabbed his hand and placed it over my chest, above my heart. “In just one day, you've understood me more than anyone has ever been able to.”

“You like flowers. So I gave you some,” he said, dismissing the amazing things he did today.

I shook my head. “You saw inside of my soul.” I dropped my forehead against his. “I finally bloomed today, and I did not wake with the sunrise tomorrow ... I'd die a happy woman. A content woman.”

I sucked in a shaky breath, not believing the next words that I was preparing to say. But they were true. “I want this marriage.”

He sighed, his chest deflating. Had he been nervous about what I might say? Maybe I was getting swept up in the whirlwind of today, but I already knew this was unconventional. I knew I was marrying him whether I wanted it or not. But I also knew that I’d never find someone so willing to give me everything that they could in order to make me happy.

No one would ever give me the gift he’d given me today. And now, I wanted to give him something in return. Jericho’s hand over my chest squeezed, massaging a handful of my breast, and I moaned. His touch was gentle, nothing like what I had experienced before.

We kissed again—intense and passionate. I wanted to show him just how thankful I was for the evening he’d given me. I took in the taste of his tongue, the saltiness of his lips against mine until I had to pull away, panting for air.

My hands gripped his jacket. “There’s something I have to tell you. Before ...”

He nodded, cupping my face in his hands.

“Alastair wasn’t kind to me,” I said, sniffing away any loose tears. I refused the happiness to turn into sadness, but I was nervous to show him my naked body.

A low rumble left his chest that almost sounded like a growl. His hands gripped my face tighter. “Anything he did to you, I promise I will never do.”

I shivered, feeling that promise pulsate through my veins. I barely knew him, but I felt it deep inside of me that I could trust him with all my deepest secrets. Still, I wasn’t ready to share everything. “I believe you. I just ...”

Jericho lifted his head, pressing a kiss to my nose. It was distracting in all the right ways, but I needed to focus.

I pulled away so he couldn’t keep me away from the task at hand. My hands ran through his hair while I continued to watch him. I studied his face, taking in the soft features of his mouth, and the way he was eyeing me with ... lust. My heart was pounding. I was desperate to remember this evening forever.

I was dying to always hold these feelings tight to me and cherish them forever. When the morning came, and the terrors took me, I’d have the vision of Jericho Vasiliev beneath me, gazing up at me as if I were the brightest star in the sky.

I’d have the joy of seeing the most precious flower on earth blossom, only for it to wither into nothingness by the time the sun rose again. I’d cherish the way his hard body felt against mine, and I’d never take for granted what it was like to be the center of his attention.

I cleared my throat, preparing to tell him of the horrible things, to show him the scars on my body so that I could give him even just a fraction of the gift he gave me this evening.

“The things I would have had to endure for even just a fraction of an evening like this ...”

I shook my head in disbelief, hating the way recalling the memories made my stomach churn. The acid turned to bile crawling up my throat, but I refused to let Alastair take control of this moment between Jericho and me.

I swallowed, forcing the rest out before I could change my mind. “He liked to punish me for everything I did. I wasn’t allowed to speak to anyone. If I did, he’d make me stand against the wall and whip me until I bled. He did other things, worse things. But that ... the lashing ... my body is scarred because of it.”



## Chapter Fifteen

## Jericho

“Fuck!” She flinched at my outburst, and I was immediately wracked with guilt. I reached for her, wanting to console the fear I had instilled out of her. “I’m sorry.”

She started to weep, her shoulders shaking with each sob that left her body. “No, I’m sorry.”

She covered her face in her hands, leaning away from me, but I wrapped my arm around her waist, refusing her any more space from me. I needed her near me. I needed the comfort of knowing she was here. Alive. Safe.

I closed my eyes against the rage building inside me.

“How much scarring?” I tried to keep my voice low, and even, but her little whimper told me I had missed the mark.

I let my free hand trace up and down her arm, trying to soothe my little blossom. I was braced, my gut in my throat. I felt like a vehicle that was about to roll over, right as it teetered on two wheels before it plunged, giving in to its momentum and crashing to its side.

“Everywhere you haven’t seen.” Her voice was getting quieter, and I could feel her retreating into herself. She was wilting away, and I didn’t know how to stop her. I didn’t know how to get past this except to simply go through it, quickly and violently.

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

I opened my eyes.

I couldn't move as she sniffed and wiped at her face. Her green eyes were distant. She looked to the side, not at the couch, but past it into some terrible memory.

Images of the things I had seen in my years flashed through my mind. Prisoners of war, spies caught while in the line of duty, criminals who made examples of their enemies. I had seen it all. Surely, I, Jericho Vasiliev, the former spy and contract killer could stomach whatever this little thing had endured.

“Show me.” I told her. “I need to see it.”

Seeing it would destroy me. I knew it. She wailed, her lips pulled back baring her teeth, but she complied. She stood in front of me, and with shaking hands she undid the zipper at her side. With a small jerk at the strap on her shoulders, it fell to the floor, and pooled at her feet.

Her black lace bra and panties hid almost nothing. From her clavicle to her knees were straight lines, crisscrossing over her slender form. I saw that not even her supple, small breasts had been spared from what that bastard had done.

And if I thought the front was bad, the back was worse.

With a deep breath, she crossed her arms in front of her and turned around, and there was barely any flesh that hadn't been marked. Some had faded with time. Some were only a couple years old.

She shivered, from the cold, and her confession. She slowly turned back around, her eyes still averted. Wherever she was, she wasn't in the room with me.

“You won't want that real marriage now.” She nodded with painful finality and sniffles. “You may want to rescind your offer. Even a marriage on paper is more than what I can hope for.”

She took a small step back, then hesitated. Then took another.

“You mistake my silence, Eve.” I told her, placing my hand on an armrest of the sofa and curling my fingers around the leather, digging into it until my nails felt like they'd snap off. “Look at me.”

She obeyed. And a twisted part of my soul craved to earn her submission. Not like Alastair, but the submission that came from trust and respect.

“I'm in awe, Eve.” Her emerald eyes glistened with tears as I spoke. “I don't know how much pain you endured, or how many tears and screams you had to swallow. I don't know how much mental strength that took. But I am amazed at your strength.”

She looked at me sideways and almost rolled her eyes. “You're just being kind.”

I couldn't help a chuckle.

“No one has ever accused me of being kind, witch.” I said as I perused her body. Besides the scarring— Hell, even with the

scarring—her body was extraordinary. Slim, graceful, like the flowing water on a steady stream.

“You should wear those scars like a badge of honor,” I told her, and her brow creased in confusion. “You should show the fucking world what was done to you, and how you overcame. Those aren’t imperfections. They’re fucking medals earned for injustice. Every person who knew what was happening should be ashamed that they stood by silently as this was done to you. You have every right to show them their sins. Show them the power, and grace you allowed them, while they did *nothing*.”

Eoghan Green. Alastair Green, my son-in-law. Every member of the New York Irish who had an inkling. Every one of them should die.

She shut her eyes, another crystal tear falling down her high cheekbone, “You don’t have to say this. I know it’s hideous ...”

“No!” I yelled, and she jumped at my outburst. I groaned, trying to calm my voice. To quell the rage. “*He* was hideous. Unable to care for the gift that stood in front of him. The treasure he could have had.”

“This isn’t all.” She let out in a wail, taking another small tiptoe back, moving away from me. “I’m a corpse in bed. That was what my husband said to me. Fucking asshole.” She pulled her arms tighter around her abdomen. “I don’t know if I can even feel anything.”

*Ah, so there was the problem.*

I clenched my fist so hard, my nails cut into my palm until I felt it break into the skin. Anything to keep me from falling into that woman as she bared herself for me.

“What do you want?” I prompted and she almost jumped out of her skin, having forgotten that I was there. “If I could give you anything, what would you desire?”

“I can’t say it.” She finally wiped a tear, and it left a sheen on her perfect face. Her breaths heaved. “I want...” she started, then turned her face away from me just a fraction. “I want to feel. That’s what I fantasize about. But the moment anyone touches me I... I... can’t.”

She put a hand to her heated cheek and retreated into her own world. I had to draw her out, this skittish little creature.

“I want to enjoy intimacy.” Her voice had a ring of helplessness. “I want to feel close to someone.”

She tilted her head back, as though her green eyes were calling for mercy from heaven itself. “But who could ever be attracted to this?”

She took her hand and ran her nails over a trail of scars. Three parallel lines across her stomach.

When no one answered her pleas, her shoulders tilted forward, and she closed in on herself once again. She didn’t know that her pleas were heard by the angel of death, and I was here to make her wishes come true.

“I should go,” her voice was now a whisper. She reached down to retrieve her clothes, but I moved my black loafer,

pinning the fabric under her my heel.

“We’re not done here.” I told her.

She was a woman defeated. And I was going to breathe new life into her.

She tried to tug at the dress, but she wasn’t strong enough. In her frustration, she huffed, and started to walk away.

“Stop.” I commanded. I was well aware that I was using the voice that made men freeze in their tracks. “Come here.”

Her eyes turned to me. It was slow, frightened, like a deer in headlights unsure of what to do.

“I said come here, witch.”

Her back straightened at the endearment, and she tried to flash me some of that fire—that hate, and contempt that she so often used. But the anger in her eyes flickered, then blew out. Her resolve and desire dousing them, until nothing but obedience remained.

She walked to me until she was within arm’s reach, then stopped.

I looked at her from head to toe in cheap, male appreciation of a beautiful female form.

She almost laughed. “There’s no way you could want this.”

She was speaking badly of her body again, and I knew that was something we’d have to fix over time. But not tonight. We had more pressing matters to get to.

“Give me your hand,” I stretched out mine. She nervously touched her fingers to my palm. I took her wrist, pulling her back toward me until her knee landed on the couch, her other foot precariously off balance on the floor.

I took her hand and ran it down the length of my hardened cock. “Can you feel how much I want you?”

It made her shiver, and I recognized it as fear. The same fear that would overtake her and turn her into that corpse she dreaded being.

But I wasn't Alastair Green. She wouldn't be able to retreat into her mind, leaving nothing but a limp body behind.

“Take the rest of your clothes off.” She responded to that voice, and my commands.

She wasn't hard to figure out. She was just a tougher nut to crack because she was so good at erecting her walls. She had built a veritable fortress around her soul. But no walls could keep me from finding her.

“Come,” I let my voice pitch low, soothing, patting my lap. “Sit right here.”

She was shaking, shivering like an autumn leaf in the wind. She shook her head, her arms came up to cover her breasts and take them from my view.

I knew that what I was about to do would test my will and fortitude unlike any other. But if it worked, then the rewards would be infinite.



“I’m not going to touch you.” I reassured her, and she looked surprised. “A real man doesn’t have to touch you, or hurt you, to own you.”

She looked confused, and even skeptical. But she moved on shaky legs to straddle my lap, her bare pussy hovering over my zipper. My cock was aching to push through my pants and into that heat. I had to mentally warn him to slow down. To tell him that he’d get his dues soon enough. The rewards of patience would be more than we could handle.

She took a moment to settle into my lap, and I longed to run my fingers through her hair, but I didn’t.

Tonight, I wouldn’t touch her, just as I had promised. Because this was about banishing the ghosts of her past, and to give her pleasure.

Her eyes were downcast, humble. Such a strange thing to see on such a strong witch.

“Look at me.” I ordered, and she did, her head remained tilted down, and she looked through the curtain of her thick lashes. The illusion made her look young. How could someone look at her sixteen years ago and want to break her?

I wanted to pull him out of the grave and kill him all over again.

“Feed me your tits.”

She looked confused at my request. Her questioning eyes searched me for answers, and I simply raised a brow, challenging her to figure it out. She tried to put her hands

around my head to pull me toward her chest, but I didn't budge.

"I didn't tell you to pull me over." I said, *tsking* at her. "I told you to feed me your tits. Take them in your hands and offer them to me."

Her confusion continued, but to her credit, she tried to obey. She placed a plump, round breast in her hand and leaned forward until the nipple was at my lips. I devoured it. I took it into my mouth, practically taking her breast whole. My cock was raging, my hands barely containing themselves on the armrest, and I groaned at the taste of her creamy skin.

She arched her chest into me. She braced her hands on my shoulder. She was shaking again, but not from fear. Her head fell back in ecstasy, that beautiful mane of curly hair trembling behind her.

"The other," I said as I released her breast with a pop.

She obeyed, placing her other breast into my mouth for more of the same.

She started to grind herself against my length. It was a slight movement, just a little tilt of her hips but unmistakable. She wanted more friction in her heat.

"You have your choices," I said after I released her breast. Her glassy, lustful eyes looked down at me. "You can dry hump me like a horny little witch, or you can take out my cock and bounce." I smiled at her, and her lips parted. "Just like I said you would the first time we met."

“I don’t know... I...” She swallowed, her eyes half closed. “I’ve never been on...” She swallowed again, “on top.”

Just as I had suspected. She had never been able to gain her own pleasure.

“That’s why you’re going to do it now.” I grinned, my teeth clenched, my body aching to turn the tables and plunge into her heat. “The choice is if you want clothes between us, or not. Either way, you’ll get yours.”

“You mean...?” She paused, her head tilting slightly. “That you don’t need your pleasure?”

“No.” My cock bobbed in protest, and I groaned. “Tonight is about you. So take your pick, witch.”

I leaned back further into the sofa, trying to come off nonchalant. Like I wasn’t being tortured by the woman who was bare, body and soul, on my lap.

She reached down, her fingers shaking as she pulled down my zipper.

“Good girl,” I growled, as she set my cock free, and he came out at attention, swollen and ready to find his place inside her warmth. “Fuck, Eve, I have never wanted anyone more than I want you.”

I slammed my head against the back of the sofa, hoping for a jar of pain to help me regain my self-control.

She rushed forward, placing her hand behind my head, her eyes worried.

I smiled at her. “Sweet girl,” I cooed. “You have no idea how badly I need you right now.”

Her eyes still wide with wonder, her hand went down to my shaft. She settled herself near the tip of my cock, her heat radiating onto my tip. She was wet. Fucking soaked. I could feel it. The scent of her sweet arousal flavored the air around us.

She plunged down, taking me all the way in, to the hilt. She screamed, her hands coming to the collar of my shirt, and she held on, twisting the fabric in her hand. She whimpered as she settled, my length pushing her apart from the inside out.

Fuck, she was tight. I could feel her throbbing and quivering around me.

As her breaths evened out, I waited, but she stayed still, still shaking like a leaf about to fall off the branch in the wind.

“Sweetheart,” I said gruffly, “you’re going to have to move. You feel amazing, but a man can only take so much. My control is about to fucking snap.”

She placed her forehead on my temple. I felt her breath over my cheeks as she whispered, “Let it snap.”

I groaned in frustration. I couldn’t let it snap. Not yet. Not when this was her first experience since the man who scarred her.

“Safe word, baby.” I was fighting with all my might to keep my mind working. “Pick one. Now.”

She took her time, the fucking witch. She grazed her nose along my jawline until it nudged my ear. Her eyes darted around the room, looking for inspiration.

“Hurry, Eve, before I fucking break.”

She laughed lightly, looking around. “It’s hard to pick. So many things I could say during the act,” she panted. “I want to make sure I make the right choice.”

I groaned, and she smiled. She was enjoying my pain, and my lust. But I had promised. I had sworn that this was about her, and I had to honor it or lose her forever.

“Damn it, Eve,” I growled, clenching my fist even harder until they turned white and shook.

“Thistle,” she whispered.

That was good enough for me. I wrapped an arm around her waist and flipped her over, never breaking our connection until she lay on the black couch with me on top of her.

“Look at me,” I commanded, as I slowly pistoned my hips, sliding in and out of wet heat.

Her green eyes turned to me, and her hands curled into the fabric at my shoulders. Her mouth hung open as she gasped at every thrust.

“I don’t ever want you to be scared of me,” I told her, before thrusting in deep again. “I swear I’ll never hurt you.”

Her cool hand came to my cheek, and I turned my head to kiss her palm, using my free hand to keep it in place as I thrust

and thrust into her.

Another tear went down her cheek, but I knew it wasn't from pain. The only reason she would ever cry from now on would be from pleasure.

I knew the moment she started toppling over the edge. Her skin heated, a blush crawling from her heart, up her neck, to those creamy cheeks. Her eyes grew wide, her hands pulled me in closer.

Her mouth opened in a silent scream as I joined her. My entire body tensed, then relaxed all at once. I shot my cum into her, filling her even more. I was dizzy and light-headed, and she was a mewling, whimpering mess. As the last spurt of my arousal released inside her, I felt the moisture between us. She had soaked me thoroughly, and I smiled, feeling the satisfaction of claiming her, and marking her as mine.

But when I looked away from where our bodies joined, I found her weeping, biting down on a knuckle of her index finger.

Automatically, I kicked myself, realizing that I should have given her more time.

“Baby? What happened? Are you okay?”

I cupped her face in my hands, turning her toward me. She slowly brought up her cool hands, interlacing our fingers and she kept on weeping.

“Take that worried look off of your face, Jericho,” she whispered. “These are happy tears.”

## Chapter Sixteen

## **Aoibheann**

Jericho's hands ran through my hair as the warm water fell against my back. He'd carried me here, leaving my dress on the floor of the conservatory. I buried my head in his chest, the grin on my face hidden while I enjoyed his fingers massaging my scalp with his shampoo.

I was sore from him, from the stretching my body did to accommodate him. He rinsed the shampoo from my hair, then continued to wash me with a wet cloth and soap. He scrubbed and rinsed each arm before kissing them. The water was soothing the tender muscles just as good as any of my herbs would have. Even more because he was the one washing me.

I stood, my head tilted back as the water splashed my face, as he continued to my breasts, then lower to my belly. A moan escaped me when his hand traveled lower, cupping me between the apex of my thighs.

His fingers lingered at my sex, playing and teasing before he pulled away. My heart soared when Jericho dropped to his knees before me. I glanced down at him through my thick lashes as he peered up at me, his gaze never leaving while he delicately cleaned my legs.

There was something powerful about this position that I wanted to explore. The ruler of the courts bowing to me when I saw myself as a servant. My hand reached through his damp hair while his hands massaged the backs of my thighs.



He pressed a kiss to my stomach, then lower and lower until his lips were against my center. His tongue darted out, tasting me with a feverish need. My mouth parted of its own accord, and I squeezed my eyes shut as I gave into the unfamiliar pleasure.

Jericho continued to lap at me, his tongue flicking against the sensitive parts of my pussy. I fisted his hair, pulling him closer to me. I was just as desperate for him as he was for me at that moment. He pulled away, pressing a kiss against me before he looked up.

“You’re the sweetest nectar that I could ever taste,” he said, sliding a finger inside of my entrance. “Tell me, sweet Eve. Am I the first who has ever tasted you?”

I nodded. “The only.”

A rumble of approval sounded from his chest, and he pushed a second finger inside of me. “The first and the last.”

“Yes,” I said on a breathy sigh as I struggled to stay upright.

I yelped at the sudden bite of pain surging through me when his teeth scraped my clit. My nails dug into his shoulders, bracing myself for more, but a kiss came next, soothing away that sudden jolt with a desirable pleasure.

“That’s it, baby. See? I won’t hurt you.”

I nodded, still trying not to fall over while he continued to fill me. His long digits pulled out of me before plunging back inside, and then his palm pressed against my clit and rubbed it

just perfectly. “Oh,” I gasped, already on the verge of tumbling.

The heel of his palm continued to provide the friction I needed with each rock of his hand as he fingered me. “God, the noises you make. They’re pure perfection.”

I hummed, the sound reverberating through me, and he looked up as he grinned. I reached toward him trying to trace the outlines of his face, the way his eyes crinkled when he was amused, but I couldn’t focus enough as the waves of my climax grew nearer. Jericho was the sun, and I the seedling desperate to grow in his love and care. I was tottering forward with only his light to sustain me.

