



# REDEMPTION IN CRUELTY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

VI CARTER  
E.R. WHYTE

# Redemption in Cruelty

Vi Carter and ER Whyte

Copyright © [Year of First Publication] by [Author or Pen Name]

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

# Contents

Dedication

Playlist

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

About the Authors

Social Media Links

Our Thanks

Dedicated to anyone who's ever felt unchosen. Unseen.

Someone is out there, with a heart as beautiful and monstrous  
as yours, just waiting for you to take down the fences.

# Playlist

## *LISTEN*

*Barracuda* – Heart

*A Little Wicked* - Valerie Broussard

*all the good girls go to hell* – Billie Eilish

*I Did Something Bad* – Taylor Swift

*Daylight* - David Kushner

*I Melt With You* - Blonde Maze

*Bad Blood* – Taylor Swift

*Never Tear Us Apart* - Bishop Briggs

*Little Lies* – Fleetwood Mac

*Play With Fire* – Sam Tinnesz, Yacht Money

*Honey (Are You Coming?)* – Maneskin

*Normal People Things* – Lovejoy

*Your Side of Town* - The Killers

*Make It Out Alive* – One OK Rock

*Little Girl Gone* - Chinchilla

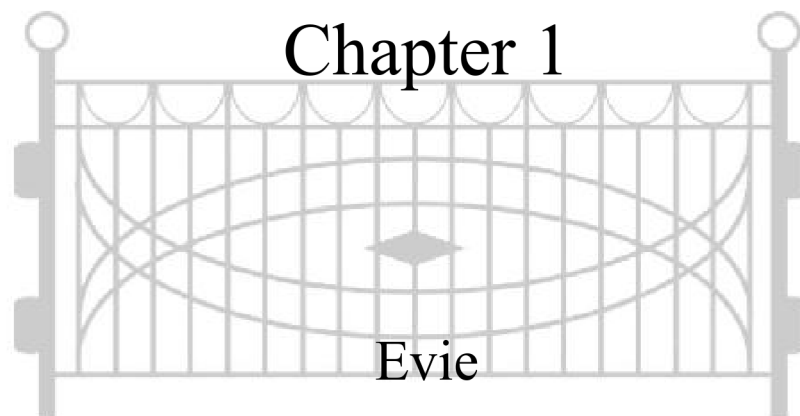
*Don't Blame Me* – Taylor Swift

*Breakfast* – Dove Cameron

*War of Hearts* – Ruelle

*Teeth* - 5 Seconds of Summer





*IT'S A BEAUTIFUL DAY, the hills of Sicily reflecting a brilliant sunset against a painfully blue sky. Around the long rectangular table, the family I see all too infrequently these days laughs and teases one another over risotto and chilled wine.*

*It's my nonna's ninetieth birthday, and she holds court at the head of the table, my mother to one side and my brother Damon to the other.*

*Damon is in from the States, able to put business on hold for a few days for this special occasion.*

*I'm in from Ireland, where I'd been staying at the O'Hanlon manse after graduating from the abbey school I'd attended throughout my secondary years.*

*I loved it there, but it was time to move on. I squirm with excitement at the thought of talking to Damon about moving permanently to the States with him. Surely he can find something for me to do to help out with our assorted family*

*enterprises. We have them scattered in New York, Italy, and Ireland, in all avenues of business, both legal and not so legal.*

*In my final year at the abbey school, I'd been able to complete an extensive marketing program, specializing in graphic design. My instructor said I showed exceptional affinity for it.*

*Maybe there's some way I can use that with our more legitimate pursuits.*

*Maybe I can make them even more profitable than they already are.*

*"Is Marcus going to be here?" Sofia, our cousin, asks.*

*I look at her with sympathy. There's no love lost there. Marcus is an ass, and a mean drunk more often than not. I caught him groping her last Christmas, sloshed out of his head. He didn't even know who she was.*

*"No," I tell her. "He's in Ireland." I reach over and tug gently on her goofy-looking pigtails. "He was wondering when you were going to ditch these things, though."*

*A car backfires loudly just then, interrupting whatever response she might have made.*

*A hanging plant explodes overhead, raining fragments of terra-cotta over the table and our heads. Sofia screams, a shrill burst of sound, and the car backfires again.*

*Not a car.*

*Gunshots.*

*Awareness sends me to the ground in a fog of shattering china and confused cries. Stunned, I crawl to my mother and Damon, dimly aware of the pop-pop-pop that accompanies the scrape of concrete against my knees as I move.*

Someone's shooting at us.

*The waiter falls beside me. I jerk away and keep crawling, not stopping until my hands land in something sticky and warm and...red.*

Blood.

*Horrified, my gaze travels up the river of red, along the length of bright blue shirtdress—blue like the sky, blue like her eyes, blue like...*

*Mother.*

*"Nooooo!"*

*My wail pierces air that's gone quiet in the aftermath of bullets. My hands land on her chest, trying to press the blood back inside.*

Make it stop.

Make it stop.

*Damon is there suddenly, pushing me away and lifting Mother to his chest. He rocks and keens and—*

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their full upright positions. Make sure your seat belt is securely—”

I wake with a start, the flight attendant’s measured tones a welcome shift from the horrifying dream. Wiping my brow, I jerk my seat into position and push the images away.

It doesn’t go easily, unfortunately, because it’s not just a dream.

It’s a memory of what was probably the worst day of my life—probably, because I’ve lost Damon now, too. And Marcus, although I don’t really grieve him the way I do Damon. We lost Marcus long before he actually died.

The flight attendant nods as she walks by, checking, and I grip the armrests. I hate flying. It means I have to relinquish control to someone else, and that doesn’t sit well with me. Not even for a few hours.

But I suppose it’s a necessary evil in this instance.

New York is an X-mark on a map. A been-there, done-that, told-it-to-kiss-my-ass kind of town.

There’s a war looming. I can feel it. Sense it the way wild animals sense a storm brewing. With Luca having chosen his side and his allies, it was time I chose mine.

So, I’m going home.

My skin itches with the dust of travel, and my eyelids droop with fatigue. The flight from JFK to Shannon was long,

bogged down with the awareness that there's no one left in New York I can trust.

Not since Luca chose Carina, at any rate.

The thought leaves a sour taste in my mouth, and I shift uncomfortably as the plane touches down. I can't wait to get off of this thing and on my way to the O'Hanlon manse. I glance at the time on the screen fixed in the seat in front of me. It won't be long now.

After what feels like an interminable period of landing, moving through customs, baggage, and finding the driver, I'm finally settled in the back seat of the car that picked me up from the airport.

My thoughts twist back to Luca and the clusterfuck that was our hastily scuttled engagement, as they've been doing more and more lately. It's part of the reason I'm leaving New York. I didn't love him, and he didn't love me—painfully obvious in how easily he picked up with his old love—but the dismissal still stings. Evie O'Hanlon wasn't created to be dismissed, damnit.

I press my lips together. That's in the past. I'll reset, soothe my bruised ego, and go back stronger than ever with new allies.

It's a solid plan.

Outside the tinted windows, rolling green pastureland moves by in a blur, broken by hedgerows, sheep, and the occasional building. I hungrily watch the scenery move past, tired but soothed as ever by the beauty of my homeland.

It's been too long since I've been home.

I've visited briefly, but I haven't spent an extended period of time here in many years. I was here recently to sort things out after a falling out with the O'Reagans, but that didn't last long and only served to remind me that we have an entire branch here that we need to be making better use of.

Tommy, my principal captain in New York, thinks I'm crazy for coming over on my own for some nebulous reason I haven't fully formed in my own mind.