I cried out, clenching around his fingers that were still shoving into me. The hand cupping his face tensed, holding onto him while my body greedily took the pleasure he was giving me.

I stumbled forward, collapsing against his shoulder, and he bit down on my neck, the evil man. “Ouch,” I cried half-heartedly.

He chuckled, replacing his teeth with his tongue. “There, baby. I kissed it better.”

Jericho grabbed my hips and pulled me down so we were both sitting on the marble floor of the shower. I snaked my arms around his neck while he positioned my legs over his thighs. “Tell me.” He kissed my chin. “If you could travel anywhere in the world. Where would it be?”

“Home,” I said, probably too quickly. “I’d go home.”

He tensed beneath me. “This is your home now,” he said, his voice breaking.

“Aye.” I ran my thumb along the back of his neck, then pulled away so that I could make eye contact with him. “This is my home, now. But before? Beyond the walls of Alastair’s cage? Home was Portstewart, where the ocean met the coast. Where the air tasted of salt, and the waves crashed along the rocks of the shoreline.”

I reached for his hand, pressing my lips against his outstretched palm. “He didn’t break me easily. It was years before I learned the punishments could come with a reward. If I was quiet, it made him feel bad. That’s when he let me out of the house.”

His hand reached, flattening against my chest while the water sprayed over us.

I continued. “I was desperate to go home. To feel the crisp air against my cheeks, and have my mother hold me in her arms. I thought if I fought him, I’d be able to leave eventually. That whenever I saw my brother, I could speak the truth of the things he did to me.”

My hands stroked along his jawline now, as he gazed upon me with sadness in his eyes, and a mixture of ... astonishment.

“How did your brother not know?”

“Alastair never let me see him.” I shrugged, half-heartedly. “My brother was cruel too, I think. He was much older than

me. I didn't truly know him. We had different fathers, and he left Ireland when I was young. He couldn't return to fetch me when my mother died, so Alastair did it for him. Once Alastair saw me, I was doomed."

His brows furrowed, and I flattened them with my thumb. I offered a weak smile. "Why? Why couldn't he get you?" he asked, his grip on me tightening.

"He went against some members of the IRA. They were hunting him, and it was a fairly new thing back then. He'd only been gone about ten or so years at that point."

"He could have sent his son." Jericho's mouth screwed into a frown. "He could have sent anyone else. And then he left you with him. How could he not demand to see you? You had no holidays with the Murphys?"

"I don't know what Alastair said or did to keep me from them. I just know that he did. I wasn't allowed to ask questions." I sighed, pulling Jericho's head toward me. "I was so desperate to find her again. I knew she was gone, that I couldn't bring her back. I could only live in our memories together."

"Your mother?" he asked.

I nodded, glad we were back on track with our storytelling. "She was very in tune with the earth. Better than any weatherman. The night before my father's death, she warned him."

“What?” Jericho asked, his breath stalling him. “Warned him how?”

“She told him there would be a storm that brought death the next day. That he shouldn’t take the boat and should send his fishermen home. She said she saw destruction from the ocean, that the water would be black and cold, and they’d freeze.”

He shivered, tucking me against him. “She had visions.”

“I didn’t believe in that stuff then. It wasn’t until my first trip with Alastair to one of the shops in town. He’d taken me to a small store that carried knick-knacks and things. I found a book on Celtic mythology, and I had to have it. That’s when I first felt the energy my mother spoke of.”

“Like a magnet,” he whispered.

“Aye,” I said, my voice thick from the memory. “I was hooked. It made me feel close to her, like she was there with me, guiding me through the hell I was going through. I had started to forget her voice, her face. But then I started to see Portstewart more and more with each book or item I possessed. Like I was being rewarded for surrendering to the earth.”

I leaned back, letting the water fall in my face, and brushed back the hair in my way. “I longed to go back. Those clear visions of my mother holding me, us wrapped around a wool blanket while we waited for my father’s ship to return after long days or weeks without him? That was my home.”

“Did you ...” His voice trailed off, and I realized he was waiting for me to look at him again. His finger tugged at my chin, bringing me to him. “Had you ever been in love before him? Ever been with anyone?”

My lips twitched. Ryan. He meant Ryan. I wasn't ready to give him that piece of me. It wasn't that I was hiding Ryan from Jericho in order to protect him the way I had been hiding the truth about Alastair. I just wasn't ready to give him all my secrets.

“The water is making my skin shrivel,” I said, deflecting.

He sighed, as if he knew the truth, and was disappointed I didn't offer him the answers he knew existed. I scooted out of his lap, and he sprung to stand, then offered help in getting me up. When the water turned off, we stepped out of the glass stall.

I giggled when he wrapped me in a towel, patting my skin dry as if I couldn't do it myself. I didn't complain, though. I'd take advantage of anything he did for me without asking.

I caught a glance at the clawfoot bathtub as he dried me. It was big enough that two could easily fit in there with plenty of space. The outside of it was painted black, and the legs were made of gold. The gold faucet was set in the middle of the tub instead of the end, and I longed to take one of my rose water baths in it.

Sleep came easily, as he tucked me into his side beneath black satin sheets. His room was even bigger than mine and smelled of his oak and leather scent. The bed had dark posts,

and the walls were a dark green color. The dark sheets and black comforter were heavy, and I felt my body pulling me under as I curled into his body.

We were both naked, snuggled against each other as he tossed and turned throughout the night. He wasn't sleeping easy, and I wondered if it was because I was beside him. Maybe he slept better alone. But each time I tried to pull away and give him the space I felt he needed, he tugged me closer.

I knew I barely slept with the way he stirred, which meant he probably didn't either. I made a note to be sure I put together some essential oils for him, to aid in a deeper sleep. Something that would allow his mind to rest.

## Chapter Seventeen



## Jericho

Portstewart. That name almost halted my caress. Only years of spying and deception prevented the reaction.

After the most gut-wrenching, beautiful intimacy I had ever experienced, when I was still high on her scent, her taste still on my tongue, she brought up *that* name. Portstewart. The book. The inscription. *Ryan*.

As she said it, my first instinct was to find that *Ryan* and put a bullet in his brain. Eliminate the threat.

Threat to what? I wasn't sure. But he was my enemy, and she was the battlefield. I could eliminate him in silence, calling on my old skills. I could hire Rose's cousins, the twin assassins, to find this *Ryan* before he had the chance to steal my treasure from me.

That was the work I excelled at. Quiet elimination. But I wouldn't. Because whatever mystical power she had, I knew that she'd find out. Not just because of some stupid Irish magic, but because I would tell her. I would bare my soul, confess my transgressions, and tarnish what little trust we had.

Fucking Ryan. What a stupid fucking name. Almost as dumb as Brett Bradley.

She didn't talk about him. She spoke of her mother, and magic, and other things. But on him, she clammed up. This particular flower still had layers of petals left to unfurl, and I

had no choice but to wait like Charlie had. Patiently. Until she chose to give me her gifts. *If* she chose to give them.

I watched her from the library, as she flitted around her newly minted conservatory. Now that I had seen her scars, she took less care to hide them, but that hadn't stopped me from warning Yuliya and Rose. They were under strict orders not to react to them, on pain of a swat to the backs of their heads.

The sky outside was white, the snow coming in a flurry. The autumn frost was giving in to the relief of a real winter, but she was protected in her darkened cocoon of plants and blossoms. She had twelve small pots with barren, thorned stems with leaves. Red and purple baby leaves sprang from them, like chicks spreading their wings.

She watered each one, lovingly, speaking to them in whispers and murmurs. I was so enthralled by the sight that I didn't even hear her when she finally spoke to me.

“Do you recognize them?” she asked.

“Hmm?” I responded, confused.

“These roses.” She looked up at me with a proud smile. “You gave them to me.”

“When?” I asked, surprised. Had I ever given her flowers?

“The first night I was here.”

I could have facepalmed, I felt ridiculous. The black roses I had purchased on my way from New York City were an impulse buy. I had passed a florist and chosen to enter. Between all the colors of long stem roses, I considered yellow

—a sign of friendship. Pink, because ... well, women. Red for romance, after all, we were arranging a fucking marriage. Purple because ... whatever the hell purple symbolized.

But those dark burgundy, almost black roses spoke to me. I dreaded giving them to her, as I finished my drive home, thinking that she would hate them. Who the fuck gives black roses to a fiancée, arranged or not?

“They’re my favorite. Did they tell you that?” She asked, her perfect arched brow raised.

I shook my head, feeling my skin heat as I put my hands in my pockets and leaned on the entryway.

“All I knew about you was that you had red hair, and an unpronounceable name,” I teased, pushing off the doorframe and approaching her.

She blushed and turned her head away with a small laugh.

I grabbed her chin and turned her toward me, and her smile faded. Replaced by her parted lips and a deep inhale.

“And that you’re lovely.” I added. “You were the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.”

“You were so mean to me,” she wiped a stray hair from her face.

“I was flirting with you,” I corrected.

“I thought you were mean,” she shrugged.

I placed her hand over my heart and kissed her. She leaned in for a moment, and I had to tear away from her before I took

her again in the damn room full of her plants. Let her little green pets see me claim her, right before their eyes.

We didn't have time for it, anyway. The Murphy clan would descend at any moment, and I didn't want them walking in on what should be better saved for our honeymoon.

I stared at the strange stems. "I thought you hated them."

Her eyes went wide. "Why?"

"Because you lopped their heads off."

She covered her mouth and laughed.

"Because a bouquet of roses is dead," she said, seemingly oblivious to the morbidity of her statement. "I cut the flowers off because it saves their energy. Then I plant the stems, with the leaves still intact, and they can come back to life."

Her slim fingers stroked one of the new purple leaves. All twelve roses were going to bloom again. I was touched by her sentimentality.

"I used the petals to make tea for *your* Rose," she shrugged.

"Ah," I said, as though it all made total sense. She saw right through my sarcasm and elbowed me in the rib, and we laughed.

I think that moment of laughter was more intimate than all the times that came before. Neither the sex, nor watching a once-in-a-lifetime bloom could ever replace the feeling of laughing with Eve after everything that had happened.

I tilted her chin up to me again and kissed her. Chaste little kisses on the lips that were becoming a habit.

“When you decapitated them, I thought I had made you mad,” I grinned down at her.

“You did. But not because of the roses.”

Our moment was interrupted with voices in the foyer. The Murphys had invaded like an unwanted pestilence.

The odd and unfamiliar sound of a little child laughing filled the halls. These rooms hadn't heard that sound since Yuliya was a child—over thirty years ago now.

Maybe it was Eve's influence. Maybe I was losing my mind. But I could picture it. Little children running around these rooms, filling it with laughter and knocking over priceless antique vases in the halls as their mothers gasped in horror and fathers laughed with indulgence.

It wasn't just one or two children, but an entire little herd of them running around, with parents sweeping up behind their destructive little dirty shoes.

A loud feminine cry of, “Aunty Aoibheann?” had us laughing again.

“We're in here!” Eve shouted, cupping her hands around her mouth.

“Where is here?” said the disembodied masculine voice. Probably that nuisance, Callum. “This place is enormous!”

Another male voice cried, “Marco?”

“Polo!” Eve yelled, laughing.

“Marco?” cried the woman’s voice.

“For fuck’s sake!” I yelled. “Take a fucking left from the foyer, it’s the double doors on your right.”

There were moments of stomping, the sound of rolling luggage and chatter.

“Nope. We’re hopelessly lost now.” A chagrined male voice finally admitted.

“Stay here,” I told Eve, kissing her on the cheek. “I’ll go get them. I’ll light a fire in the library and get some things to serve tea.”

As I pulled away from her, she tugged at my hand. I looked back to see what was wrong, but she kissed me before I could say anything.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“It’s just tea,” I shook my head, kissing her forehead.

“You know what I mean.”

I did. But the breadth of my emotions didn’t have time to find words. Not when the damn Irish mob had arrived at my doorstep like bulls in a China shop, ready to wreak havoc in their wake.

## Chapter Eighteen

## Aoibheann

Jericho lit the fire while I pressed kisses to sweet little Owen's round cheeks. He settled onto my lap as the fire roared to life. All five of my brother's children were here—three of them married—and with three small children in tow. Owen belonged to my nephew, Patrick, and his husband, Michael. Both were here now, sitting on the couch where I had first found my box marked “Evie”

The twin girls were held by Callum and his wife, Haley. They were giggling, while Haley played peek-a-boo with them, and the sound made my heart full.

“When is the dress fitting appointment?” Saoirse asked, swooping Lana, the blonde one, from Callum. She pressed a kiss to Lana's nose, twirling her in the air.

Callum reached toward Haley, taking the brunette girl, Sarah. He settled her onto his chest, then pressed a chaste kiss to Haley before he paid mind to the baby. Haley grinned, her gaze following her husband and child.

“It's in an hour. Rose and Yuliya will meet us here first,” Jericho said, poking a piece of burning wood.

Embers sparked and fluttered while he continued to stare into the flame, as if it held the answers for all of mankind. He stood, finally, his eyes searching for me in the room. When



they found me, he smiled, and it sent my heart fluttering the way it seemed to do whenever he gave me his attention.

“We’ll need to get you a dress for the engagement party too,” Saoirse said. “What’s the theme of each?”

“Her wedding dress will be black,” Jericho said, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his gray dress pants. “With red accents. The men will all wear black as well, and the women will be in red.”

Saoirse glanced toward him, her head tilting to the side. After a quiet moment, she glanced around the library and nodded. “Very eldritch. I can work with that.”

Jericho raised a brow, watching my niece. “The engagement party ...” He turned to me, and my breath caught as he held my gaze. The corner of his lips twitched. He hummed, turning back to the fire for a moment, then he turned to Saoirse. “I’ve picked out a few dresses for the event. She’ll know which one speaks to her.”

Saoirse’s mouth dropped open, her green eyes sparkling with awe. Then, she turned to her husband, who was sipping his tea, one leg crossed, the ankle resting on his other knee. She slapped his chest. “You don’t dress me.”

He grinned, brown eyes eyeing her with appreciation, before a smirk tugged at one half of his mouth. “Princess, if it were up to me, you’d never wear anything.”

I gasped, covering poor Owen’s ears. “You mustn’t speak so crudely with your nephew and nieces here.”

The room burst into laughter at my expense, but I didn't mind. I was just happy that there was noise in this room, other than my lonely humming. Owen began squirming, ready to get out of my arms. I dropped to my knees, setting him on the floor.

Then, I headed for the desk that was near the fireplace. Jericho reached out when I was close, his fingertip brushing against my cheek. I opened the drawer, finding just what I was looking for. Some plain printer paper and a pair of scissors.

He watched as I grabbed a pile and headed back to where Owen was already trying to climb up a bookshelf. Patrick was up and wrangling him. "Sorry, aunty," he murmured.

I shook my head, dropping to my knees beside his son. "He's just a bored little lad, aren't you, Owen?" I placed my hand on the top of his head and ruffled his dark hair. Like Patrick, Owen favored Callum Sr. I folded a piece of paper, then got to work cutting a chain of little people.

"When I was a lass, we'd spend the rainy days cutting up paper dolls. Ma and I would dress them in little purple dresses and give them names. We'd make up the silliest stories for our dolls," I said.

Callum let out a soft laugh. "I remember. Gran would line them up along the dining table and you'd sing songs about the dark creatures of the night. I don't know how it never scared me shitless. Your songs of changelings, pucas, and leprechauns."

I glanced up at him, Sarah tugging at a tuft of his auburn beard. “You remember?” I asked. “You barely visited. Callum Senior didn’t like that Gran remarried.” Though they had lived in Ireland as children, my brother kept Callum and Patrick away from their gran.

Patrick and I were the same age, and I turned to him as he smiled. “I don’t remember ever visiting,” he admitted.

I nodded. “You tended to go to the docks with my dadai. I think that’s why Callum kept you away. He felt ...”

“Threatened,” Declan filled in the gap between the silence. “Da felt threatened that a man took his mother away, that he’d take his children away too.”

I swallowed, tears threatening to pour out of me. “Aye,” I said, pulling apart the paper pieces that revealed a chain of stick figures wearing dresses. That made sense now that I thought of it. My father had taken his mother from the city to live in the countryside. To Create a new family that didn’t include him. We were a place where Senior didn’t fit.

Haley cleared her throat, a snuffle escaping. “That’s too fucking heartbreaking to unpack right now. This is a time to celebrate. Aoibheann, teach me to make these dolls for the girls, please.” She came beside me, plopping onto the ground.

Callum joined, settling Sarah between the two of them. His arm wrapped tenderly around both the baby and his wife while Haley grabbed a piece of paper.

She reached for my curls, taking a fistful, and shoving them into her mouth. I shrieked with laughter. “Silly babe, that’s not for eating.”

Together, Haley and I pried Sarah’s hands from my locks. I glanced around, my gaze falling on Sean. He and Declan were the two singles of the clan. He was standing near the entrance of the greenroom, his head peeking in there and taking in the sights. He was unaffected by the conversation happening in the library, in his own little world—much like I usually was.

“This is cool,” he said, finally, knocking on the door frame. “We need a castle like this.”

“No,” Callum, Declan and Patrick all said together.

“It’s fucking cool in here,” Sean said. “I’ll bet there are ghosts that roam the halls.”

“I haven’t felt any,” I said, shrugging. The room turned to me, silence enveloping the space. Wide eyes and pale faces stared, wondering if I was joking, or playing a prank on them. “Usually spirits give off strong auras.”

“I’m ...” Sean sighed, shaking his head. “Kind of disappointed. The number of murders that have probably taken place here has got to be in the hundreds, am I wrong?” He turned to Jericho, who didn’t deny the guess. He nodded, bringing a finger to his chin in contemplation. “Should be some spirits.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if my witch of a fiancée scared them off,” Jericho said, shooting me a wink.

I grinned, handing Owen the paper dolls. I got to work folding another sheet, and Haley followed my instruction. Yuliya and Rose entered the library, murmuring to each other as they came in. They stopped suddenly, taking in the crowded space.

Yuliya's gaze fell on me, and she tilted her head trying to figure out what I was doing. Then, she let out an amused chortle. "I haven't seen paper dolls since we made them to burn," she said turning to Jericho.

He nodded, a boyish smirk on his face. He was carefree, pulling the memory from somewhere deep within him. I enjoyed how young he looked in the moment, as if he weren't a cold-blooded killer—the leader of an entire organized crime syndicate. There were no worry lines around his eyes or mouth.

Still, I had to poke the bear. I dropped my mouth, pretending to be appalled. "You ... you burned the poor dolls?" I shrieked in horror.

Jericho turned to me, his face soft. "Oh, Evie," he sighed. He hurried toward me, as if I'd just told him he stabbed me in the chest. He dropped beside me, pulling me into his arms and stroking my back as if to console my poor heart.

I buried my face into his chest, a giggle bubbling up my throat. Jericho's hand froze against my back. "You were ... teasing me?"

I giggled again, pulling away to look up at him. "I was."

He chuckled, shaking his head.

“We have to go,” Rose said, clearing her throat. “In order to make it home for dinner, yeah?”

Jericho stood, then reached down to help me up. I placed my hands against his chest, and he cupped my face in his hands. “Whatever you choose, I know you’ll be the most beautiful woman in the world,” he said, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. His mouth dropped to my ear, and he whispered so only I could hear. “Though, like that Scotty boy, I’d prefer if you weren’t wearing anything.”

## Chapter Nineteen

## Jericho

Why had we separated by gender? I had no fucking clue. I was stuck with the Murphy men and children while my sister, daughter and fiancée went dress shopping.

I would have rather gone with the friendly faces of the women who made my inner circle than making small talk with these imbeciles. I still couldn't even look them in the eye, after knowing what Evie had endured, while it was happening right under their noses.

I fortified myself with a glass of Finlandia vodka. But it just reminded me that Yuliya wasn't here to lighten the sting of this god forsaken interaction. This was her favorite brand.

They were prattling on, with Callum recounting his own wedding, how Haley had told him no over and over, how he wound up having a very pregnant and reluctant bride walking down the aisle. I was too busy, anger churning inside of me to laugh out loud at how pathetic that sounded. Poor Haley, stuck with a man who couldn't even protect his own blood.

Patrick and his army-buddy-turned-husband talked about their *lack* of wedding and how they went straight to being parents. The crackling fire and their laughter grated on me as a question swirled inside my head.

I was over the incessant small talk. I couldn't hold this resentment in anymore. "Did you ever care about your aunt?" I



asked, whipping my head from the roaring fire to meet the stare of the men I was placing on trial, here and now. “Have you ever seen her scars?”

The strange one, Sean, raised a brow. Declan looked around, confused. Callum stared at me, a look of anger on his face.

I ground my teeth.

“You fucking Irish.” I looked at the twin girls, one squirmed on her uncle’s lap, the other mewled on her dad’s knee. “You never teach your women how to defend themselves, and then you leave them defenseless.” Callum’s eyes narrowed, and I knew I was twisting the knife. “Is it because you need your women weak to control them?”

“Hey now,” Declan began to stand.

Callum thrust out his hand, stopping him. The eldest Murphy turned his eyes to me and with his lilting Irish accent, the one so similar to my Evie’s calmly responded, “Say what you want to say, Jericho. Let’s have it out.”

“Have you seen her scars?” I said, slower, like I was speaking to a particularly stupid child.

“No. I don’t know what you’re speaking of,” he said, and I searched his face for any signs of deception but found none.

“He *whipped* her.”

They looked startled. All of them, looking at one another for assistance.

“For years, she was alone and tortured like a fucking captive. Treated like a goddamn slave.” I pointed an accusing finger at Callum. “At best, you were neglectful. At worst? Complicit. Which is it?”

Five sets of masculine eyes stared up at me. The children continued their games, unaware of the tension in the room.

“Declan?” Callum turned to his brother. “Did you know about any of this?”

He shook his head. “She never said a word.”

I ran my hand through my hair, tugging at the root until I felt the pain in my scalp.

“You’ve never seen them? In all that time ...” I wanted to punch a wall, and if there weren’t little ones here, I probably would have. “You’ve never had a clue that he ...”

I couldn’t say it again. Saying what he did to her would crack me in two. I couldn’t say it because if I voiced it, the next logical question would be ... *what else did he do to her?*

If her first confession of his abuse involved whips, then what else could he have done? My Evie ran like cold, still waters. Under her cool surface lurked monsters and demons we couldn’t comprehend.

“No,” Callum slowly reaffirmed. “We didn’t know.”

I glared at them, before staring down my son-in-law who hovered in the threshold.

“What about you, lover boy?” I growled. “You were named after the man ... how well did you know your namesake?”

Alastair placed his hands in his pockets, once again the picture of cool confidence. His lack of reaction always grated on my nerves, but now with Evie’s health in question, I wanted to kick his teeth in.

“I’m not from here, Jericho.” The fact he called me by name instead of his sarcastic Dad was indicative of the gravity we all felt. “I was in London. When he married her, I was in the service and rarely visited. But ...” I braced myself knowing that I would hate what was about to be said. “I was told she was a young gold digger, and he had fallen under her spell.”

I straightened, my fists clenched. I was ready to deck him as if he was the one making these accusations.

Alastair threw up his hands in a gesture of embarrassment. “I know her now,” he explained. “I know that it’s not true. My uncle was an adept liar, and a very good manipulator.” He put his hands back in his pockets. “I want her forgiveness, but I bear my uncle’s face. I see it in her eyes when she sees me, and the way she sometimes wants to put herself bodily between me and Rose, looking for the slightest sign that I might be harming my wife.”

I snorted. The very idea that Alastair could ever lay a finger on my daughter without her soundly beating him into the ground was ridiculous.

Alastair must have read my mind because he smirked. “It doesn’t matter that it would never happen. I admire the fact

that she would try to protect my Rose after everything she's been through." He shrugged. "She's got strength. And my support."

His supplication did little to diffuse my rage. I was a man with too much rage, ready for any excuse to snap someone's neck.

"And what about your cousin?" My voice went low, a low and quiet growl. "What of the harm he wants to cause my Eve?"

I felt my eyes narrow on him when he didn't respond.

He hemmed and hawed, broke eye contact and looked away for a moment before looking back to me.

"There are two sides to that story," he said, quietly. "And I don't have all the information."

"You bastard!" I went after him, my fist ready to fly.

But the strange one, Sean, stopped me, a hand hooked to my elbow. Murphy men picked up the kids and pulled them away. Callum handed the girl in his arms to one of his brothers before stepping to me.

"There are kids present," he warned.

"I'm not going to pick sides between you, or my cousin!" Alastair protested. "The only side I will choose is my wife's."

"And I'm her father!"

"Yes," Alastair raised his brow. "Trust me, that's her worst flaw."

Sean snickered. So did Declan. The corner of Callum's mouth tilted up, but he schooled his features and regained his bearing faster than the others.

I looked at the twin girls, cooing away in the arms of the men who would need to defend them.

The first thing I had taught Yuliya was how to make a fist. Then how to throw a punch. I was her first punching bag, when she was three years old. But it wasn't enough to keep her from harm.

"I hope you teach those girls how to defend themselves," I looked at the eldest Murphy. "Because I see no less than five men in this room who should have protected Eve. And even now, the only way you protect her is by throwing her at a man you barely know." I looked at every pair of eyes in the room in complete disgust. "You make me sick. All of you. If she didn't want you here, I'd never let you in my home."

I pulled my elbow from Sean's grasp and marched my way to the threshold. I looked over my shoulder, glaring at my son-in-law, and his Irish companions.

"You should all be ashamed of yourselves," I turned my back on them. "You might as well have held the whip yourselves."

I moved to step forward, but Callum's voice stopped me from leaving. "I am not my father, Jericho. I cannot speak for his reasonings on thrusting his sister into the hands of a man who was so cruel. I can only apologize for my lack of action in the past years in his absence."

I didn't leave, waiting to see what would be said next.

"I never asked why we didn't see Aoibheann because I was used to never seeing her. It had been ten years since I last saw her. My father said that Alastair claimed she wanted nothing to do with us. She hated him for taking her from her home."

I turned my head over my shoulder. Callum was close to me now, but Alastair watched intently from a distance, probably to make sure I didn't attack. My top lip curled into a snarl. "And you believed them."

"Aye. I did. Until Alastair's death. For the last two years I was in charge of my father's business, Declan made monthly visits to the Green's. He always asked for her. Alastair always turned him away. Eoghan was kind enough to allow them visits."

My gaze turned to Declan, who nodded.

"She enjoyed seeing me. And if I knew what was happening, I would have killed Alastair myself."

"It doesn't change the fact your women are helpless," I said.

I turned, glaring at the men who had failed my Eve. My chest was splitting in two at the thought that they could have protected her if they just opened their fucking eyes. Everyone in this room had wronged her because they were too wrapped up in their own shit.

"Speak for yourself," Scotty said.

The Navy SEAL, the only one I had an inkling of respect for, stood from his seat. He'd been quiet this whole time, but now

he approached. I must have awakened him by insulting his wife's competence to protect herself. He stood square with me, brown eyes boring into mine. He smirked.

“You can ask Yuliya how helpless Saoirse is. And as for Haley?” He let out a disbelieving laugh. “She could put you on your knees just as easily as your own sister could.”

Sean nodded in agreement, his chin turning up. “My nieces are the heirs to this shitfest. They'll be stronger than any of the men standing here right now.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “That's all good and well. It doesn't change the fact that you pawned your own fucking blood off on someone else. You left her alone and scared. All this bullshit talk of blood and family, and you couldn't even protect the one person who actually needed you.”

I turned and left before anyone could respond with another half-assed excuse. I was done with the lot of them. As far as I cared, the only good Irishman was a woman. And she'd been out of my sight too long already.

## Chapter Twenty



## Aoibheann

Saoirse's hands wrapped around my shoulders, her red hair falling against my cheek as our heads touched. "You're so different now," she said.

I flipped through one of the racks of dresses. Three racks were dresses Jericho had picked for the engagement party.

"Happy," she said. "He makes you happy."

"I think so," I said, my hands falling on a midnight blue dress with tulle around it. It was low cut, and my back would be on full display at the party.

Saoirse cooed, her hand reaching for the hanger. "Aoibheann, this one is beautiful."

"It's ... revealing," I whispered.

"All of these dresses are revealing," she said, amusement dripping from the words. "I think he wants you wearing next to nothing while he shows you off to friends and family."

I inhaled, focusing on taking in short breaths. My mind drifted back to when he told me I should wear my scars as a badge of honor. Had he picked out the revealing dresses to do just that? It would mean chaos for the Irish to see what my body looked like.

They probably wouldn't believe that Alastair caused them. I was sure they'd come up with excuses that circled back to how

I was a wiccan, how I perform spells and sacrifices and that my body was marred from black magic used wrong.

Still, if he wanted me to show them off, I would. I nodded, reaching for a sheer cape as well.

“What about your wedding dress?” Rose asked from her spot beside Yuliya on the small love seat that was situated near the fitting rooms in the tiny boutique. I found it hard to believe that all these dresses came from this small shop. That Jericho didn’t just rent out the space and have all these clothes sent here.

I shrugged, heading for another rack that held black and red dresses. “You need to pick out your dresses,” I said, glancing at them.

“Rose and I are wearing tuxedos,” Yuliya declared. “Jericho will have them ordered with the men’s things.”

“Modern. I love it,” Saoirse said.

Haley huffed. “I want a tux,” she said as she went through the rack that held the dresses for the bridesmaids.

“So? Then tell Jericho and give him your measurements.” Rose shrugged, not understanding why Haley was complaining.

“I think it’ll be easier to breastfeed if I can just pull the neckline of a dress down. Instead of having to unbutton a dress shirt,” Haley said.

Saoirse reached for a lace dress that had various shades of grays and blacks, with layers of tulle. The black layers were

over the grays ensuring that the train would flow back behind me. The neckline was low, black lace covering the top with flowers designed into the pattern of the fabric. It would show off the marks on my body, and I knew that the women might not be prepared to see it.

Saoirse gasped, running her hand along the braided silk tie that cinched the midline. “Aunty, I really think this is a good choice.”

She pulled it from the hanger and pressed it against my torso. “It’s going to be beautiful on you. And we can get you a soft gray cape. Sheer, with red lace flowers.”

I took the hanger, my stomach fluttering. This experience was so much different than my first wedding, which was a rush job. I chose nothing and wept the entire day. Through every single proceeding. I wanted to savor every moment, make the memories I would look back on. I had my family with me, finally. They’d welcomed me into their arms, and Jericho’s were doing the same.

“It’s beautiful,” Yuliya said, standing from the couch she and Rose were occupying. She came behind me as I held up the dress to the light. It shined through the see-through parts of the dress. “You’ll take away his breath in this. My brother doesn’t deserve you.”

I pictured Jericho at the end of the aisle, dressed in a black suit with a red tie and red handkerchief. A gray dress shirt instead of the classic white. I imagined his brown eyes on me, holding me captive until I reached him. He may not have

believed in the unexplained forces that drew us together, or the way crystals manifested energies, but I did.

And I truly believed that everything that happened to me in the past was to prepare me for this moment. I was meant to endure great tragedy in order to be able to appreciate the man before me. There were no words to describe what I felt when he did these grand things for me.

I thought of Ryan in that bookshop, the man I first gave my heart to when we were still just babies. I thought that had been love, true and real love. I had pined for him to help me get through the torture of my captivity, but this ... the gnawing feeling churned inside me because I had been away from Jericho for too long, it was colliding with the somersaults of knowing I'd be with him soon?

Love wasn't strong enough of a word to place on this. Whatever *this* was.

I longed to trace my fingers along the lines of his face, to inhale that familiar oak scent, to be held by him as he worshiped my body, as he cherished each line of damaged skin. He didn't see me that way. He saw me beyond it all, and he reminded me that beneath the weak facade I played for Alastair, I was the embodiment of strength. A warrior, a wiccan, the ethereal beauty that the Irish soldiers in New York feared for good reason.

I grinned. "I don't deserve him," I said through a whisper. I handed the dress back to Saoirse. "Let me try these dresses on for the party tonight first. Then I'll come out for this one."

The woman who was behind the register heard me and headed over to grab the clothing from my hands. She led me to the back where a small room was tucked away. It didn't have a door, just the frame, and inside were six other doors, three on each side.

“When you need help zipping, just holler,” she said, hanging the dresses on the front of the middle door to the right. She headed out of the room, back toward the others. “Ladies, what are we thinking of for your dresses?”

Grabbing one of the dresses, I hummed to myself as I stepped inside of the fitting room. Just as I closed the door, warm hands gripped my waist, pulling me against a hard body. I cried out from shock, but the familiar scent welcomed me, and calmed my beating heart.

There was a mirror on the wall in front of us. I took in the sight of him holding me close, his earth-colored eyes wild with lust.

“Shh,” he whispered, his mouth against my ear. “Don't let the women know I've hijacked their party.”

“You scared me,” I said, slapping his arm. “You're not supposed to be here, fiancé.”

“Hmm.” Jericho nuzzled his head into the crook of my neck. “I couldn't be away from you any longer. It's like missing a limb. I'm not whole when I'm without you.” His hand came up the hem of my skirt.

I gasped when his fingers dug into the soft flesh of my thighs. “You shouldn’t see me in my dress.” His hand massaged the curve of my arse, and I moaned as a tingling went down my spine.

“Should I go, witch?” He shoved his hips against me in that moment, his shaft jutting against me. He was hard, and I gasped, remembering how he felt inside of me. How I felt riding him.

“No,” I whispered. “Stay.”

“Look how beautifully that blush creeps up your neck.” His tongue darted out as we looked at each other through the mirror. He licked up the line of my neck to my jaw.

I moaned, grinding my arse against him.

“Quiet, baby,” he said as he plunged two fingers inside of me, which was counterproductive if he wanted me to be quiet.

My mouth opened in a silent scream, and a wicked grin spread across his face. I needed him to move inside of me, but he didn’t. The hand holding my hip moved to brush away the curls from the nape of my neck, then slid between the base of my shoulders. His hold was firm, and he flattened his palm against me, gliding his hand down my spine until he reached the end. He pushed me down.

I shrieked, trying to control the volume of the sound that left my lips. My hands jutted out, pressing against the mirror to brace me so I didn’t topple over.

“Your screams are for me only. I couldn’t wait any longer. I needed to have you. So, you’ll be quiet, or I’ll stop. Understand?”

I nodded. “Yes, baby,” I said through breaths.

He moved his fingers inside of me now, stretching me and filling me. The sensations were too much, yet I still felt I needed more.

“Jericho.” His name left my lips in a strained sound.

His fingers left my body, and I whimpered at the loss. The hand that was holding me down left my back and he grabbed my neck, yanking me to stand upright.

“Silence, witch.” He was using that commanding tone, the one that made my toes curl.

The hand that was inside of me came to my mouth and he shoved those two fingers inside with no gentleness. Our first night had been slow and intimate. This was rough and desperate. The claiming of my soul.

I gagged around the fingers in my mouth that tasted of my musky arousal.

This is what I had said I wanted.

Domination.

The pleasure to be given to me without me having to work for it. I wanted him to want to give me an orgasm, and I knew he would. It was clear in the way he watched me, the way his eyes spoke to me even through the mirror.

He was cruel and commanding, but he was still my kind, and self-sacrificing Jericho.

He pulled his digits from my mouth, and I gasped to suck in oxygen.

A brief hissing sound filled the air as he unzipped his trousers. My belly tightened with anticipation. Silky warmth pressed against my entrance, and he slid inside of me. He wasn't soft now, as he shoved into me. He was desperate, just as needy as I was to be connected.

He groaned through gritted teeth. "Fuck, Eve. So. Fucking. Tight." Each word was met with a hard thrust.

I gasped as he pushed inside of me with so much force, shoving me into the wall. He dragged his cock in and out of me, hitting the spot inside of me that made me clench around him, begging him never to leave me.

He wrapped his hand around my hips, and I groaned when his thumb pressed against my clit. I was swollen and needy, and the friction that came from the hard circles he rubbed had me seeing stars.

"Come for me, sweet girl."

My body listened to him, desperate to comply. My sex clenched around his, pulling him deep inside and I let out a silent scream with my climax.

He panted, thrusting until he was close to letting his seed go inside of me. The motions came fast and frantic, and I knew he was close. A low growl came from his chest with his last



pump, and his erection twitched against me as he filled me with his release.

Jericho toppled over me, his arms wrapping around my stomach. His teeth grazed at the back of my neck, and we stood there for a moment, with his hardened member softening inside of me.

My heart clenched. *Intimacy*. This is what I always wanted, and he was the one to give it to me.

There was no way we hadn't been heard, but I didn't care. I wanted the entire world to know that I belonged to him.

He pressed a kiss to my temple. Then, he pulled out of me, adjusting himself, and zipping up his pants again. "I'll see you at the party?"

I nodded, a grin plastered on my face. He spun me around so we faced each other, pressing a kiss to my mouth. And then he slipped away.

## Chapter Twenty-One

## Jericho

Ingress into a woman's changing room was unethically easy. With only one woman at the desk, and all the ladies chattering off in the dressing room, I slipped in through the back without being seen. I was both glad of that and a little annoyed. Yuliya and Rose were here as security, armed underneath their jackets. Yet they didn't think to sweep the dressing room before letting her alone in one? Sure, they had checked it on entry, but they should have done it again before letting her in here.

Maybe I'd broach the topic later, but without admitting why I knew of their neglect.

While Rose was not my biological daughter, she was still my kid. I didn't need her knowing that her future stepmother and I got it on in public. The kiddo might lose her appetite again.

On my way through the stockroom to the back alley doors, between dumpsters full of full of fabrics, threads and other accumulated seamstress detritus, I saw a shadow cross between tufts of tulle.

I jogged after it, unsure if it was my imagination.

In the hallway to the back, the walls were made of cinderblocks, the floor was polished concrete. I heard footsteps echoing, getting faster as they went. The alley door opened, just out of sight, but I turned the corner in time to see

a tattooed, bald head in a suit disappearing out into the midday sun.

The door fully slammed before I could get to it. When I opened and looked outside, there was no one there.

I'd file that information away for later. I definitely needed to remind my people about security ... But it'd have to wait until after the Engagement party tonight.

At this rate, I would have to rush to make it back to "the castle", as the Murphy's called it, to get dressed and still get to the ballroom in the middle of New York City in time. But I should not have worried. I arrived with plenty of time to spare as the women were over an hour late.

"It's worth it," Haley told me as she passed, the other girls hard on her heels as they entered to re-join their companions.

"It really is," Rose said, then she gave me a strange look, crinkling her nose before walking to find her husband.

Yuliya, in her black blazer with a red lining that twirled as she spun, looked at me.

"Did you have a nice time at the dress fitting?" she asked. Then she put her finger in her mouth and made a gagging noise.

Maybe I didn't need to talk to them about security after all.

I was waiting on pins. The grand ballroom for our engagement party was a baroque ballroom, complete with enormous glass French doors that opened to a marble terrace

and chandeliers every few feet that cast a soft glow on all the glamorous faces.

The engagement party and wedding would happen in quick succession. This was a simple declaration to New York City, and the entities that hold its power in their hands, that this union would occur. And no declaration could be made unless the women were forced into corset ball gowns, and men were in cinched cummerbunds.

The murals on the ceiling depicted a starry night, with angels and cherubs hanging the moon and stars. I had picked this place out of a line up, because it fit my future wife.

Pillars of black and gold spanned the center of the room, and high-top black linen tables lined the outside.