"We're fine here," I told him before I left, referring to our New York operations. "Even with Angelus Valachi in clear control and the Marzano-Scarpetta union putting them solidly behind him." The words twisted at my gut, reminding me that the Marzano union could have—should have—been mine. "But we could definitely be better. Stronger. I think Ireland might be the key to that."

Tommy was skeptical, reminding me that we haven't worked closely with the Irish O'Hanlons in years—not since my mother moved to Italy and was later killed.

I didn't listen to him. The car jounces down a long dirt road now, taking me ever closer to my family's home on the outskirts of Limerick. The driver stops for a group of sheep, waiting patiently for the milling animals before he's able to keep going.

Just that tiny delay is enough to set my teeth on edge. Now that I'm here, I want to be *here*. At my house, in my bed. With my people.

But we're almost there.

As soon as the thought crosses my mind, the last curve of the narrow road gives way to our driveway, and the house rises up in the distance, solid and comforting with its weathered gray bulk. Beside it gleams a lake, glimmering in the last dregs of daylight.

Its stone silhouette, familiar and long unseen, brings a lump to my throat. "Pull around back, please," I instruct, my voice husky.

"Aye, ma'am."

I'm out of the car swiftly when the driver parks, moving to the back to fumble impatiently at the back hatch for my suitcases with my gaze trained on the door.

The smile breaks free, unhampered by jet lag, when the door opens, and John shuffles onto the stoop.

I forget the suitcases and run to greet him. "Hey, Old Man," I say softly, lifting my arms for a hug. His mouth quirks at the nickname. No one else ever dared call him something so impertinent, but I never cared about his bluster. He's Old Man to me, and will be until the day one of us dies.

John pulls me in, wrapping me tightly against him. The ancient caretaker is still brawny well into his seventies, even if his shoulders have stooped and rounded with the passage of time.

"Hey, li'l gal," he rumbles back at me, his gnarled hand clasping my head against his sweater-covered chest. "Looks

like you could blow away.”

I pat his chest and step back, shaking my head when he insists upon taking my bags from the driver’s hands.

“Don’t start with me, Old Man. How is everything?”

I follow as he turns and shuffles back inside, and I stop to hug his wife, Meredith, on the way.

As the man my grandfather trusted as our property’s caretaker years ago—really, our family’s caretaker—John has always had his finger on the pulse of every aspect of our home and the people who run our various enterprises. A close friend of my grandfather’s, he used to handle the family’s affairs here in Ireland until his son, Tadgh, took over for him. Tadgh shifted him to minding more of the estate business at that point—the less urgent tasks.

He’s not retired, though. John will never retire.

He grunts and sets my suitcases at the doorway leading into the hall before settling his bulk at the kitchen table. I sit opposite him, letting my gaze drift around the homey space, with its hanging copper pots, brick fireplace stained with soot, and butcher block countertops scarred and indented with nearly a hundred fifty years of use.

His gaze touches me like his gnarled hand. “I know why you’re here, gal.”

“Oh yeah? And how do you know this?”

Meredith flutters about. “How about a cup of tea? Won’t take but a minute.”



John laughs. “Evie’s her mother’s daughter. She doesn’t want tea—she’ll have a whiskey.”

“Well, I’ll just get the whiskey, then,” she answers easily.

“It is my job to know things,” John answers my earlier question.

I snort, then take a long, careful sip of the whiskey Meredith set before me before replying. “Not anymore, Old Man. You’re retired. You need to be taking naps and eating sweets and chasing Meredith around this table here.”

His rheumy-blue eyes twinkle across the table. “I chase Meredith just fine, but I’ll sleep when I’m dead. And looking after you is something I’ll never be too old to do, *a stóirín*.”

*My treasure.* I let the phrase settle in my heart while Meredith *tsks* and sets a fragrant bowl of shepherd’s pie down in front of me.

“Eat, hon. You’re looking hungry.”

I eat. I’m not particularly hungry, but when Meredith puts food in front of you, you eat. Across from me, John continues to talk.

He raps his knuckles smartly on the worn oak of the table, drawing my gaze. “You know your O’Hanlon kin didn’t make their home outside of the city in order to make culchies out of their children.”

I nod. It’s nothing I haven’t heard before, and once he gets on this track, he’s unstoppable.

*Culchies*. Country people, bumpkins.

Basically, he means that we were meant for more than hanging around our old homeplace and getting sucked into the family business, which is a sight less...sophisticated...here in Ireland than our dealings back in the States.

“You had two brothers,” he’s muttering now. “Your parents never intended for you to deal with this mess.”

“My parents knew the game they were playing,” I return. Anger slowly crawls beneath my skin. Someone’s going to tell me now—now, after Madre’s been murdered, and Damon’s dead, and my fiancé has chosen another woman...and there’s that other brother, too, but we don’t consider him, these days, fucking rat—what my parents intended for me?

Fuck that.

“They knew exactly how their children would need to step up if they fucked up,” I say, voice soft. My shoulder lifts in a shrug that shows far less emotion than what I’m feeling. “I was always there just in case.”

John shakes his head just a fraction. “You don’t have to play their game, Evie gal, you know that—”

“I’m an O’Hanlon, same as any other. I’ve been dealt the same hand as everyone else, and I’m playing.”

John raps his knuckles against the table a final time and huffs out a breath. “The festival’s going on in the city. You going to it?”

I laugh a little. “I didn’t come all the way here to play carny games, Old Man.”

“When you stayed in Ireland and went to school long ago, you loved going to the festival.”

He’s not wrong. When I attended Catholic boarding school in the city, the annual festival was a fun break—a time for all of us to sneak out and meet boys, get a little drunk, let loose. Funny that he knows about those times.

I guess there wasn’t much that got past him, though. “I’m done with childish things,” I say now.

“I’m too old for that gallivanting, so you need to do it. The underbosses will be at the estate the morning after. It would be good for you to reconnect with your roots a bit before meeting with them.” He pauses. “They’re...old-fashioned.”

*Translation: they might not deal well with a female boss. My lip curls.*

*Get ready, boys. There’s a new kid in town, and her name is yes, ma’am; right away, ma’am; allow me to kiss your ass, ma’am.*

As much as I hate the idea of a carnival, though, John’s suggestion has merit. Mingling on a social level will help me get the lay of the land before I swoop in and take over.

“Fine. I’ll go,” I say. John beams as I toss back the rest of my whiskey. “Right now, I’m going to freshen up.”

“Sure, sure. You know where everything is.”

Upstairs, the doors to the various bedrooms march along a narrow corridor lined with fading cabbage-rose wallpaper. My old room was the one closest to my parents' room, which was the master suite at the end of the hall. Damon's old room was beside mine, while Marcus was across the hall.

We never really lived here. We stayed here many times over the years—months out of every calendar year—and there was the time I spent in boarding school—but we lived in Italy and the States.

Still, everyone had their own rooms. Their own space.

I pause, my hand hovering over the doorknob to Damon's room. I can picture it if I close my eyes. The olive-green coverlet and pale gray of the walls were his choice for décor the last time the room was done. The walls would be papered still with his framed comic book collection, vintage classics from the seventies and eighties.

My hand flexes, then falls back to my hip.

I keep walking, past his room, past the guest room to my left, past Marcus's room, and into my room.

It's like stepping into a memory. The walls are papered in floral wallpaper, but I can barely make out the pattern for the sheets of sketch paper tacked helter-skelter from knee-level up, as high as I can reach. They're filled with doodles—logos, fonts, line art—anything my little heart could think of to scribble at.

I touch one of the designs, an iron fence with an open gate and a heart attempting to squeeze through its keyhole.

It's odd, and I have no idea what I was trying to convey. The heart could just go through the open gate...I shake my head ruefully before backing out of my former bedroom, closing the door behind me.