For my daughter, there were couches that lined the walls, also in black and gold. Pregnancy was “kicking her ass”. She didn’t even have a bump, but she was already developing bags under her eyes. Lethargy was certainly a sign that her kids would be little demons. Little Green demons.

“I don’t fucking dance.” My daughter had declared. “I want to sit.” She patted her still flat belly and laughed. “I’m fat and pregnant. And I’m riding that excuse until I squat these two out.”

It just emphasized how strange this whole thing was.

Among the mafia elites were other power brokers and celebrities. Sophie Tudor, the famous singer, stood at the podium, awaiting Eve’s entrance in a floor length, shimmering

dark gray dress. At the grand, black Baldwin piano was my own son-in-law, ready to play my bride's grand entrance.

The Murphys were here. All of them. The men, and their little sister, meandered together looking nervously back and forth, probably taking bets on whether or not the wedding would happen.

My daughter's cousins, the twin assassins Leo and Lea Bonifacio, were also lurking about with Caledonia Security, armed to the teeth and ready to take out any threats to me, my family, and my bride.

So was Eoghan Green. I couldn't *not* invite him, though I strongly considered losing that in the mail, and accidentally sending him an envelope full of arsenic. This show was for him, after all, telling him in no uncertain terms that Eve was mine. Firmly under my control and my protection. He had arrived with five of his closest bodyguards, all burly and jittery, ready to jump at ghosts and witches. The superstitious fools.

"Hello Brett," said Lea Bonifacio, bumping me with her shoulder, referring to me by the name I had used while under cover.

Since having her own twins, she had let her dyed platinum hair go back to its natural black. The biological resemblance between her and Rose was startling now. Since their fathers had been identical twins, they were biological siblings, at least according to a genetic test. I wondered if my granddaughter

would resemble them. And I very much hoped there was a girl among my future grandkids.

“My mother says she hasn’t seen you at dinner,” Lea continued with a chuckle. “She’s asking if you’ve moved on to a new bitcoin venture somewhere.”

I threw my head back and laughed, remembering the time I had been assigned to “recruit” the Bonifacio twins to the American government. I had thought to build rapport by inviting myself to their parent’s house for dinner as *Brett Bradley*, the most annoying Californian that ever existed.

“Tell her I’m doing CrossFit competitions along the east coast,” I chortled, picking up two glasses of vodka from a nearby server, and offering one to her. She took it and sipped. I downed half of mine in one gulp. “Tell her I’m doing mediocre, at best, and can’t wait to see her again.”

“Brett Bradley,” she laughed, “we used to joke that you had delusions of adequacy.”

“All a part of my cover.”

“You were such a douche.”

“Were?” I quirked a brow.

“Are,” she corrected. She looked over at the closed double doors where my bride was going to stride through. “Rose says she likes her.”

I nodded to myself. “I like her too.”

Then the little pixie of an assassin drifted off. Another person materialized beside me. The governor of Massachusetts, Corbin. He was an inch shorter than me, but there was always something imposing about his presence, despite his boyish looks. A youthful appearance that was as sharp as any weapon when disarming an adversary.

“Congratulations, old man.” He grinned, handing me a fresh glass of Finlandia Vodka. “Getting hitched, huh?”

He wasn’t invited because he was a power broker. He was invited because he was a former colleague. And the closest thing I had to a best friend. He called me an old man even though we were the same age because, unlike him, I looked like I was old enough to have finished university and started a professorship. If I ever discovered where the man hid the fountain of youth, I’d happily cut that stupid smile off his face and steal it from him.

“You’re a long way from the jungles,” he mused with a smile.

“So are you,” I commented. “We both know you never pop up unless you want something. So, what is it, pretty boy?”

We laughed together in mutual understanding. I turned to him full on, our shoulders squared as I waited for him to state his business. Just like his smile and youthful manners were a weapon, so was his small talk. A tool to extract information, which was a thing he had a talent for.

“Is your sister single?” he asked, tilting his head like a curious puppy.



“Oh, holy fuck.” My eyebrows rose to my hairline. Of all the things he could have asked, that was not what I anticipated. They’d been dancing around each other for years. Decades, even.

I whipped my head to my sister, standing in her tuxedo which was different from mine only in that it had theatric, pleated tails that went down to the back of her knees. Her hair was pleated into a thick set of Viking braids that trailed down to her lower back, no doubt because of the Murphy girl. Her prominent cheekbones and sharp jawline were a result of hours lifting and shredding off every ounce of unneeded body fat from her body. But now that I looked at her, I noticed a color to her lips and her eyes, and a slight pink on her cheeks. Had she put on makeup?

I loved my sister dearly. She had been my best friend for most of my existence, since the moment she was born seven years after me. No one had a more beautiful soul. But actual physical beauty? That was not my sister’s greatest trait, and she knew it, accepted it, and discarded such things as unimportant long before puberty.

So, what was this little makeup for?

“I’m asking, you know,” Corbin said, staring into his drink, “because she’s approached me about some *business* venture, and if I was going to go in on it, I don’t want her distracted. You know how women can be, right? When they have kids and... things.”

Holy shit. The idiot was in love. And I'd need to play the angry brother, before letting the happy couple be together. Either way, she was going to eat him alive. His training at Langley wouldn't protect him against the mind-fuckery my sister would put him through. She had somehow made him stupid. This ham-fisted attempt to extract information from me was a joke. And he was once a master interrogator! *Where's the fucking popcorn?*

I scratched my forehead, as if I could scratch the weird itching in my frontal lobe from realizing that the political pretty boy, the next John F. Kennedy, was blushing over my little sister. And I chuckled into my glass. What a fucking world we lived in!

"She's single, as far as I know. Though there's some guy in Boston that's been sniffing around her." I watched Corbin's eyes darken. "Nice guy! I've met him. Arturo Alvarez, or something like that." I said it to piss him off, and a flicker of anger crossed his features before he remembered himself and placed that careless smile back on his lips. "And she's always dedicated to her work. You know that."

He let out a breath and nodded at me. I wanted to jab him for his little *crush*, but I didn't. After the week I had, I was in no place to talk.

"Good talk," he said, and just as quickly as he appeared, he vanished into the meandering crowd.

I grabbed another vodka from a passing tray. I was on my way to getting fucked up. But I took it, using the glass to

occupy my nervous hands.

The clamor of the two double doors unlatching echoed like a shotgun. The hum of the crowd silenced, and all eyes turned to the grand entrance in anticipation of the bride. I strode down the empty middle of the ballroom, to the bottom of the marble staircase.

“Yuliya!” I called and beckoned her with my hand to come stand by me. “Rose!” I found her in the crowd and twitched my head.

The two women, my family, my blood, came and stood by me. Yuliya, my best woman, was at my left. My little Rose to my right. The Baldwin piano let out clear, crystal notes of a dissonant chord. Another song that I had picked as a joke, but now seemed more than appropriate.

The doors opened, but she wasn't there, the doors opening to an empty hall. I furrowed my brow in concern.

Sophie Tudor sang the discordant, soprano notes of Mozart's “Queen of the Night” aria. I had been told that the pop singer was classically trained, but I didn't realize she was this good. The acoustics of the room made her voice carry, bouncing off the ceiling and walls until it felt like it surrounded us all.

I saw the rustle of skirts before I saw her. The long, A-line skirt split down one side to reveal a long pale leg, elegantly turned in a black high heel. My eyes moved up to the bodice. No corset. My slim fiancée didn't need one. But the tulle, layered to hide her creamy skin plunged down almost to her navel. The crisscrossed lines of the scars that crossed her

breasts were light, barely visible, but there. A delicate hand covered the exposed skin, fingerless black tulle gloves with sparkling stars adorning her arms.

Her bare left finger caught my eye, and I smiled, knowing that we would rectify that problem tonight.

As she started to elegantly stride down the stairs, her eyes focused on me. I tried to smile at her, to encourage her. To keep her focus not just because I desired it, but because she needed it too.

A white shawl draped over her shoulders. I guessed that it hid the more obvious scars on her back.

I reached out a hand to her, palm up as she got closer. Both of her beautiful hands reached back, and she floated to us. To me.

“She’s beautiful, Dad,” Rose whispered.

“You don’t deserve that.” Yuliya socked me on the shoulder, and the two of them laughed at my expense.

It didn’t matter. When Eve’s hands touched my palms, I drew her in, wrapping my arms around her shoulders and kissing her on the mouth. She fell into me, leaning on her toes as her arms wrapped around my neck.

My sister and daughter led the silent room in a round of applause. Sophie Tudor’s “Queen of the Night” aria reached a crescendo, then descended into silence.

“It’s time for me to put something here,” I said, pinching her ring finger between my index finger and thumb, as my other

hand fished in my pocket.

She gasped as I drew out the large black star sapphire surrounded by a platinum band that was shaped and twisted like the vines of a plant. It was large, over-the-top, but perfect for her. I slipped it on her bare finger and kissed her cheek.

She held it up to the light, looking at it in wonder.

“It’s perfect,” she whispered to me.

Relief filled my chest. I was pretty sure I had made the right choice, going for a non-traditional ring for my non-traditional bride. But I worried, still. Just as I did with every gift I had given her, worried about a misstep that would break the delicate bridge we were building between us.

“Find your dance partners,” I said to Rose and Yuliya without taking my eyes off my future wife.

“I don’t dance.” Yuliya rolled her eyes.

“Go find Corbin,” I said with a grin, nodding my head toward where the pretty boy lingered on the periphery.

She looked at him and cringed. “You’re kidding.”

“Do it for me. It’s my engagement party,” I said with a little shrug.

“Groomzilla.”

Eve and I laughed. She bit her lower lip.

“He’s in love,” Eve whispered my sentiment back at me. “Are you playing matchmaker?”

“Just a little bit of amusement,” I responded, kissing her again, as Rose walked away to find her husband near the piano.

I looked over my shoulder as Sophie sat at the piano bench, a new sheet of music in her hand. My next surprise for my woman was a declaration of war, and I drew her close to my body. I was inviting the daggers to come out and play.

The first dissonant notes drifted to us, soft and simple. Her eyes widened, and she laughed, throwing her head back in sheer delight. Her haunting melody that she hummed came down on the crowd and I drew her into a slow dance.

“Gird your loins,” I chuckled to her. “Your former stepson is going to lose his fucking mind.”

Her emerald eyes looked up at me with glistening defiance, sparkling brighter than the black polished rock on her slender finger.

Her brave, defiant voice responded as I imagined. Stronger and clearer than I could have hoped for. “Let them come.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

## Aoibheann

Though he was holding me close to him, I stepped back to shrug the cape off, exposing the scars on my back. Jericho took the garment and tossed it onto a nearby chair as if he were discarding a piece of trash. His hand grabbed my wrist, and he pulled me into him. His grip tightened, as if declaring he'd never let me go.

And I didn't want him to.

I allowed him to lead the dance. The beautiful symphony he had composed just from the words and tune I'd hummed melted me, and I was being remolded as I came together to be with him. I was no longer alone but reformed to always have this man connected to me.

He made me stronger, more able to withstand the stares as I showed off my scars to the world. I no longer hid my back from those who couldn't stomach the thought of what had been done to me. That was because of him.

I rested my chin on his shoulder as he twirled me along the room, and I hummed my melody along with the pianist.

I didn't know what else he could pull out of his sleeve at this point. I thought watching the queen of the night bloom couldn't be topped. That was how special he made me feel.

And yet, here he was, seeing me, hearing me, *loving* me. My breath hitched, my body threatening to stop working as I



thought those words. Tears threatened to escape, the waterworks fully ready to burst through the dam.

Jericho saw it, and he released my hand, to cup my face. “Don’t cry, my sweet Eve. You’ll ruin this beautiful make up. And you’ll also break my heart.”

I shook my head, blinking hard to wish away the drops threatening to release. “Mine was broken, and you’ve managed to heal it. These are tears of happiness, my tyrant.”

He chuckled, the sound better than any tune I could hum.

Fuck the magpies. I had joy. True gaiety. Though maybe, that was the beauty of my fate. I was finding solace in the misery. The happiness that Jericho could bring me despite a marriage I had never wanted.

Jericho twirled me, then pulled me back into him, and I sang the words to my song, my eyes meeting Eoghan Green’s. His face haunted me, the spitting image of his father. I once looked at him, hoping for a relationship. A friendship. Though I was his stepmother, he was only five years older than me. I had hoped we could bond over dinner and the homeland, that I could have a family even though I hadn’t consented to marriage.

I was a foolish girl then. Now, I looked at him, and sang my tale. He was my enemy. The scars on my back could have been stopped if he had just opened his eyes. The wife he missed might have stayed if he only saw the true pain his father and their guards had inflicted, and the fear they instilled upon Kira.

My future husband held me as the song came to an end, his warmth giving me the strength to continue to stare down at the man who once made me quiver. Jericho was declaring war on anyone who caused me pain, and if I was the queen of the night, then he was the knight who was fighting for my honor.

Callum headed toward us, his green eyes filled with water too. “Aoibheann,” he said, his Irish lilt thicker, as he allowed the emotion he was feeling to show on his sleeve.

I raised my chin, not wanting to show any sign of weakness. These men all saw me as such. A woman unable to fight back. I might not fight with fists but today, Jericho was my weapon. “Callum,” I said, my tone stern, and strong.

“May I have a dance with you, Aunt?” He turned to Jericho, who was still refusing to let me go.

“I’ll be fine,” I whispered to him. He hesitated a moment, before a sigh left his body, and he released me.

A new song began playing, as Callum’s hands replaced Jericho’s. “Haley told me of the markings on your body. Had I known what was done to you, I would have stepped in. I would have stopped it.”

“Your father never visited. You never visited, either Callum. I would have told you if I could have. And then it was too late.”

He cleared his throat. “You’re right. I sent Declan to have tea with you once a month. That wasn’t enough. I should have

cared more. You are my blood. I didn't treat you as such. I treated you as a nuisance."

I dipped my chin, not wanting to accept his apology. It didn't feel like he had said enough.

"My wife wasn't treated well by the men in her past, and to know you were being hurt right before my eyes, and I did nothing." He shook his head. "This apology isn't about me. This is about you, Aoibheann. Eoghan is obsessed with you. He believes you murdered his father, that you are responsible for his wife's disappearance. And I feared for you. So, I handled it in the easiest way that left me out of it. I'm here to apologize. I'm sorry that I didn't help you earlier."

I scoffed. "Will it ease your conscience if I tell you that your apology is accepted, dear nephew?"

"No, it won't. I will forever be burdened with this information, with the regret that I did not protect you. I see the mistakes I made. I want you to know that I will keep you safe. I will make sure Eoghan cannot harm you. I'm sorry that I shoved you into the hands of another man."

He squeezed my hand, his eyes filled with the meaning behind his words. "I won't make you marry Jericho, Aoibheann. I will do what I should have done and declare war with Eoghan if that's what it takes. Say the word, and I will call off the engagement."

I laughed, my head tilting toward the ceiling.

"What?" He asked as I spun around the floor with him.

When my fit of laughter ended, I brought him in for a hug. “Jericho has done what no one else could in just seven days. He has saved me from myself. He’s reminded me what life was like before I was imprisoned. He has taken the shell of a woman that Alastair carved me into, and he has given me the ability to remember who I was before your father stole me from my homeland and shoved me into the arms of a monster.”

I didn’t say those things to hurt him. I said them because they were the truth. “My mother—your gran—is weeping from her grave to know the damage her son has inflicted on her only daughter. And I pray your daughters never see even a fracture of the pain I have endured.”

“You’re right. My father was a cruel man. Da doesn’t deserve your forgiveness. But I hope that one day, I can show you how sorry I truly am for my part in this.”

“You never visited,” I whispered, sadness shaking my voice. I hated sounding weak now that Jericho had given me my confidence back.

“Alastair informed us that you wanted nothing to do with us. Da tried for a few years. Then, I think he gave up when he thought you wouldn’t forgive him. And I ... I should have tried harder these last few years. When Alastair died, Eoghan encouraged Declan’s visits. When he saw how Eoghan yelled at you that day, he didn’t hesitate to bring you home to us.”

I sighed. He was referring to the evening Declan had visited a year ago, where Eoghan had accused me of killing Kira. He

was shouting and shaking me, and I was withering into myself, sobbing as Declan entered the estate for a visit.

“It’s in the past, now, Callum. Thank you for the offer. I choose to stay with Jericho.” *I choose to stay where I belong.* My heart pounded in my chest.

Callum was giving me a choice, and I didn’t see any way where I didn’t choose Jericho Vasiliev. The song ended as our conversation did, and I pressed a kiss to his cheek. I glanced around, looking for the tyrant who had claimed my soul, my very existence.

He was across the way, a glass of clear liquid that I knew to be vodka in his hand. One elbow rested on a pillar while he chatted with the man beside him. But his gaze was on me as he twirled the evil eye bracelet on his wrist.

He noticed I was heading for him, and his smile made my stomach flip with butterflies. This time, I knew it was because of attraction. My mouth hurt as I grinned, making my way toward him. He pushed off the pillar, our eyes clashing as the air crackled. I needed him, and the energy that hummed through me knew it too.

“Where is she?” That venomous voice snapped me from my haze. Eoghan stood in front of me, his dark eyes wide and crazy as he glared at me.

I froze, unable to respond to him. His breath smelled of whiskey, and the bloodshot rings around his eyes told me he was well past a slight buzz and moving onto horrible

intoxication. My shoulders were tight with the need to get away from him, my newfound courage deflating in my chest.

“What did you do to her, witch?” He was shouting, centimeters from my face. Spit landed on my eye and nose, and he grabbed me by the arms, shaking me.

“Get the fuck away from her,” Jericho shouted, before yanking Eoghan from me. “Before I strangle you here and now for all to see.”

Rose and Yuliya surrounded me, pulling me away from the chaos. Irish and Russians were separating. Lines were being drawn. I glanced around, tears falling freely. My heart ached as the blanket of bliss I was living under was pulled from beneath me.

“Jericho,” I cried out, my arms reaching for him. Rose wrapped her arms around me, while her cousin, Lea, stood beside Jericho, a pistol drawn on Eoghan.

“Shh,” Rose whispered. “Dad will be fine.”

I glanced around the room, looking for Alastair, but couldn't find him. Had he left Rose on the Russian side to stand with the Irish? Why did I even care right now?

“What is he going on about?” Haley asked, coming over. “That man is insane, I swear.”

Callum, Declan, and Patrick were standing with Jericho, trying to calm him, but I couldn't hear what was being said as Eoghan continued screaming. Everything I did for his wife, I'd do again. Everything I'd given her to be free of this man who

was just as crazed as his father. I glanced toward Rose. Was Alastair truly kind to her? How could he be when he was related to such cruel men.

Rose sensed my uneasiness, and she grabbed my shoulders, finally yanking me from the grand room. “Let’s go. Let Dad handle this shitfest.”

“But ...” I turned my head back toward the chaos. Too many men were shielding Jericho and Eoghan to see what was happening. Nausea took place where the butterflies were. Poor Jericho had no idea what I had done, and I wasn’t sure if he’d forgive me for this. I could never admit this secret. It would only end in misery for Kira.

## Chapter Twenty-Three



## Jericho

Rose had Evie. Thankfully, my daughter had the common sense to not get involved, though I knew she wanted to.

“Yuliya,” I said to the air, hoping she heard me. “Go with Eve, get her home.”

“Of course,” was her curt reply, and the rustle of skirts and retreating voices told me that she was out of danger, safe. I trusted no one more than my sister and daughter when it came to security. Even pregnant, my Rose could match with anyone, all without allowing a single glance to land on her belly. Yuliya gave ferocity a whole new meaning, her aggression unparalleled by anyone I had ever met. She made warlords look like kittens, in comparison to the cruelty she was capable of.

Now, the women I loved were taking care of my precious little jewel while I, Jericho Vasiliev, had to take out the fucking Irish trash.

The pixie assassin beside me had her gun pointed at Eoghan’s forehead as the men held him back by the arms. Her twin, Leo, was meandering. The two of them were standing at a forty-five-degree angle from each other, with Eoghan right at the apex. They were poised and ready to take him out, instinctively working as a team and staying out of each other’s way.

“Party’s over!” I yelled. “Get everyone out!”

Doors started opening and slamming, and strange murmurs and whispers, and occasional pearl-clutching gasps filled the room, then receded, going far away.

“Get the servers out too,” I ordered, and the men and women in white shirts couldn’t drop their trays fast enough as they fled, leaving me with the Murphy men, the twin assassins and Eoghan Green.

A circle had formed around us, with me in the middle. I chuckled, darkly.

This was a long time coming.

I shrugged off my jacket, then removed the blasted cummerbund. I rolled up one white silk sleeve, then the other before facing Eoghan, his blonde hair disheveled and his eyes bloodshot from booze.

“Let him go,” I ordered.

Callum and Declan let him go abruptly, and Eoghan stumbled forward before righting himself.

With my fists clenched, I circled the man who would hurt my *wife*, and his eyes followed me.

“Let’s have it out, now,” I spat. “You fucking coward.”

With jerky movements, he pulled off his blazer, and brought up his fists.

“He’s probably got a knife on him,” Leo warned with a skeptical brow.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said, hunching my shoulders up and assuming a boxer’s stance. “He’s going to get his face rearranged, no matter what he does.”

We circled each other like roosters in a cockfight. But it wasn’t a fair one. He was swaying, flying three sheets to the wind, and out of his mind.

He tried to throw a punch, which I dodged with a small tilt of my shoulder, and the momentum of the missed blow almost took him over.

“Do you feel good, Eoghan Green?” I said his name like a curse. “Your dad beat a teenage girl. For sixteen years, he beat his wife, while he was under *your roof*.”

The room was with me. I could almost hear the snarls and growls like feral wolves waiting for a kill. The scars on Eve’s back were a fucking advertisement of what hell she was lived in.

Eoghan tried to do a cross punch, putting his whole body into it, but I dodged, and gave him a hook to the ribs. He grunted and stumbled back, and I gave him time to right himself and bring his fists back up. It wasn’t about beating him up—though I’d take great pleasure in that. It was about finally telling him what a worthless piece of filth he was.

“He *whipped her!*” I growled, until my voice echoed from the walls, coming back to my own ears, building and repeating until it faded away. “For years, he whipped a defenseless woman in his care. Is that what you’re defending now?”

With a howl of anger, Eoghan ran toward me, ready to try to take me down, burying his shoulder into my stomach. But I didn't budge, and he fell to the ground.

I kicked him in the ribs once, and he grunted as he rolled onto his back. I could tell that the alcohol was swirling in his brain, poisoning his blood. He was circling the fucking drain, but I hadn't made him bleed yet.

"You and your father are pathetic," I said crouching over him, landing a blow to his face.

Blood spread from his nose, trickling down his cheek, and his head lolled to the side.

"You will never"—punch—"Ever!" Punch. "Be able to justify the pain your father caused."

His face was already swelling, coated with blood mixed with rancid alcohol sweat.

"Is this the force of nature that the last Pakhan was so scared of?" I was talking about my brother, Anton, who had always been so afraid of the Irish at his heels that he almost lost everything. I spat in Eoghan's face. "You're nothing. You never will be."

"That's enough," a voice interrupted.

My son-in-law. Alastair Green, the second.

I dropped Eoghan, and he fell like a heap to the floor groaning in pain.

I got up and squared to my daughter's husband, the fucking spitting image of my wife's tormentor. I grabbed him by the collar, and he looked up at me, his hands staying in his pockets, as though I was putting my arm around him in camaraderie.

“And you're going to stick up for your uncle, huh?” I shook him roughly, watching with satisfaction as his perfect blond hair mussed, twisting my fists in his collar until it cut off his air and blood supply. “You want to join your cousin? Or are you finally going to give me a reason to put a bullet in your brain?”

I was crazed, ready to fight anyone and anything that even looked at my wife sideways.

“No,” Alastair said, cool as fucking cream. I wanted to slam this pretty boy's head through a fucking wall, even that posh British voice of his grated me like nails on a chalk board. “But Eoghan's wife has been missing for two years.”

“What does that have to do with my *wife*?” I glared at him, not letting go of his collar. His face started to turn red.

“Your *fiancée* was the last person she was with,” Alastair choked out. “There's no doubt Kira disappeared because of her, or ...” He looked down at his cousin, bleeding and groaning on the floor. “With her help.”

I dropped Alastair and he collapsed to the ground, falling to one knee, his extended hands breaking his fall. He coughed, clearing his throat. It took about a minute before he got to his

feet, smoothing his blonde hair back into its slick, side-parted style.

“I don’t excuse my uncle,” he continued, righting his blazer and smoothing his collar. “But Eoghan is like a brother to me, and he allied with you when you went after Anton Vasiliev.”

“I didn’t ask for his alliance—”

“No. I did. Because my Rose needed her dad to win the war and come out unscathed.” She was *my* Rose. She was *my* daughter before that cunt ever had the privilege of calling her his wife. But I didn’t correct him.

Alastair walked over to where his cousin lay limp, his eyes blinking absently in the distance. He knelt beside him, and the family resemblance was off-putting.

He reached into Eoghan’s pocket and pulled out a phone. He used his own face to get through the facial recognition to unlock it, which disturbed me.

He clicked a few things before a photo appeared. He flipped the phone to me, showing me an image.

It was a picture of Eoghan on a beach, the green leafy necklace around his shoulders. He wore a white long-sleeved shirt in a thin, almost see-through fabric. The woman beside him was in a white, flowing dress, with orchids strung around her shoulders, her long, wavy black hair dancing in the wind, a few strands in front of her face.

“She’s Filipina,” Lea said beside me, peering down at the phone.

“Nah, she could be Hawaiian,” Leo responded.

“What’s her name?” Lea asked.

“Kira.” Alastair said. “Kira Kekoa.”

“Hawaiian.” The twins decided in unison.

“Anyway,” Alastair interrupted. “She’s been missing for two years, and Eoghan hasn’t been able to find hide nor hair of her. He fears that she’s died, and as you can see, is going quite mad.”

Alastair came to his feet, the phone still in his hand.

“She probably ran away if the son is anything like the father,” I crossed my arms, glaring.

“I don’t think so,” Alastair defended.

“You didn’t know your uncle was whipping *my* Evie,” I growled.

“That’s true.” Alastair put up his hands in surrender, the phone pinched between his palm and a thumb. “But I didn’t know my uncle well. I know Eoghan.”

He went through the phone and showed me another picture. It was just the girl, a paintbrush in hand, her eyes closed and smile wide, her tongue sticking out between her teeth. In another, her hair was pinned up over her head as she stood in front of a half-finished canvas. Then another swipe, to a close-up of just her eyes looking pensive. Then another of her resting a hand on her cheek, a small, kind smile on her lips.

“Thousands of these pictures,” Alastair explained, “All taken by him. He *worshipped* that woman.”

He dropped the phone onto his cousin, and it bounced off his heaving chest and clattered on the marble floor.

“Aoibheann was the last person seen with her,” groaned Eoghan on the floor. “And in all the times I’ve questioned her...” Eoghan spat blood onto the floor. “In all the times I’ve begged...” He turned to his side, trying to push himself up from the ground. “She has never denied that she had something to do with it.”

He groaned onto his knees, his hands at his sides, staring at me with hate, exhaustion, and a hint of grief.

He started to laugh. It was a laugh of hopelessness and anguish. “She has never—not once!—denied that she did it.”

He shakily got to his feet and walked toward me, his hands clutching at my lapels. Callum was ready to lunge forward and pull him from me, but I stopped him with a gesture of my upturned palm.

“Where is she?” There were tears in his eyes, and his lips pulled back in a pained snarl. “Where is my *Kira*?”

He fell back down to the floor, landing on his knees, his head falling to the floor as he crumpled. A man completely defeated.

He was right. My wife had never denied it in all the times I had seen him lunge at her. What had she said back at that first dinner? *She’s living free...*



My little queen of the night had even more secrets and layers still yet to uncover.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

## Aoibheann

Haley handed me a clean mug, then sat beside me at the kitchen table. I'd gone up to my room and changed into maroon satin pajamas. The house was cold, so I grabbed the gray cotton bathrobe hanging in the walk-in closet.

It was a nightgown style that ended on the floor and had a hood to keep warm. I flipped it over my head, trying my best to keep my hair from my face. Jericho was dealing with Eoghan. He was protecting me from a mess he didn't even know I created. Meanwhile, I'd been whisked away from the danger and shoved into a car to come home.

I had rummaged through my jewelry box while my chest ached. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Where was the ring? I couldn't find it there, the tears from my frantic worry streaking my makeup. I should have given him the obsidian ring already. Had he been wearing it tonight, maybe I wouldn't feel like I had left him behind to die.

What if Eoghan hurt him? *What if what if what if?* The endless possibilities clattered through my brain until I found the ring and clutched it to my chest. Maybe if I kept it with me it would help draw out this stress until I had him in my arms again.

I had shoved the ring in my pocket and hurried down to the kitchen. Now, I waited. I poured some hot water into the mug, then waited for the leaves to steep. Haley and Saoirse were on

either side of me, chattering away about the babies as if our husbands weren't dealing with chaos.

Maybe it was my guilt that had me so stressed out. The blame for tonight fell on me, not them.

“What was up Eoghan's ass, anyway? Why is he so strung up? It's not like Alastair was winning any father of the year awards,” Haley said. “He deserved whatever happened to him, if you ask me.”

Saoirse shot daggers at her sister-in-law.

“What?” Haley asked. “You were thinking it too.” She clutched my arm but continued to look at Saoirse. “I don't give a fuck if that was his father. Doesn't give anyone the right to grab her like that.”

“I'm not saying that. But have some compassion. It was still his father,” Saoirse said.

“So he's allowed to harass a poor woman? He can get off. He ruined a perfectly good child-free evening.”

“I think there might be something else going on,” Rose said, her eyes falling to me. “It's not right he treats you that way, but, *my* Alastair has always said his cousin loves his wife. The same way he loves me.”

My head lifted and I regarded her. Did that mean Alastair didn't love Rose? The vile Green men didn't treat their women with love, but I had hoped it would be limited to father and son, and not have been passed from uncle to nephew.

No. Alastair Junior didn't hurt his wife. I was sure of it. He was just wrong about his cousin. Blood could make us blind sometimes.

"With anger issues like that, I'd leave him," Haley continued.

"With anger issues like that, he deserves to be castrated," Yuliya said as she jammed a knife into an apple before cutting it into eight perfect slices.

Haley snorted. "And where was his wife tonight, then? If he loves her so much?" She turned to Rose, drawing a skeptical brow toward her.

Rose's shoulder hitched. "I can only say what my husband's mentioned to me."

"Clearly she's missing," Yuliya bit into an apple slice. "Where is she, he kept saying. She probably took off at the first sign of Eoghan's outbursts."

"It doesn't matter," I said, my hands clenching around the mug. I was shaking on the inside. I turned to Rose. "I'm sorry for judging your Alastair for the crimes of my Alastair. It was wrong of me to make accusations when I didn't know him. But I lived with Eoghan for sixteen years, Rose. I know *him*. And he is no saint."

Chatter carried through the halls. It came from multiple male voices. I stood from the chair in a haste to get to Jericho. It toppled to the floor, and I had to jump over it to run out of the kitchen. I lost my slippers running, until I reached the men.

Jericho was leading them, the rest of the boys following. My heart sank when I took in his face. The hall was dark, only a dimly lit trail of lights along the wall, but it was enough to take in the state of him.

He had bags under his eyes, but there were no cuts or scrapes. My throat bobbed when he didn't react to me. He didn't offer me a smile, or even a twitch of his eye. He stood before me, the emotion void from his face, as if I meant nothing to him.

I swallowed, not wanting to worry about that right now. First, I wanted to make sure he wasn't hurt.

I searched for blood, my gaze landing on his bruised and battered knuckles that were most definitely covered in blood. I hurled myself into his arms, biting my lip as he wrapped his hands tightly around my waist and lifted me off the ground.

"You're bleeding," I said.

"It's Eoghan's." His tone was void of any emotions.

I sniffled, letting him hold me while the rest of the men brushed past us. Jericho pushed my back against the wall, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. "The storm was coming and I didn't see it," I whispered against his ear. The words cracked as they left my throat.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the ring. I sniffled, tugging at his arm. "What's that?" he asked, pulling one of the hands that were holding me free. I slid the ring onto his finger.

“It’s yours. You didn’t have it because I was too stubborn to give it to you. I didn’t want you to think I was weird, and then you didn’t have it tonight and I was so fucking scared, Jericho.”

He chuckled as I blabbed what was probably nonsense to him. He brought it up to the lightbulb beside us, inspecting it. “This is mine? I’ve never seen it before.”

I sighed, kissing him. “I bought it years ago.”

“You bought this ring for me ... years ago? Are you telling me you’ve been stalking me?” He smirked, placing the ringed finger against my cheek.

“No, you imbecile. I’m trying to explain something. Stop being such a smart arse.” I turned into his hand, biting his finger.

“Explain while we get you to bed.” He pulled away from the wall, carrying me toward another hall that would lead to the stairs.

“I was in a crystal shop,” I began, filling him in on how I found the ring.

He carried me up the staircase with ease, as if I weighed nothing, and I rambled on about the crystal shop, the feelings I had when I found the ring, how it called to me. How when I realized it belonged to him, I refused to acknowledge it, and grabbed the bracelet instead.

He plopped me onto the center of the bed, a dark look in his eyes before he let it flicker away. “I need to clean up. Stay

right here.”

I nodded, chewing on my lip. He disappeared into the bathroom, leaving me in the silence. My heart fluttered, trying to process his reaction. He wasn't being cold, but he did seem off. Like he was distant. Had I done something to upset him?

I didn't know, and I spent the entire time he was showering with my mind spiraling. His walls were up, but it could have been because of the night we had at the engagement party. I couldn't be sure.

Jericho returned finally, his brown hair still wet. He was wearing only his boxer briefs, and he didn't speak as he approached me. He still wore the ring, which made my heart soar.

I swallowed as I sat up on my knees. My hand reached for his, and I twirled the ring. “If you were wearing it, tonight could have been prevented,” I said, reaching for his hand. I didn't care that his knuckles were stained with dried blood. My finger ran along the black obsidian stone. “I should have given it to you sooner.”

He sat at the edge of the bed, tugging the robe off my body. I helped shrug it off as he lifted me up to get it completely free.

“What's it mean?” he asked, his finger trailing down my neck. He continued his path, down my chest and to my stomach until he reached the hem of my top.

I shivered despite the warmth of his touch.



“It ...” I swallowed, trying to remain focused. It was a harder feat than I thought when he lifted my shirt over my head. “It’s one of the more powerful crystals. It blocks and absorbs energy. Transforms negative ...”

His head dipped and he sucked a nipple into his mouth. I gasped, running my hand through his hair. His teeth grazed along my flesh and his tongue flicked around. A moan left me and he pulled his head back.

“Please, don’t take it off,” I said, as he pressed his hand against my shoulder and pushed me onto the bed.

“Sweetheart, Eoghan would have put his hands on you regardless of a stone.”

He reached for my pants, tugging them off. “He had some interesting things to say,” Jericho said. His hand trailed toward my center. “About Kira Kekoa.”

And the emotion in his eyes dimmed while my stomach twirled in knots.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

## Jericho

I pushed her away from me, and she bounced off the center of the bed.

“Jericho, I can explain,” she said, crawling backward away from me.

I grabbed her ankle and pulled until she slid down, her hair scraping against the duvet. I pulled at her pajama pants next, until the silk came down. She made some feeble attempts to stop me, but off they came until she was only in a pair of black silk panties.

“Then explain,” I said, kissing at her thigh.

“I-I...” She gasped as I bit into the flesh of her inner thigh, then soothed it away.

“Yes?” I asked.

“I... can't... tell you.” Her face grew hot, turning that pretty pink color again.

“Wrong answer.” I shook my head, disappointed.

“No!” she screamed, turning away from me, crawling up the bed on all fours.

I pulled her down again and placed my weight on her back so that she was pinned down, her ass in the air.

I knew she needed to be trained. She needed to learn how to fight an attacker, how to use their weight against them. How to

create space so that she could escape. But we hadn't gotten to that yet. Right now, I was grateful for that oversight. She was so pliable.

I held her wrists on either side of her head, and she squirmed, grunting and whimpering.

"I won't tell you where she is. Not even if you beat me." A tear glistened as it slid down her perfect, high cheekbone. I kissed it away.

"Beat you?" I whispered in her ear. "Why would I do that?"

I transferred her wrists into one hand, pinning it above her head. She tried to claw at the sheets, but it did nothing for her.

My free hand went down the side of her ribs, then between her belly and the mattress to the sweet, warm folds in her panties. I grazed them, gently.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, her eyes darting around the room in confusion.

"There are a thousand different ways to get the answers I need from you." I nuzzled her neck, pushing her hair to the side with my nose. "I know which method I'm going to use."

She whimpered as my finger lightly started to spread her, barely touching the sweet little nerves that had become my best friend since our first time in the conservatory. Now, I would use it as an instrument of her torture.

"I don't understand," she said.

“You will,” I growled into her ear, breathing in her scent as her whimpers of fear turned into gasps of lust. She tried to move her hips, but I pressed my weight on her, my cock finding a sweet spot against the curve of her ass.

I felt the moisture pooling where my fingers touched, and I spread them over the button until her breaths became ragged. But slow. Very slow. Painfully slow.

“Please,” she whimpered. Her little whine sent a jolt to my cock, and he ached for the relief that was punishing close to him.

“No,” I told her in a calm, quiet voice.

“Why?” she whined.

I chuckled. “Because bad girls don’t get relief.”

I bit down on the shell of her ear, letting my finger graze her entrance, lightly tracing the moisture around, but never penetrating her. She tried to bring herself onto my finger, and while the thought of her fucking herself on my hand made me feral, I had to remind myself of *why* I was doing this.

She had secrets. Secrets that put crosshairs on her back. I needed to know them. Not just because the idea of my wife’s soul bared open, exposed to me, turned me on far more than her body spread eagled and available for me to use at my leisure. But because I couldn’t protect her if I didn’t have all the relevant information. And my methods of achieving her compliance were nothing like Alastair Green’s.

I pulled my finger back to her clit, and she whimpered again, her body starting to shake with desire.

“Please!” she whined.

“Where is Kira Kekoa?”

“No!” Her eyes went wide, and she shook her head, her hair getting tousled and tangled as it rubbed against the duvet.

“You know I can do this for hours, Eve,” I whispered into her ear, and she shivered, tilting her head up to rub against my cheek. “I’ll make you scream all your secrets.”

“I can’t tell you.” Her voice was high, pained, and I knew that she wasn’t ready for what I was about to do. But I did warn her.

“You’re giving me no choice,” I said, gently, giving her a chaste kiss on the cheek.

I let go of her wrists, took her panties in my hands, and ripped them off her body. She screamed as the cloth dug into her skin before it tore off. She didn’t have time to think, or to move away before I was back, pinning her hands down and tying them together with the fabric.

“What?” she gasped, shocked. She tried to pull her wrists apart, but that only made my Eve-scented rope tighten further. I flipped her onto her back and pulled her by the wrist until the rope could be secure onto a carving on the headboard.

Now that she was stuck, I was free to move down her exquisite body. I palmed her breasts in my hands, taking one in my mouth and suckling, teasing the other with my thumb and

forefinger. I stayed here, keeping the pressure light, even as she curved her body up to me, begging for more. I went to the other breast and did more of the same, barely putting any pressure until a tear came down her cheek.

I loved her pleasure tears. They gave a gorgeous sheen to her emerald eyes. I kissed those salty little drops and savored them.