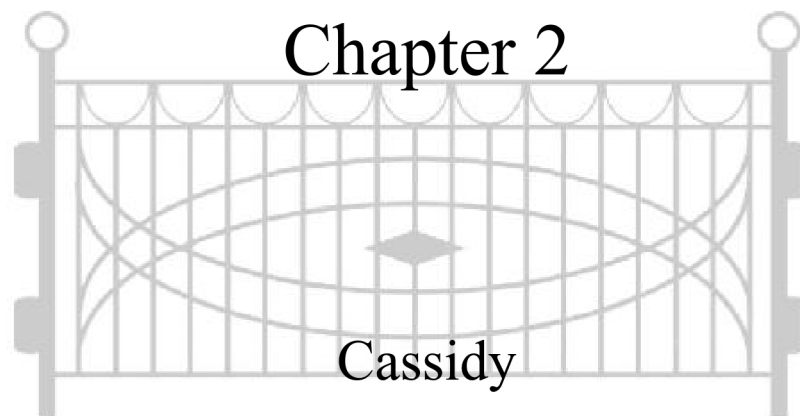
I'm not here to wallow in the past.

I move into the master bedroom and look about in contentment.

No more girlish dreams. I'm the boss, and this bedroom, this life, are mine now.

There is a future here for me, if not in New York.

Even if it's a bloody one.



---

I TIGHTEN THE COLLAR of my beige jacket, pulling it closer to my neck. It's the end of July, and all we have endured is rain. It rained on the fifteenth, and according to my father and his generation, which likes to spread their superstition, if it rains on the fifteenth of July, it will rain for thirty days. So far, it's starting to look like a whole lot of truth.

I slam the car door, releasing some anger that seems to rise hard and fast at times. I never let it explode out of me; I've watched too many men lose not just fights but their heads, too, when they go to do anything in a rage. I've learned through my father how to take that rage and release it in a controlled but very effective manner.

My men close in around me as umbrellas are opened above my head. A separate group of men walk as if the sun is beating down on them and not the rain in all its vengeance. The noise on the canopy of the umbrella doesn't stop me from walking toward the blue cargo ship that's docked at Ted Russell Dock here in my hometown of Limerick.

The circle around me pulls back as we near the small group of men who have gathered at the side of the ship. My own men are huddled together against the rain; the one who I focus on is the man holding an umbrella as he watches me approach. I want to reach out and take the umbrella from my guard; it would give me something to tighten my hand around. But I also know it's wise to show my power in subtle ways. Like not having to hold my own fucking umbrella.

I stop a few feet away, and with a crook of my finger, I call over one of my men. He pulls a cap from his head; his hair underneath is soaked, the tweed failing to stop the heaviness of the rain.

“You want to tell me what's going on?” I ask, looking him straight in his blue eyes. He doesn't flinch like most do, but I see the shift in his stance and know he's nervous. But his eyes reveal strength.

“The inspector wants to open some of the cargo.” He glances at the security that still surround me, shielding me both from the downpour and any physical threat.

“Why am I only hearing about this now?” I take a step closer. The breeze shifts, sending a spray of rain against the left side of my face. It stops as my men catch up and move with me to block it, but it's enough to make me want to throttle this man.

His fingers tighten around the tweed hat. “We were nervous about the inspector choosing the wrong cargo,” he says, and I know he must hear the level of stupidity in his statement. But I

won't shoot the messenger. This man is working on the ship, taking orders; he is not the one who is in charge.

I nod. "I will handle it." I try out a smile, and the man flinches. I let my lips drop back into a thin line and walk toward the inspector.

I hold out my hand. The inspector takes my fingers, and I tighten my hold on his, not too tight to cause pain, but tight enough that he won't escape my hold until I allow it.

"You picked a great day for standing outside." I smile again.

"I was informed by your men that I couldn't board yet."