I eased my way down her body, careful to not touch her most sensitive areas even as her inner thighs quivered. I licked her little mound, staying away from her clit. I nipped at her folds, but never spread them apart to touch her entrance. My finger traced the beautiful rim of her ass, spreading her wetness all around, but never entering her.

She was starting to see the theme of this interrogation, and she shut her eyes.

“Please,” she begged.

“I love to hear you beg,” I told her, kissing her folds again. “Tell me what I need to know.”

“No! I can’t. I promised ...” Her voice trailed off, and she shut her eyes, turning her head into her bicep. She took a deep breath, trying to regulate her breathing, trying to retreat into her mind. I saw it, in the way she schooled her features, relaxing her body once body part at a time, until her face was impassive.

It was a neat trick. But it wouldn’t work.

“What you promise others isn’t more important than your obligations to your husband.”

I smiled down sadistically, knowing that I’d need to escalate things. It would be my delight to do so.

I stepped away from her and went to the nightstand. She called my name, but I paid her no attention as I searched for the items that I was looking for.

“I was saving these for our honeymoon,” I said to her over my shoulder, “But I guess I’ll have to up my game before then.”

“What?” Her brow creased.

I showed her the items in my hand, and she looked at them, confusion written in her furrowed brow and open mouth. Had she never seen a butt plug or a dildo before? It’s a shame to use these surprises now, instead of in celebration of our marriage.

I placed myself again between her spread legs. She didn’t bother trying to close them. I smiled up at her, her eyes wide as she looked at me.

I took the silver butt plug and put it between her wet folds. For one second, I let it go into her, just long enough to coat it in her juices. She automatically bucked, wanting more but I pulled it out before she could get anything that resembled relief.

The first rule of interrogation? Make sure they know you have all the power, and they have none.



I slid it down, tracing the small distance to her back hole, then slowly pushing it in.

Her eyes grew wide in fear, she started to shake her head.

“Where is Eoghan’s wife?” I asked. She clamped her mouth shut again. Closing her eyes, knowing that there was only one way out of this.

I was willing her not to give up. I didn’t want the answers too fast. I wanted her beautiful resistance because this was going to be exquisite.

I pushed the little silver plug into her, slowly, giving her time to adjust until it was all the way in, until a small black diamond tip was the only thing visible. I tapped on it, and she shivered. I couldn’t help but laugh at her struggle.

“Stop!” she protested, blushing, trying to hide her face in her hair and against her bicep again.

I kissed her folds, letting my tongue slowly grace her clit.

She hissed at the pleasure, her hips bucking toward my face and whining as I pulled back. She tried to tug at her restraints, but that was futile.

“Tell me what I need to know, witch,” I demanded, but hoped that she wasn’t ready yet.

She shook her head, her lips trembling. Sweat was starting to bead at her chest, and that blush that was normally on her cheeks and neck was spreading all over her body. I felt fucking powerful, holding this quivering goddess in my hands.

“Is that a no?” I asked, daring her to speak.

“N-no.” Her voice was weak, as brittle as a thin piece of crystal.

“Good,” I said, smiling at my fiancée as I took the dildo and slowly placed it inside her.

She screamed. It wasn't one of relief, but of desperation. She tried to kick at me, but her arousal took all the bite from her movements. It took all her coordination and strength away, and all that was left was a woman desperate to feel more.

“Please ...” she whined, shaking her head.

I reached up and pushed the hair from her face and planted a kiss to her lips. She looked at me, hope in those beautiful eyes. Hope that I was as desperate as her—and I was!—and would be ready to give us both relief.

But the second rule of interrogation was to always dangle a carrot, then snatch it away.

I got off the bed, leaving her panting and whining.

“Where are you going?” she asked, wide eyes confused.

“Nowhere,” I reassured her, pulling a chair up to the foot of the bed, and taking a seat, staring at the apex between her long, lithe legs.

I reached down to my discarded pants and pulled out my phone.

“What? What are you doing?” She looked at the device in my hand.

I didn't answer. Instead, I pressed a few buttons that started the low, slow vibrations from the toys inside her. It'd be too low to give her relief, but it would keep her in a steady, unsatisfied state. And I'd have the pleasure of watching the show.

She moaned, her eyes closing. Her breasts heaved as her back arched. Her inner thighs gleamed with her arousal, and it perfumed the air around me, driving me insane. I grabbed the base of my cock, pulling it from my boxers and slowly moved my hand along my shaft.

"What are you doing now?" she whined, sounding petulant.

"This torture is for you, not me, witch." I grinned at her.

"Please!"

"What have you done with Eoghan's wife?" I tried to keep my voice even, cold. But even I was affected, my voice thick with lust. And who could blame me?

My bride was sweet, sensual, with long limbs and a fire in her belly that made me want to do nothing more than plant a baby in her. To watch her grow round with my child. I had never wanted babies before this woman. Never thought about it until just now, as her skin shone like silver in the moonlight.

She let out a little whine, her hips bucking against air, fighting for anything to give her release.

I got up from the chair and went over to a nearby cupboard. I pulled out a tumbler and splashed a little vodka in it before coming back to my seat. With a drink in one hand, and a cock

in the other, I watched the most erotic porn show unfold right on my bed.

She writhed from side to side, moaning, tears streaking her lovely face. She blushed all over her body, her toes curling, her fingers splayed. I noted the red marks on her wrists from her panties and made a mental note to soothe them when this was over.

*If this was ever over,* I thought with a smile.

My cock leaked pre-cum, as I continued to watch the show.

“What have you done with Eoghan’s wife?” I demanded again.

I don’t even know if she heard me. Her forehead beaded in sweat. If I even lightly grazed her clit, she’d probably go over the edge.

I rested my drink on the armrest, and came to her on the bed, placing myself between her legs. My knees spread her thighs apart, my cock hard, and throbbing.

She licked her lips. She was so greedy for it, and I chuckled, knowing that I was dangling another carrot in front of her, just to yank it away.

I pumped my aching cock above her.

“You want it, witch?” I asked her.

She nodded, eagerly. Such a sweet, guileless little thing.

“Say it.”

“I want it. Please,” she whispered. “Fuck me.”

“Give me the information I need,” I demanded, again.

She almost wept, her mouth turning down, her tears glistening as she whined. She sobbed for release, begging, moaning, screaming “Please” again and again.

“I’d rather you beat me,” she said, her addled brain making her say things she didn’t mean. “Please, I can’t handle this.”

I pumped my cock, jerking myself off like a teenage boy, looking down at her with a smile on my face. She was fucking beautiful. Every one of my fantasies come to life.

“Fuck, Eve,” I said, throwing my head back as my balls tightened, my cock hard as steel before my body jerked with my release. “You’re so fucking gorgeous.”

White ropes coated her belly, between the valley of her breasts, and even up to the corner of her lips.

Her pink tongue juttled out, tasting my cum, and she moaned again.

There was an art to getting information from a stubborn witch. That was by making her body betray her mind in the only way she’d surrender control.

I stood up from the bed, returned to my drink. The glass was almost at my lips when I heard her little voice again.

“I helped her run away,” she said, so softly I almost didn’t hear her. Maybe she hoped that I wouldn’t hear her.

I turned, felt the burn of the vodka on my lips.

“And where is she now?” I asked in an even tone, able to regain my self-control now that I had given myself some very temporary relief.

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

“Not good enough.”

“I don’t!” she screamed, desperate for me to believe her. “I swear! I gave her all the money I had stolen from Alastair. I was the one that was supposed to run, but she was so scared. I helped her get away.”

I looked at her face, her pleading eyes and the desperation written in her drawn lips. She was telling the truth.

With my glass in hand, I got back on the bed, between her quivering thighs. I lifted the glass over her belly, tilting it until a little splashed into her shallow navel. I bent down to lick it and she moaned. Her hips had stopped bucking, her body now limp, surrendering to the pleasure it couldn’t fight against, and couldn’t get relief from.

I licked and sucked at the pooling liquid in her navel, tasting myself in the mixture on her skin.

I poured the glass again, right above her mound, a few drops landing on her swollen, pink clitoris. I bent down to take it in my mouth, tasting her and the vodka, and lightly grazing my teeth against the sensitive flesh.

It didn’t take long. Just a few, short tugs before she screamed, her head thrown back, her body stiffening as she

climaxed against my mouth, and I swallowed her pleasure mixed with vodka in my throat.

When she was barely down from her high, I whispered, “Good girl.”

Then I took her sensitive clit again, and letting her ride high, one orgasm after another until her eyes rolled to the back of her head, and she collapsed, exhausted. Passing out from her pleasure.

## Chapter Twenty-Six



## Aoibheann

I didn't think I could cry anymore. I thought the tears would have dried up by now, but they continued as Jericho opened my legs. He pressed kisses from my knee, up to my center, then down to the other knee. They were slow, intentional, as if he were apologizing for what he just put me through.

I knew he wasn't sorry. He enjoyed it too much. I did too, though I wouldn't admit it.

I sighed when he undid my wrists and brought them to my chest to get the blood flowing again. I shook my fingers, still trying to catch my breath. My body felt foreign, and despite wanting to hate him for the torture, I found myself reaching for him.

He curled beside me, grabbing my wrists, and pressing kisses along the angry skin. "Shower," he whispered.

I shook my head, not wanting to move. I was sore, and mentally exhausted. I hated that I had given in. I could have called that safe word we had established but I never did. It almost left my lips but each time I went to say it, I stopped.

I wasn't sure if it was because I was worried he wouldn't stop, or if it was because deep down, a part of me enjoyed the twisted torture. I turned to my side, burying my head against his chest. I'd just admitted to him the truth about Kira. It wasn't my truth, and I betrayed her.

“He can’t find out,” I whispered against his warm skin. “I promised her.”

Jericho’s hands moved to my back, rubbing me softly. “I am your husband. You’re not supposed to bear the weight of your secrets alone.”

His voice was soft, the emotion back, and the dam of tears I held back released with relief.

“We’re not married yet,” I said through the sobs. It was a pathetic attempt to change the subject.

It didn’t work. It only earned me a swat to my arse. “Mine,” he said. “In every way.” He grabbed my hand where the engagement ring he placed earlier was resting and brought it to his lips. “You’re my wife even if we haven’t stood in front of some Irish prick employed by the church.”

“In the eyes of Jericho Vasiliev, husband and wife,” I laughed. “His word is greater than the eyes of God. Or the government.”

“Come,” he said, sitting up. He grabbed my arms and wrapped them around his neck. “I’ll even carry you.”

I moaned as he carried me to the bathroom. He placed me on the countertop by the sink and ran cool water on my wrists. His body was on display in the full light, as he turned from me to draw the water for the black tub.

His back muscles were sculpted, more than I’d ever seen on any other man. It was no wonder he handled me so easily, as if I weighed nothing. He was across the room, dumping soap

into the water when I noticed the scar for the first time. A round circle of raised and different colored flesh. I wanted to run my fingers along it and kiss it as he had kissed mine. But I was too weak to move, still withdrawn from my mind.

My gaze drifted lower, to the tightness of his round cheeks, and the smooth muscles on his legs. He grabbed towels from a cupboard, the act somehow domesticated even though what had just happened was anything but.

I kicked my feet against the countertop, excited to sit in the bath. I didn't even care that my rosewater was left in my room. I'd do without if he was climbing in with me. We both sat in the comfortable silence while the bathtub filled. I even wound up resting my head against the mirror and closing my eyes.

I had drifted asleep, only to be startled when he settled me in the hot water. I kept my body curled while he climbed in. He rested his back against the edge. His knees spread, making room for me between his legs, and I moaned as he drew me toward him, settling my back to his chest.

His arms wrapped around my front. I rested my head against his shoulder. The sweet scent of florals caused me to lift my head. "Did you snoop in my room?" I asked when I saw the jar of rose water on the shelf ahead of us.

He brushed back my hair, a humming resigning from his chest. "Did I have some of your things brought to your new room?" he corrected. "Yes. I did."

I clenched down on my lip. My feet naturally began tapping in irritation. Maybe it was a nice gesture, and I *had* wanted the

rosewater but those things didn't matter right now. "So you disregarded my privacy."

His fingers were running through my hair, braiding it, and they stopped. "Privacy? Didn't we just agree that my wife will not keep secrets from me?" he asked in a clipped tone.

"Privacy is different than secrets, Jericho. I don't snoop through your things."

"Your things should be in my room. You've chosen a real marriage. We will sleep together, and you will live in *our* quarters. You have no privacy when it comes to your toiletries, Evie. Just as I have none. Snoop away."

I huffed, slamming my back into his chest. He grunted. It wasn't a pained sound, more like he was enjoying my anger. And that made me want to scream.

"I have secrets too, Eve."

I sucked in a sharp breath. Was this a tit for tat now? He wanted more information from me, what I had told him while he was making me crazed for release wasn't enough for him.

"I have nothing left to tell you," I snapped.

Jericho's fingers ran along my sides, drawing lazy patterns that caused shivers through my body. "I've killed people. Tortured them. Gained their secrets and used it all against them."

Anxiety tugged at my stomach. "You want to know my secrets, Jericho? You want to use them against me? Break my mind and my soul?"

“That’s not what this was, Eve. I need to know them to keep you safe.”

“However you might justify it ...”

“No!” The water splashed as he jolted forward. “Make no mistake, I am as much of a killer as Eoghan, the Murphys, Alastair Green ... but unlike them, I was *paid* to do it. Often by the very entities that were meant to enforce law and order. I have done this work in four different continents, and I have trained my daughter to do the same. The moment I find someone else to hand the pakhan position to, I’ll do it so I can return to my work in the shadows, putting bad people into the fucking dirt. I can guarantee that when it comes to the souls taken by the men in your life, my list is by far the longest.”

He relaxed, leaning back into the tub looking at me.

“Killing men isn’t necessarily evil ...” I was trying to justify him, but I didn’t know why.

“I killed *people*, Eve,” he interrupted. “Not just men.”

“You’ve killed women?” I asked, shocked.

He nodded. “There are women in my life like Rose, Yuliya ... Lea, the twin assassin. There are women out there who can be just as cruel and vicious as men. So yes. I have harmed women too. Men don’t have a monopoly on cruelty, and they don’t have a monopoly on the consequences either.”

“Women and children aren’t off limits to you?” I asked, shocked, ready to jump from the tub.

“Not children.” He shook his head. “I said *women*. Adult women. Many of them in the same profession as me. Or our criminal counterparts.”

I was aghast, unsure what to say. How could he hurt women?

He let out a small sigh. “See this scar?” He pointed to a line that went down the side of his stomach. “Her name was Anatalia Dubrovich. She was a human trafficker. She stabbed me with a serrated knife, and I had to finish the mission with her blade stuck in me, because if I pulled it out, I would have bled to death. Instead, I just bled until I passed out once I got her victims in a car and snuck them into Lebanon.”

“What happened to her?” I asked, unsure if I was on her side or his.

“My partner shot her in the face.” He let out an exasperated sigh. “I am paid to know danger, and to mitigate it. But I can’t do that if you’re keeping secrets from me. Snooping, as you call it, or spying, isn’t just for your enemies. You do it to your allies so that you know where their vulnerabilities are. So you can watch their backs.”

“No. You need to know them because it kills you not to see every mark etched into my soul. Kira and Eoghan aren’t your business.”

“They are when he hurts you. He puts you on edge when he’s in the same room. He put his fucking hands on you, Eve. He grabbed what’s mine. You’re my wife. I must know what you’ve done to keep you safe.” Jericho tried to keep his tone

steady, but I felt the anger deep inside of him. I held the same rage.

His hands left my body to clench around the edges of the tub. It left me without his warm touch. The touch that had grown to be a part of me. It was why I'd given in. He was walking away from me while he used my body, and I needed him. I was broken without him, and he was *leaving* me, pretending I didn't matter. So, I spluttered the truth to bring him back to me. It was time to unleash the truth on him.

*What had I done? I did everything. I did nothing. I died, and I survived.*

"I killed him," I shouted into the silence.

Jericho froze. The hands gripping the tub softened, and the anger was slowly dissipating. It turned into something else ... I couldn't place my fingers on the slow vibrations. The tempo-less frantic rather than the rage.

"My little witch. Did you put a hex on Alastair Green?" He nipped at my ear. He was teasing, but he probably didn't believe I was capable.

I smirked. "That's the only way a weak woman like me could kill someone, right? By magic?"

He didn't respond.

"I'm not strong enough to stab a man in the chest. How could I—*frail*, little Aoibheann—murder someone?" I asked. I let the anger fuel my tone, I didn't hide it the way he did.

I turned in the warm water, facing him. We made eye contact, and I could see him searching for the truth in my face. My walls were down, there was nothing to hide. His walls were down too, and I saw the disbelief in them. The question was there. *Could she really do it? This frail little skittish thing. How? How could she have done it?*

“You don’t believe me,” I stated.

His lips twitched. “I don’t believe in spells. There were no signs of foul play. So how did you do it?”

My hands swirled around in the water. “Did you know gold is toxic?”

His brow raised to his hairline, as if to say of course he knew.

I grinned, wrapping my arms around his neck. “I didn’t. Not until he bought me one of my magic books.”

Jericho’s hand found the small of my back. His thumb stroked the skin beneath the water.

“He used to make fun of them. Tell me how foolish I was. Thought it was hilarious when I told him my thistle tea was to help give him children, though in fact it did the opposite. I never understood why he fed my love for things he made fun of.”

He brought a hand to my face, his knuckles brushing against my cheek. “He needed you to feel less than. Giving you something you loved but making fun of it was a way he controlled you.”



I clenched my jaw, my teeth chattering. “Well, *he* was the fool. Not me. The very thing he teased me for was his demise.”

Jericho’s finger found my chin again and he pulled my gaze back to him when I turned away. His lips brushed against mine. And when I pulled away, I caught the flash of approval in his eyes. It made my chest thump with pride.

“Eoghan and Kira made this sculpture of gold. It was like a tree of life, almost. The tree was twisted with gold wiring, and the roots sprung around into a circle. Beneath it lay a pot of gold sand. I stared at that sculpture every day. Hated the false sense of hope and love it represented. And when she left, my hope of leaving was gone. I had no money to run. There was no other option.”

I reached for him, my nails digging into his chest to keep me grounded. I didn’t want to cry when I told him, I wanted him to look at me and know I was strong. I may not have been able to stab Jericho, but I killed Alastair. I needed Jericho to understand that. He had to know I could protect my mind, if not my body.

“I couldn’t be there anymore. Staring at the tree, pretending to be someone I wasn’t. I didn’t want the attention of the guards anymore, or to be looked at as Alastair’s slut wife. I wanted to be free, Jericho. I yearned to go *home*. I wanted my body back, my choices back. My mind was never theirs, but everything else ...” I sighed, shaking my head. “So, I took the

gold sand. Every day, just enough, and I mixed it in his breakfast. It was slow, it took a year, but it was worth it.”

My nails dug into his flesh, drawing blood. He didn't budge at the pain I knew I was causing him. He'd probably felt worse in his years, but still, he took my pain, letting me expel my agony through the marks on his body.

“I had no home. I had nothing. He took everything, so I took his life.”

Jericho wrapped his arms around me, pulling me until my chest squished against his. He squeezed me until I was struggling for air, and he didn't let me go. “You're home, baby. You're home.”

I moved to cup his face, searching his eyes, and pleading with mine. “Kira,” I whispered. “Kira couldn't see the same fate as me.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

## Jericho

The wedding rehearsal and rehearsal dinner were in the same place. Thank God. Finally, something promised to be easy.

The rehearsal was ... fine. I planned to forego the strange hand-fasting blood oath, but Evie wanted to do it, and after what I did to her during last evening's confessions, I was in no mood to deny her anything.