Heads will fucking roll. I keep my smile in place and continue to hold his hand firmly in mine. "I'm a strict boss. That's something I might have to alter." I release his fingers. "By all means, Inspector. Come aboard."

I let him go first up the walkway and follow closely behind him. The water thrashes violently along the side of the ship, and I picture taking him by his legs and flinging him over the side.

Problem solved. He glances back at me as if my thoughts caught his attention. I smile through my fantasy, and he quickly looks forward.

We arrive on the deck, and I snap my fingers at two of the men closest to me. "Let the inspector see whatever he wishes."

The inspector studies me like I'm spoofing. I'm not. No matter the results of this inspection, I can make them disappear like I could make him disappear. It would raise too many eyebrows



and questions for my comfort, but I'd do it. And, frankly, I'm not in the fucking mood to talk. I exhale on a smile to let him know to hurry up and that my good manners are fading. Fast.

The inspector goes through the hatch and enters the ship with two of my men. Without looking at anyone, I speak.

“Get me Willie.” That's all I say as I stand under my umbrella. My men are soaked through, and it seems like the inspector is happy taking his sweet time.

He returns at the same time as Willie comes shuffling along. The terror in his eyes makes me happy.

Willie, the fucking gobshite, was placed in his position by my father. A position that he had no business holding. By sheer luck, we have never encountered a fuckup like today. But it's evident he needs to be removed.

Maybe permanently.

The genius opens his mouth as if he is about to speak to me.

I hold up a hand that's clad in leather. “Not now, Willie. Give me just a moment.” I keep my voice light, charming, but his pupils dilate; he knows me well enough to know that his bad decision making won't go unpunished.

The inspector struggles to hold his umbrella while taking a slip of paper and a pen from his pocket. The struggle is entertaining, not just to me but to some of my men, who snort and garner the inspector's attention. His face darkens, and I keep all humor hidden.

“Help him!” I order Willie.

Willie hesitates but walks to the inspector and takes the umbrella.

“Thanks,” the inspector mumbles with his face still in flames.

My security still sniggers, and I glance at them, but I don't see a grin on anyone's faces. They are very good at concealing their emotions.

The inspector tears out the piece of paper and hands it to me. A blank check.

This time, I grin. “A blank check. You must be a very brave or trusting inspector.”

He takes his umbrella back from Willie. “I opened several bags of animal feed, and everything looked fine. The check is to pay for the ruined product. I have no idea what you charge for a bag, so I'm sure you can fill in the correct amount.”

I pocket the check with no intention of using it. “I mean, I could overcharge you,” I tease.

The inspector relaxes like we are two men sharing a joke. “What are your plans for such a large shipment of animal feed?”

He's relaxed a little too much for my liking. “To feed animals. Unless you want to buy it all.” I take a step toward him, and this time, I accept the lash of rain. “Do you ask Lidl's who is going to buy their corn puffs? I'm not a fortune teller.”

I stare at him until he realizes my grace for having him in my presence has lapsed.

“Have a good day.”

He parts, and I wait until he is off the main deck before I turn to Willie.

“I’m sorry for not calling. But he sprung it on us, and I thought I could talk him out of his inspection.”

I nod and place my arm around his drenched shoulder. The rain is ceasing its previously powerful downpour, and dust sprinkles across the sky, along with a rainbow. For Willie, there will be no pot of gold at the end. His luck has run out. “How did that work out for you, Willie?” I ask.

He swallows but stupidly continues talking. “I mean, I thought I had him convinced at one stage.”

I grin. “Yeah?”

He relaxes. “Yeah, he was so close to leaving.”

“You tried,” I say and release his shoulder. “Come with me.”

He follows me down the ramp and back onto land. The other men wait along the side of the ship. The inspector is gone, but I don’t slow. When the rain stops completely, I order my security to get rid of the umbrella. They do, and I remove my coat and hand it to another guard while glancing over my shoulder at Willie, who has fallen a few paces behind.

“Walk with me, Willie.” I continue on, knowing he will fall into step beside me. He does. When we reach the large containers, I stop. I want every man who has followed us to watch. Willie knows he fucked up. It’s clear in how he hunches his shoulders.

“My father built this business from the ground up.” I point at the sky before removing my suit jacket. “He slogged, gambled big—” I grin. “—won big. And with his winnings, he didn’t buy fancy houses or cars. Nope. That is not our way. He built a fucking empire and gave me—” I jab a finger at my chest. “—and my brothers a chance at being more than ordinary. We’re leaders.” I hand my suit jacket to the closest man, who takes it while I roll up the sleeves of my white shirt.

Rage roars to life in my system. Not just rage from the situation but rage at the loss of my father, and at Willie for disgracing his memory. Maybe my rage is drenched in my own disappointment that surfaces too often at not finding out who killed my parents.

“It only takes one mistake, one gobshite, to make a complete disaster of what my father built for us.”

“I thought...”

I jab a finger at his forehead, and he steps back but steadies himself.

“Don’t think. That’s my job. You just do as you’re told. You call me if the ship is sinking or if St. fucking Patrick has returned for round two with the snakes. What you don’t do is try to be the big hero.” I lean into him. “You’re not a fucking hero, Willie. You’re nothing.”

I stand toe to toe with Willie and glance over his head as each of my men watches. I don’t have to make a speech or let them know this is a reminder for those who fuck up. All they have to do is watch.

I take a large gulp of air, and when I exhale, I let the rage flow, too. My forehead slams down on Willie's nose. The crunch is as instantaneous as his screams and the red fluid that flows down across his mouth and onto his chin. He holds his face in his hands while howling.

"Hold his arms," I say without taking my focus off Willie.

Each arm is held by a member of my security, and he's crying as I grab his nose and click the broken bone back into place. Drool mixes with blood as it drips off his chin. His wails don't make me want to stop, and my fist slams down on his nose again, knocking the bone back out of place. His legs give way, but my men hold him up. Willie's eyes roll to the back of his head, but he's alert as he reacts to me moving closer.

"No! No! No!" His cries don't stop me.

I push the broken bone back into place, and he buckles again. I nod at my men, and Willie hits the ground. He retches, and I take a step back. I slowly button my shirt sleeves. Reaching into my back pocket, I retrieve a wad of cash and let it drop on his back.

"Your nose is broken—get it fixed."

I hold out my hand for my jacket; it appears between my bloody fingers. I slide it on, and without asking, my security hands me my overcoat, which I put on, too. I accept a handkerchief and try to clean some of the blood off my knuckles.

“Everyone back to work,” I announce and make my way back to the ship, where more workers are waiting. “Hey, your man back there just had a nasty fall. Make sure you’re the ones who find him.”

Two of them nod and run off in the direction I just came from. The blood on my hands is visible, giving life to my words, but no one would dare question me. I get into my car, one of my guards slipping in beside me to ride in back while the other two are up front. I continue to try to clean the blood off my hands.

“Do you still have an appointment with Limerick’s Chief Executive?” one of the men up front asks.

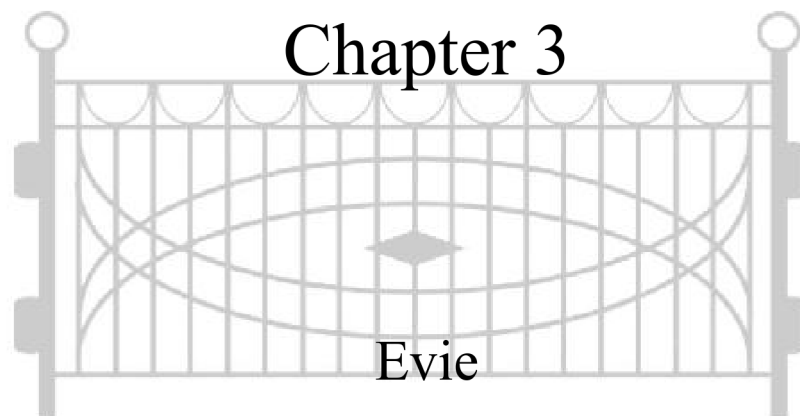
I continue cleaning my hands. “I won’t be attending, but a friend of mine will. Everyone should go to the festival and watch the fireworks.” That’s where I will be, so I expect my men to be there, too.