I didn't feel guilty about a damn thing. The image of her tied and writhing on my bed was the stuff dreams were made of. I wanted to do that again, except instead of edging her, I would orgasm her to the breaking point, until she collapsed in an exhausted heap.

The rehearsal dinner promised to be another shit show. Alastair guaranteed that Eoghan would be on his best behavior, but I was coiled, ready for a fight. I didn't leave my wife alone for an instant, keeping her within arm's length. Preferably with a hand, or my entire body covering her at every moment.

In truth, I no longer knew what to think about Eoghan.

Eve was sure that he mistreated Kira, but all I saw was a man desperately in love, and in agonizing pain. Despite my empathy, I was still ready to put a bullet in his brain if he ever came within touching distance of my wife.

My daughter chose the restaurant. I loved my kid to death, but I hated her choice of food for the evening.

It was one of those modern little themed establishments, where instead of carpet, there was grass underfoot. Plants hung low overhead, and there were jungle noises on the speakers instead of the lulling sounds of easy listening. The tables were as low as coffee tables and we were seated on the floor, our asses on jewel-colored pillows.

Everything was family style, and we had to reach over one another to get to the food items on the long, narrow table. The Murphys sat on one end, to the right of Eve. To my left was my sister, my daughter sat across from me, with Alastair straddling the ground between her and his distant Irish relations.

Since wrenching her confessions, Eve was even more affectionate. She freely tucked herself under my arm, and even now, she naturally took a space near me, leaning into me for support, with my arm around her shoulders. We had an easy peace between us.

She looked at my daughter with different eyes. And also at Yuliya, who sat at the corner, her arms crossed.

“Oh!” Rose said, clapping her hands. “So this restaurant was booked out for the next six months.” She shrugged. “But do you love it, Aoibheann?”

My daughter butchered my woman’s name as much as I did. Her Tagalog accent hardened consonants and gave her trouble as she formed the fluid vowels.

“I love it,” Eve said, grinning from ear to ear, running her fingers over the grass.

“I thought so,” Rose said triumphantly. “I did have to pull a favor, to do this, so we’re going to be joined by one more at dinner.”

She smiled, casting a sideways glance at Yuliya.

“You didn’t.” My sister narrowed her eyes at my child.

“What’s happening?” I asked, my eyes darting between the two of them.

“Hello everyone!” I looked up, seeing a familiar face and let out a loud guffaw.

“Corbin!” I said, coming to my feet and clapping him on the back. “Are you the reason we got into this fine establishment?”

“Sure am.” Corbin smiled, his blazer jacket opening as he brought his hands to his hips, assuming a superhero stance. “Got a call from Rose, and thought, well ... anything for Jericho and his bride. You know what I mean?”

Rose bit her lower lip, trying to stifle a shit-eating grin.

Yuliya leaned over and slapped my daughter on the back of the head, and Rose laughed.

“Hey!” I chastised my sister. “She’s pregnant.”

“She can still incubate if she’s in a coma!” my sister protested.

“That’s enough of that.” My son-in-law stood to move between my daughter and my sister.

Rose threw out a hand and directed her husband back down to his old seat.

“This seat’s for Corbin,” she said, indicating the cushion between her and my sister. I hid my smirk as Yuliya’s normally impassive face turned beet red. She was almost purple with rage.

Corbin took his seat, his smile unwavering as my sister stared daggers at him.

“Did you know this Massachusetts governor”—I leaned down to my wife but spoke loud enough to speak to the table—“and I used to work together?”

“Oh? I didn’t know that!” Eve’s eyes grew wide, and she smiled, friendly, at Corbin. “Did you know that, Yuliya?”

I beamed with pride as my bride caught on to our little game.

“No. For all his incessant blabbering, he never told me that.” Yuliya sarcastically rolled her eyes. Her hair was flowing loosely around her shoulders, down to her lower back, and it seemed to quiver in anger, like the snakes on Medusa’s head.

“Yes,” Corbin was unfazed as always. The man had great bearing. “Actually, have you seen this scar on him?”

He pointed to his own abdomen, where my scar was on me. Eve looked at me, then blushed. Probably remembering our evening of confessions. She nodded to Corbin.

“I was there when it happened!” Corbin looked triumphant. “This fucking guy passed out, and I had to carry his heavy ass to the rendezvous point.” He winked at my wife, as though they were co-conspirators.

“Don’t be impressed,” I leaned down to Eve, whispering in her ear. “He carried me because he didn’t have body armor on. He was using me to catch bullets.”

“No way!” Corbin had the audacity to act offended.

“I’ll tell you about the bullet wound on my back some time.” I kissed Eve on the temple.

“That was a misunderstanding,” Corbin defended, raising his hand to order a beer from a passing waitress.

“I have to pee. Eve?” Rose came to her feet. She had gained a little fluffiness around her middle. “Want to come with me?”

“Oh?” Eve looked surprised. I guess the women-going-to-gossip-in-the-bathroom thing was new to her. “Okay.”

I unhooked my arm from around her shoulders and let her stand. Within two seconds, I was already missing her presence in my space.

“I’ll come with you,” Yuliya tried to stand, but Rose shot her hand out.

“No!” she said, a little too loudly. “You should stay. I want to talk to my stepmom.”

Yuliya glared at the two women, and Rose stuck out her tongue.



“Mark my words, in six and a half months when you shit out those puppies, I will take you into the octagon, and trounce you.” Yuliya had a glass of vodka in her hand, and she was on her way to getting drunk.

What was it about Corbin that threw her off her game? I hoped it was what I thought it was.

With her personality, and her looks, men were not a lining around the corner for her. Not because she wasn't beautiful. But her height, her large hands, and even her muscular features would intimidate even the strongest, most secure man. She exuded power, and strength. The very thing that made her magnetic was why lesser men - and most men were less than her - called her mannish and unattractive. She did nothing to stop that. In fact, she drew comfort from it, cultivating it the way my Eve cultivated seedlings in her greenhouse.

“You'll be post-baby,” Yuliya said, with a smirk, “All *soft* and *weak*. So, you're in for a beating, *niece*.”

My daughter wrinkled her nose and snorted, grabbing Eve by the hand so they could go to the bathroom. Likely to talk about the couple Rose was trying to match-make.

“I'm surprised you're making it down the aisle before me, old man.” Corbin said, taking a beer bottle to his lips, ignoring my sister.

He was playing her like a fiddle. I sipped on my vodka and smiled.

“You and I are the same age,” I glared, playfully at him.

“Sure, but you know ...” He shrugged, patting his stomach. As if he were trying to imply I’ve put on the weight recently, which would just not be fucking true at all. “We don’t *look* it.”

“It’s that babyface of yours,” I chuckled. “Anyway, I didn’t know you were looking for a wife.”

Yuliya was looking at his hands on the beer bottle on the table. He was stroking the neck with a finger. It made my sister flush. I didn’t want to know why.

“Well, I did arrange a thing for a while, but it didn’t pan out, as you both know.” He tilted the bottle toward me.

Yuliya grimaced. That was how she and the Murphy girl had met and formed their unusual friendship.

Corbin shot a look at Saoirse who was sitting at the other end of the table. He waved at her, and she smiled and waved back, until her husband growled and tried to kill Corbin with a glower. But he was unaffected, smiling that boyish grin.

Not that it mattered. What was one pair of hostile eyes, when Eoghan hadn’t wiped his particular brand of death-glare off his face.

Corbin snorted, and blew an actual kiss toward Scotty, a wink following. The man was begging for a fight. Scotty returned the gesture with a tongue plunging kiss to his bride. He was marking his territory.

We had discussed the engagement with Saoirse at length when it was happening, and I had thought it was a great idea. Corbin has presidential aspirations, and a wife was a necessity.

Not to mention he needed it for his cover, for our work in the shadows. But I hadn't seen the depth of his flirtation with Yuliya until now. Not really. I had known, sort of. But he was acting like a man smitten.

“Well, the United States has had exactly *one* unmarried President,” I said conversationally.

“And he was a single term President.” Corbin shook his head gravely. “So, I need to really get serious about finding a first lady.”

We had had this *exact* conversation before. He was doing this for my sister's benefit, and I was an asshole for playing along. But what was his intent? To make my sister jealous? To impress her with his political ambitions? Neither would work, but I wanted to see what would happen in this train wreck.

“Excuse me,” my sister said, getting up from the table, and following the women to the bathroom.

When she was out of earshot, Corbin and I laughed, leaning forward on the table. The Murphys were deep in their own conversation, and they didn't pay attention to us. Except for Scotty, of course, who was still glaring.

“Okay, okay, bro.” I leaned forward, assuming the mantle of my old cover, Brett Bradley, the forty-year-old surfer dude douchebag, dragging out my California accent as I delivered the next punch. “What are your intentions with my sister, man?”

Corbin grew serious, leaning into the table. “Think she’d have me?”

His eyes were eager, his lips frowning. He was actually worried that I would say no.

“I don’t know. My sister and I talk about guns, ammo and fighting.” I shrugged. “Boys weren’t ever her thing ...”

“Okay.” He nodded, concern weighing down his features. “And do you think ...”

There was a scream, and everyone at the table scrambled to their feet.

“Jericho!” yelled Yuliya, before there was the sound of a crash.

Corbin was faster than me, sprinting to the hallway where the restrooms were nestled. I ran hard on his heels. What we found there made my vision turn red with rage.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

## Aoibheann

Rose led me by the arm to the bathroom, and once she was nestled in a stall, she let out a huge sigh of relief. It made me laugh.

“Sorry!” she apologized from behind the closed door. “I’m only three months along, and I’m already peeing all the damn time.”

I smiled. “Summer is the perfect time to have the babies. They’ll be in the sun all day. Winter is gloomy. Babies sleep better outside.”

“I suppose getting two babies to sleep, let alone one, would be hard. I’ll need all the help I can get.”

“Do you plan to stay in New York?”

“I’d like to. Alastair has thrown around the idea of starting a branch of the security company here. But I don’t know.” She opened the door and headed for the sink.

I turned on the sink to wash my hands. “I meant what I said the first night. About the children in the green room.”

Rose shot me a weird look. I needed to get better at conversing. I cleared my throat. “Sorry. What I meant, without being ... creepy ... is that I know Jericho would love to have the children in the house. And I would too.”

She finished washing her hands and leaned against the wall as she dried them, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Do you love my dad?” she asked, her lips pursed.

I frowned, tilting my head. “I don’t think it’s fair to ask that when we’ve only known each other a week. But ...” I held her eye contact. “Jericho has given me a gift that I can’t even begin to repay him for. There aren’t even words for the amount of kindness and respect he’s given me. And for that, I know we have a good foundation to build on.”

“I guess I’ll take that.” She regarded me for a moment. “Did he tell you anything about my real father?”

“No, he hasn’t.” I blushed. “I mean, not more than what was mentioned at dinner.”

She looked at the door, as though she could see through it, all the way to the men seated on the floor in the main hall of the restaurant.

“Jericho gave me a relationship with my biological father, long after he was dead, when I never thought I could feel anything for him.” She looked at me, her eyes open and trusting. “I was alone in the world, and he gave me everything.”

She let out a little breath, and put her hand over her belly, looking down at the small pouch starting to form on her abdomen.

“I’d be nowhere without him. At best, I’d be on the run. At worst, I’d be dead.” She looked back up at me. “But instead, I have everything now.” Her gaze turned pleading. “So, I’m asking you to please not hurt him.”

“You think I could ever hurt a man like him?” I was shocked. I thought of Alastair, and the gold I had sprinkled into his food. But Jericho would be too smart for that. He was superman, able to withstand bullets in my mind.

“Not physically,” she said, shrugging. “But he does have a heart. It bleeds red like the rest of ours, no matter what he says about it being made of stone.”

She leaned on the sink counter and smiled sadly.

“I just want him to be happy.” Then another sigh. How many was that? She must have made that sound half a dozen times in the span of this conversation. “And I’d hate to have to kill you.”

Her face was serious. There was venom in her eyes. And for a moment, I saw the killer that lurked beneath her kindness. The vicious warriorress that was legend. Then she let out a little laugh.

“That was sarcasm?” I checked because I was terrified of her.

“Maybe,” she said, smiling sweet.

I didn’t have time to pry because the door swung open suddenly. I was still staring at Rose when a gloved hand clamped over my mouth, an arm holding me down, elbows pinned to my sides. I tried to scream, but the leather glove muffled it into nothing but a whimper.

Rose ducked low as a second man tried to silence her the same way. He wore gloves and a ski mask, obscuring his



features. Once glance in the mirror showed that my assailant did as well. My heart dropped. This was a planned attack. Was this Eoghan's men?

With a grunt of irritation, Rose gave him an uppercut to the jaw, and the man's head slammed backward toward a nearby wall. He slid down against the wall to the floor.

I struggled against my attacker, but I couldn't move. I wasn't like Rose, though I desperately wanted to be.

The man came to his feet, aiming a punch at Rose's stomach. With a twist of her hips, it glanced off her hip and she pushed him to the ground. Her skirt tore as she straddled the man, reigning blows on his face.

I tried to squirm, to struggle. I dug my heels into the ground as hard as I could, as he dragged me toward the door. I kicked, and struggled, but he just lifted me off the ground. I tried to bite through the glove, but it did nothing.

"You two are assholes," Yuliya said, stomping her way into the room. "Do you know what they're talking about out there?"

She paused, standing still.

She looked at me, the man's arms around me, then down to the floor where Rose was pummeling her attacker. Right punch, left punch, right, left ... the man's head lolling back and forth between blows.

Yuliya thrust out her hand, grabbed the man on me by the mask, spreading her large fingers over his neck, clawing at his

larynx. The man sputtered.

“Let her go,” she growled, low. Then she looked over her shoulder and screamed out Jericho’s name.

There was stomping of feet, the door slammed open. Corbin was there, a gun out of his pocket.

“They’re getting away,” Jericho said, pointing down the hall. “Check the rest of the building!”

The Murphy boys followed in that direction as Jericho stepped into the room. He took the man’s hands off me, finger by finger as his sister held him by the throat.

Rose ripped the mask off her man. His face was swollen, bruised, the nose broken, the socket looking precariously collapsed. My mind noted that there was a familiar slant to his forehead. A recognizable look to his brow, but that thought was pushed aside.

Jericho didn’t spare either man a look as he stepped to me.

“Are you okay?” He was struggling to keep his voice calm, low. He was trying to keep me calm.

I shook my head, tears streaking down my face.

“No,” I admitted. My hands reaching for his face as I pushed into him. I wanted to bury myself inside his chest and never leave. To never come out into the cruel, dangerous world we lived in. “Don’t ever let me go.”

I was begging, howling into his chest.

Through my bleary eyes, I saw Corbin with a phone to his ear.

“Who are you calling?” Jericho asked him, his arms still around me, stroking my back as he was down to business. Doing what needed to be done.

“Getting you some top cover,” Corbin said. “Calling the commissioner, so we can sweep this away.”

“Thank you,” Jericho said, tilting my head into his chest. “Rose, he’s dead.”

My eyes went to the floor where Rose was still punching the man whose face stopped being a face minutes ago, and now resembled a piece of hamburger.

I felt Jericho shaking his head as Rose seemed to come back to consciousness, staring at her hands in surprise, then looking down at the man.

“Next time, try to take them alive, so they can be interrogated,” Jericho said, with an even calmness that I couldn’t understand.

“Oops,” was her only response as she came to her feet, fixing her skirt. Her husband grabbed her by the elbow to balance her.

She looked at her husband, who quirked a brow at her, and grinned. “My sexy little vixen.”

“He tried to hit the babies,” she said with a cruel tilt to her lips. “I should have drawn it out more.”

“Quite right.” Alastair kissed her hard. “No one hurts our little ones.”

He whispered something in her ear, and she blushed. Then she moaned, in exasperation as she rushed to the bathroom, slamming the door.

“I have to pee again!” she explained, and her husband chuckled. “Pregnancy sucks!”

Corbin reached over to the man Yuliya was holding, yanking his ski mask off his face.

“Anyone know him?” Corbin demanded, looking around the room.

Jericho shook his head. I was too scared to look. From what I could see in my periphery, though, there was something familiar about him too. His hooked nose, which pinched and upturned at the end, and the tiny features on a face that was too long. There was a pain in my stomach as memories I had repressed threatened to bubble up, like bile to my throat. I felt sick. Nauseous.

“I do.” It was Eoghan’s Irish accent, low and menacing. “I fired him two years ago. He was one of my father’s bodyguards. One of his inner circle.”

Eoghan turned his head, and I knew he was looking at me with a quizzical brow.

“I fired him because he scared my Kira.” He stepped into the room, and I hid my face in Jericho’s chest, unwilling to see what he might have pieced together. Did Eoghan know? Did

he figure out what happened to me? Did he know why these men might be after me?

“She cursed us!” The man with the hooked nose, his eyes begging Eoghan for a reprieve.

With Eoghan’s eyes off me, I was able to look out. He was looking at the man with a hooked nose, assessing, scanning him from head to toe. He was mentally putting pieces of a puzzle together, but still coming up short. Some pieces were still missing.

“Boss, she cursed us!” He was struggling against Yuliya.

Callum Murphy rounded into the door. “We lost them. There were four others, it looked like. They had a pre-planned escape route.”

Eoghan made no move to help the man in Yuliya’s hands. He just stared, in silent contemplation.

“She cursed us, boss.” The hooked nosed man struggled, obviously seeing Eoghan as the only friendly face. “Listen! Don’t you hear it?”

Everyone went silent, eyes turned on me. I realized that Jericho had me swaying, soothing me with a gentle rocking motion and I was humming my song.

“I fucking hear it in my nightmares.” The man was thrashing, but Yuliya didn’t let up, looking un-phased, and even a little annoyed.

I stopped humming and looked up at Jericho. He was busy staring at the men around him.

“I’ll get her to the car.” My fiancé’s commanding voice did inappropriate things to my insides, considering the situation. “Package them up and take them with us. Stick them in the trunk.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

## Jericho

Yuliya dragged him by his hair as he kicked and screamed. She hoisted him to his feet and tossed the rope over a wooden beam. Corbin grabbed the other end and pulled, his hands curled on the rope, tugging it until the man stood on his tiptoes.

We had deposited the women at the house with Eve. Only Yuliya came with us because keeping her away from a good interrogation was like keeping a kid away from gifts on Christmas morning. Ever since she was interrogated as a child, she developed a fascination with stress, fear, and all the inner workings of a human mind before it broke.

She never broke. But the other children kidnapped with her had. One by one, they all collapsed. But she never did. And it was that mind that had made it all possible.

We drove away from the house, down a dirt path to a building that housed lawn equipment and other tools that didn't belong in the main house.

The rickety old shed didn't have room for the audience that was here, but we crowded in.

The man's yellow hair was drenched and covered in blood and sweat. The terror in his eyes would have elicited sympathy from a lesser man. But I was here for vengeance.

He whimpered, and it made my heart grow with anticipation.



“That’s right, tell me all about it,” I cooed, like I was soothing a wounded bird.

I hadn’t interrogated anyone in years, but it was like riding a bicycle. The sadism of it all made my blood burn and my muscles coil in sweet anticipation. This wasn’t some terrorist who thought he was a freedom fighter or an enemy combatant. He wasn’t trying to fight me for a cause that, under a certain light, might seem noble. It was a man who had the audacity to hurt my family. My fiancée, and my daughter with the unborn babies in her belly.

That was a sin worthy of reigning hell on earth.

“So.” I picked up an ice pick from the tools in the shed and made sure he could see it, before continuing my question, “Do you mind telling me why you went after my family?”

He shook his head, frantically turning back and forth before his eyes landed on Eoghan, standing in a sliver of moonlight at the shed’s entrance.

“He knows!” the man cried, his Irish accent thick. “She cursed us. It’s the only way to get rid of the curse. She has to ...” He whimpered, his head lolling down as he stared at the ground in defeat. “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”

His words had no conviction. He was a breaking man. A dead man. The only question was *when* and *how*.

A question only I had the answers to.

“I assume we’re talking about Aoibheann?” I said her name the way the Irish would, and not by the names I had newly

christened her. It felt stale on my tongue.

“Aoibheann Green,” he confirmed. “She cursed us all. We’ve lost everything. My wife. My family. Even my fucking dog ran off.”

Eoghan shuffled where he stood, his brow furrowed. He came to stand beside me, reached up to grab the man’s hair and tilted his head up for a closer look.

He recoiled, his lips curling in disgust before letting go of the man’s head.

“He’s right about losing everything,” Eoghan said, not taking his eyes off the captive. “I fired him and cast him out. His wife and kids chose to stay under my wing. She’s moved on to better pastures.”

Callum, who stood behind the dead man, flinched at that news.

“Why?” I asked. I forced my blood to run cold. *I am cold.* No heart. No feelings. I was detached from all of this, to do what I need to do.

“They made Kira uncomfortable.” He narrowed his eyes. “After my father died, his personal guards were *all* scaring my wife. She didn’t tell me why or what they did to make her jumpy. I just saw it. So, I got rid of them. Replaced them with my own men.”

Callum’s brows shot up.

“You didn’t kill them?”

“No,” Eoghan said, his hands coming to his hips as if he was recalling a mundane event. “I wanted to, but my wife ... she was *against* some of the methods that I would normally consider, and I thought I was honoring my father’s memory. I fired them with a small severance and thought that was that.”

He tilted his head, nodding to the man that was strung up.

“I asked Kira if they said or did anything to her, but she said no.” He shrugged. “Believe me, if she had mentioned anything, he’d be strung up in my woodshed, not yours.”

Alastair stepped forward, his mouth open ready to defend his cousin, but I paused him with a wave of my hand.

“I believe you,” I told him. And I did. Eoghan was a vicious man. Even a delusional one when it came to witchcraft, but he wasn’t a dishonest one.

I turned back to the whimpering fool, and placed the ice pick by his navel, poking just a tiny bit of pressure onto his shirt and the skin beneath.

“So why would you believe that my fiancée cursed you?” I kept my tone cool, casual. “Seems like you got off pretty easy.”

“She’s got you all fooled,” he said through sniffles. “You, most of all.” His eyes flicked to me. “She’s got you under her spell.”

I took a breath. I steeled my nerves. I was a robot, not a man. I was a tyrant, not a bridegroom.

Years of training had all boiled down to this one moment.

“Okay, maybe you’re right,” I said, letting the flicker of emotions burn out.

Callum’s brow furrowed, as if he couldn’t believe what I was saying. It was best he didn’t believe it, as long as our hostage didn’t see it. “I’ve been ... feeling off since meeting her. I mean ... it’s like she’s ...”

“Magnetic?” I said. The man nodded, eager to say what I wanted to hear. “You feel it too? The way she draws you in?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding as if I was coming to a realization. “I mean, her looks ...”

“Her beauty is unreal, like a fucking medieval painting.” The man was eager, as if we were becoming friends over a beer. “It’s ethereal.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, nodding, looking over to Eoghan who stood completely still, unsure what move to make. “And that voice ...”

“That humming just gets into your head,” he whimpered. “She hadn’t given him kids, so he decided he had other uses for her.”

“Yeah? What other uses?” I asked, like we were gossiping over fucking tea. I was curious, not disgusted. At least that was what I forced my body to convey. My tone held interest, as if I believed every word he said. He was the life of the party, and I wanted more from him.

“We would do anything for her, she was so beautiful,” the guy whimpered. “We were at war with the Bratva. Alastair

was losing everything. His territories, his sanity ... if we could be the cruelest man in an attack, he said we could have her.”

My body tensed. My fists clenched. Every man in the room stood straighter. It was like we had all been dropped in a bucket of ice water at the same time.

But I was cold-blooded. I had no feelings. I forced my body to relax. To continue my charade.

“Have her?” I tilted my head, bringing a hand into my pocket. “You mean ...”

“She was beautiful,” he continued, now lost in a memory. “That first time, I had to crucify an entire family—husband, wife, and two kids—at the docks to get it, but I thought it was worth every scream...”

My fists were starting to shake. I was beginning to shiver.

“We all wanted her, and I finally got to have her that night.” He started to laugh, one of almost relief. “He whipped her good, first. The two of them were into that sort of thing. She lay there, perfectly still, her legs spread, her skin was so white... And I got a taste.”

I couldn’t stand this. I couldn’t handle it. I gripped the ice pick in my hand.

“For a year, it was perfect.” A tear went down his cheek, the sign of sorrow from a twisted mind. “She was the sweetest reward we could have had.”

“You raped her,” I finally said, losing my cool. No amount of training or trade craft would have prepared me for this.

“She never said no!” he protested, suddenly realizing he wasn’t alone in his memories, looking at me frantic, desperate for the connection we appeared to have a moment ago. He realized he had erred somewhere and started to walk back his statements. “She never said no, she never complained... It was a thing they did. An arrangement they had! He was like a king, and she was his witch... She did everything he asked, no question, so she liked it...”

I punched the ice pick into his stomach, and he screamed, spurts of blood coming from his gut. I must have punctured an intestine, as a foul smell came from his body.

“She never said no!” he whimpered.

“Because she couldn’t.” Eoghan shook his head slowly. “And you thought...” He sighed with a sad little laugh. “You thought I’d be the same with my wife.”

The man suddenly knew that he had revealed too much. That he had been fooled. In his addled brain that was impaired by blood loss and pain, he knew he was a dead man. And dead men love to confess.

“You are just like your father. Down to your core.” He shook his head, again, confessing far more because he couldn’t seem to stop talking. “Instead of strawberries and cream, she was coffee and chocolate.” His eyes flicked to Eoghan. “You didn’t handfast her, anymore than Alastair did that *witch*. She was never your real wife.”

Eoghan snarled, his lips curling in disgust. He then wiped his face from his forehead to his chin. He took in a ragged breath

and blew it out slowly. With his hands on his hips, his shoulder hunched, he looked to the ground, then out the shed doors.

“That’s why she ran.” He shook his head, whispering to himself. “That’s why she was so scared.”

He turned around and left the shed, to contemplate the new information that had been forced upon him. We heard an anguished scream of “Fuck!” as the doors slammed behind him, and even though I couldn’t stand the man, I was with him, when it came to finding a new, disturbing facet of a wife’s suffering.

I wanted to go out there and scream at the moon as well.

Alastair Green, the younger, marched out to join his cousin. Possibly to comfort him. For once, I didn’t fault him for it.

The dead man started to hum that song again. His little rodent face was an insult to mankind. He was humming my wife’s song between whimpers. The haunting, sad tune.

“She used to hum it,” he chuckled. “All fucking night she hummed it ... and she cursed us. She cursed him. That’s why he died.”

I stayed silent, knowing that he would fill the gaps in speech. Not because he wanted to, but because his mind was on its last legs. The final fight of life, before imminent death.

“And I can still hear that fucking song when I close my eyes.” He shook his head, not even believing what he said. “When my wife left me, the door closed, and that song... that humming.” He snarled. “When I was fired by the son... that

song was in all our ears.” He started to hum it, but with an edge of anger and bitterness.

He kept on humming it, until he was screaming it out, missing notes and making a mockery of it.

It was time to put the dog out of his misery.

“Give me the gun.” I put out my hand, palm up toward my sister. She went into her hip holster and pulled out her Glock, ready to hand it to me handle first, but the Murphy boy stepped between us.

“You don’t want to do that,” he said, shaking his head.

“Oh, I promise you, I most definitely want to do that,” I said, trying to push him out of the way to get to my sister’s weapon.

“No, you don’t.” He grabbed me by the arm, shaking me until I looked at him. “Listen to me, Russian.”

I looked at him, ready to punch him in the throat if I didn’t like what he said. I was coiled, and someone *needed to die today*. Best to be the man who raped my wife. Who used her as a prize for their little cruel games.

“I killed the man who...” Callum looked away, his words caught in his throat. “He hurt my Haley.”

There was a murmur among his brothers at his confession. Not because they didn’t know he’d done it, but that they were surprised he was telling me.

“I put his feet in cement and killed him.” He looked me dead in the eyes. “If I could do it again—”



“Don’t go soft on me now, Irish,” I interrupted him.

“If I could do it again,” he said, slowly and deliberately. “I’d do it slower. Make sure he cried every tear that she had, and more. I’d flay the man slowly, over the course of days, maybe even weeks. Watch him bleed out, terrified, until it wasn’t my cuts that killed him, but his own loss of will to live.”

He gripped my shoulders, demanding my attention. “My aunt deserves the same justice.” He stepped back from me and nodded at the dead man, who was horrified.

I smiled.

“This might be the first time I’ll take your advice.”

“Oh! Oh! I know!” Sean thrust his hand into the hair, hopping up and down like a schoolboy needing a bathroom pass. “Let’s bonfire him!”

## Chapter Thirty

## **Aoibheann**

Haley stood beside me, one arm wrapped around my shoulder. The children were asleep in the guest rooms, and she held a tiny monitor in her other hand. The tears had stopped at some point in the night, but my eyes were still puffy and red. And they burned. God did my eyes ache not only from the saltiness of the tears, but also from exhaustion.

Jericho was in that shed along with the other men, and Yuliya. He had captured my attacker, and I knew he was learning more of my secrets while I stood in the conservatory consoled by the women. All of the horrible things I hadn't been able to confess to him, and I knew he was probably stone faced on the outside but dying on the inside.

I wanted to hold him and promise him I was okay. I needed to be there so that he could smell me, feel me, hear me. I didn't like thinking he was worried about me while he was away from me.

“Aoibheann, it'll be hours before he's back. Let's get some rest. We have a long day tomorrow, okay?” Haley's voice was soothing, but it did nothing to ease my worry.

I knew what they were doing to the man in the shed, and I knew my husband would be getting the information he needed. He'd know soon what Alastair's men had done to me. He'd probably think the same of me that Alastair did.

I was useless, nothing but a hole to fill. And Jericho would soon realize how many people had violated me. What if he thought of me as garbage and disregarded me as such? I needed to know what he was thinking.

He wouldn't want to marry me tomorrow. The wedding would be called off, and Eoghan would be free to dispose of me as he saw fit. Callum wouldn't bother protecting me still, if he knew that I allowed those filthy things to be done.

My skin burned with the agony.

"I need to see him," I whispered, wiping the tears from my face. "I have to know what he's thinking."

"He's thinking he'd burn the world for you, Aoibheann. And that's exactly what he's doing. Let him."

I shook my head. "That man is telling him things ..." I heaved a shaky breath.

"And Dad is making sure he pays for his sins," Rose said from behind us.

"He's going to hate me," I whispered, desperate to run outside. Rose was guarding the door, making sure I wouldn't go.

"He's not going to hate you," Saoirse promised.

"Eoghan is out there and ..." I sucked in a sharp breath. "The guard. They're telling him. I didn't want him to know. I didn't want anyone to know." I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Look at me,” Haley said, grabbing my arms and shaking me. “Look. At me, Aoibheann.”

I forced my eyes open. Haley’s hazels met mine, searching for answers to questions she wasn’t asking out loud. “I was violated too. And when I told Callum he gave me my vengeance. That is what is happening out there right now. Jericho is giving you your peace. He is putting to rest the demons that haunt you, so you can be free.”

She continued rubbing my arms, trying to keep me grounded, to prevent me from yet another panic attack. “That is all that is happening. When he is finished, he will come inside, and he will hold you and put you to sleep. And when you wake in the morning, he will kiss you, and he will be at the end of the aisle, his eyes only on you while you walk down in your beautiful gown. Nothing else will matter.”

I shook my head, letting out a scream I’d been holding in for too long. It held the power of years’ worth of torment that I was never able to express. I fell over, my body hunched.

He knew what they did, and I wanted to believe Haley, but I couldn’t. Hands rubbed my back while I let out the pent-up emotions. Whispers and coos cocooned me, but all I could focus on was the reality that was in front of me.

“What’s that?” someone whispered.

“Are the woods on fire?” another person asked.

“It’s a fucking torch.” That was Haley. “My husband is holding a torch.”

I forced myself to stand so I could learn what was happening. Through the paned windows, I saw it.

Smoke enveloped the area, reaching well above the treeline. Something was on fire, but the darkness wouldn't allow us to see what. I couldn't find the light Haley noticed. I searched desperately, but then it happened.

The flicker of movement and men walking toward the woods. There was a shimmer in the distance. They were shadows mostly, except for Callum who was holding the flame and leading the way. His face was orange against the fire he held, and Jericho was behind him, dragging something.

My eyes squinted. No. Not something. A man. The man that they had captured and thrown in the trunk. My heart soared, as we stood against the glass in silence, watching the show.

A few of them were surrounding Jericho, others were collecting wood and tossing it in a makeshift fire pit.

"They're going to burn him," I whispered. My hands reached out, falling against the glass.

"Holy shit," Saoirse said.

I turned for the door that lead into the garden, but Rose realized what I was doing and went to block it. She was fast, but I was closer, and I made it there before she could stop me.

"Aoibheann!" she called after me as I ran.

The ground was cold and wet. My feet were going to regret this by the time I made it to the fire. It was calling to me, the earth pushing me forward. I focused on the wind and the

smoke billowing in the distance. Though I should have been wincing from the frozen December ground touching my bare feet, I was numb to it. I was numb to everything except the man being strung up for his death.

Jericho stood, helping to make sure he was secure, and when he saw me, he stopped. He turned toward Callum, taking the flame, and with an encouraging nod, he handed it to me.

Haley was right. Jericho was giving me my vengeance.

## Chapter Thirty-One



## Jericho

My ethereal queen, barefoot on the cold grass, walked with her hands at her sides, staring at the torches, and the man trussed like a witch.

“I couldn’t stop her,” Rose whispered loudly, as if I would be mad at this turn of events.

The man groaned on the pyre, his bloodied face lolling back and forth.

“Please,” he kept repeating, begging for mercy. “Don’t. Please. Please!”

Not on my watch. Not after what he had confessed.

I took the torch from Callum’s hand, and he let out a yelp of protest before his eyes drifted to her. Aoibheann, the ghostly apparition, the angel of fucking vengeance.

I handed her the torch, and she took it without a word. Barely sparing me a glance.

Some ancient ritual was happening here. The Irish had to respect it. She was some kind of woodland spirit, mother earth itself, coming to correct a great injustice in the world.

Eoghan stepped forward, speaking her name, but I silenced him with an open palm, and he withdrew. He could make his apologies and his amends later. For now, we were simply witnesses. She was the ringmaster, and we were her sideshow.

She started to hum that song, the one that I had thought of as her battle cry, low and haunting like a lake witch, a Rusalka, that had come to crush the souls of men. She would crush mine too. But I welcomed her power. I welcomed the force of it, the pressure in my lungs.

The dead man went silent, his eyes darting back and forth, looking for the source of a melody.

The torchlight reflected on her pale skin, her flame hair loose, curled and wild around her. My beautiful witch was a thing of the most glorious nightmares.

“No,” moaned the dead man, his eyes growing wide when they finally focused on her.

She hummed on, her voice growing louder as she sang new lyrics: *“Gold on his lips, blood on his blade. Never believed the price that you’d pay. Men who are liars die at my fire.”*

She tipped the torch to lick the bottom of the pyre and smiled menacingly as the sticks caught and slowly spread, dispersing the cold air that shrouded us.

And all the while, she continued to hum her tune. The song of her curse. A curse that I would bring to fruition, even if I had to spend the rest of my life hunting every single one of them down and offering her their heads on a platter.

She took the torch and with a sadistic glee, touched it to the man’s bare toes. He screamed and she laughed, withdrawing the fire, and he quieted again.

She turned her head to look at me, fear crossing her eyes. I knew she feared my disapproval. But I smiled. My queen of the night deserved her revenge against those who had transgressed against her. With a nod of encouragement, I gave her permission to be what she truly was—powerful. Ethereal. A Goddess among us mortal men.

She took the torch to the man's face, letting the flames lick against his blood-soaked cheeks, and he screamed, his skin charring like a roast pig. The scent of burning flesh was sweet and stomach-churning. I breathed it in, enjoying the aroma of our brand of justice.

She continued to hum her beautiful, and terrible, lullaby.

“In my country,” Rose whispered, a faint sound of wonder in her voice, “Before the Spanish came, men and women were equal. There were only two things that were considered feminine. One, was being a mother.” She rubbed her hand over her growing belly, “The other was called a Baybaylan. The Spanish thought they were witches. But they were spiritual leaders. They could heal wounds, speak to spirits, and whip an army into a frenzy before battle.”

We all marveled as the wind thrashed around Eve's skirt. The fallen leaves seemed to rise and fly around her, like they were caught in her orbit.

“Where Babaylans lead, the warriors followed,” Rose finished her sentiment, looking at me. “Are we ready for that?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation. There was none needed. I was ready, and eager. In an older time, I would have laid my sword at her feet. I would offer her my armies, and bend the knee, swearing fealty to my queen.

Rose nodded. My faithful child, always by my side. I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and held her to me, planting a kiss at the top of her head. My daughter, and my grandchildren. These were things worth fighting for.

I spied Eoghan, uneasily shuffling his feet as he witnessed her true colors. Her scars were visible, the lines bright in the moonlight and flames. The undeniable proof of her torture, her abuse, her pain was all around us.

“Whose side are you with?” I growled at him, asking the question that burned my blood. “Now that you know the truth?”

Eoghan’s head jerked at my question, then turned back to my bride, before returning to me.

The chorus of the dead man’s screaming echoed in our ears. He screamed for mercy. For God. For the pain to stop. He hadn’t realized that his appeal had been denied. That the person whose mercy he needed was standing before him, and she would not grant him relief. He deserved none.

Her humming stopped, and she threw the torch into the flames.

With clenched fist at either side, she let out a primal scream to drown out her victim. He shut his mouth, his neck straining

against the pain, struggling against the binds that would not give. Not while he was still fucking breathing.

It would be worse if he never surrendered. If he survived the flames, and fall from the logs we stacked him on, then he would die of his injuries, cold and wet on the ground, surrounded by nothing but angry faces. None of us would touch him. We'd never put him out of his misery. We'd let him live for days in complete agony before hell took him.

She breathed in deep, the fire gave her skin a glow as she screamed again. The battle cry of my angry angel. Her scream echoed all around us from the trees, and they seemed to shiver in response. The wind picked up, the hot air and smoke swirled around, the leaves joining in the merry dance.

"I'm on her side," Eoghan said, looking at the wind, the trees, and the earth that was splitting open in front of us, responding to her call. "I'm on hers!"

He wasn't saying it to me. He was saying it to whatever power she was conjuring. Whatever wicked wind he thought that she could call in her agony which turned to anger.

He should be afraid. He had every reason to fear her vengeance, because I was now her knight, and I would do her bidding until all the pain of sixteen years were wiped clean. I'd never stop being her champion until every single scar was paid for in blood. Pain earned, for pain inflicted.

"We're going to war," I warned Eoghan. "I will hunt down every single one who laid a finger on her. If you stand in my way, you will share their end."

Eoghan, strong as he was, and as cruel and fearless he was, didn't balk at the threat. He didn't bristle, but nod.

"I'm with you," he declared. "We go to war."

Eve turned to us, her fists still at her sides, her eyes desperate, angry, looking at us all one by one, inspecting her troops. Yuliya nodded with delight, her fealty already known from the beginning. Callum, Declan, Alastair, Rose stood taller under her scrutiny, until her eyes landed on me.

I stepped to her, and went down on one knee, taking one of her pale hands in mine and bringing it to my lips in worship, in fealty, in a promise that I would do her bidding. Her other hand came to my head, like she was bestowing her blessing to my sacred quest that I would embark for her. My queen of the night. My black bride.

The love of my life.

*The story continues in King of the Dawn*

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