Willie’s blood still stains my hands, and I stop scrubbing. It comes with the territory.

Our business is built on blood and a lot of dead bodies.

More than I care to admit to sometimes.

But only sometimes.



---

I'M READY WHEN TWO SUVs arrive to pick me up for the festival, rested from a brief nap and dressed in a simple pair of blue jeans, a dark long-sleeved tee, and a pair of boots. Both of the SUVs are filled with men who work for the Ireland branch of the O'Hanlon family. Few, if any, of them are actual O'Hanlons. The name has all but died off, with me being the last one to carry it. All of these men have some relation who worked for the family in the past or owe debts that put them solidly into our service.

I eye the one who holds the door for me before sliding in. He's in his forties or thereabouts, with dark hair curling at his nape and bright blue eyes. "Thank you...?" I let the words trail off in a question and lift an eyebrow.

"Sean, ma'am. Happy to meet you."

"And I, you. Who are all these guys?"

"They're your security."

I lift my chin. “I see. Are things that dangerous in Limerick these days?”

“We believe in being careful, ma’am.”

I climb into the back seat of the SUV, stiffening slightly when he slides in after me. I don’t like being boxed in by large, unfamiliar men, but John knows them and trusts them, so I guess I need to, as well.

The drive to Limerick passes quickly, but it slows down as we approach the city. In spite of myself, I find my anticipation rising as we creep along, the traffic nearly bumper to bumper and crawling. The river festival is a big deal in Limerick, and I loved escaping into its whirl of festivity as a kid. By the time our two vehicles get to the park, it’s nearly sundown, and my knee is jouncing against the leather of the seat.

To give him credit, Sean doesn’t comment on my impatience. He and a couple of men trail quietly behind me as I move from booth to booth, stopping at each to exchange smiles with the people running them and give them a fare in exchange for tossing a ring or buying a favor. It reminds me so much of my childhood, outlined in a kaleidoscope of light, color, and sound.

Neon lights and multicolored bulbs adorn the rides, game stalls, and food vendors that line the midway, casting an almost otherworldly illumination across the entire carnival. The Ferris wheel stands tall, its massive spokes and cabins outlined in bright, pulsating lights, while roller coasters race



through the darkened sky, leaving trails of brilliant streaks as they zoom along their tracks.

The night air is filled with the cacophony of carnival sounds. The laughter and excited screams of riders blend with the melodies of carnival music spilling from various speakers. The call of barkers inviting you to try your luck at games of skill and chance can be heard over the cheerful chatter of the crowd.

I look up, my gaze caught by a night sky made into a canvas of stars, occasionally punctuated by bursts of fireworks.

I feel a smile tug at my lips. It's pure enchantment, this carnival. I'm glad John pushed me to go.

As I look back down, though, I see Sean and one of my men, and the smile fades. Maybe it's not all pure. Not with all the hidden guns in the crowd. They're a necessity, I know, but that doesn't mean I like it.

Especially since I don't even know these men. Sure, I've seen them here and there on my trips back and forth over the years, but I have no strong sense of loyalty to them, and I can't imagine they do to me, either. Not in any real sense. It makes me mildly uneasy.

I have my knives, though, tucked in the waistband of my pants and riding securely in my boot.

Sean nods to me, and I return the gesture before I resume my wandering. I end up on the outskirts of the main booth promenade, where the smaller and less colorful stalls are

located. People here are selling homemade wares, and there's a fortune teller.

And a knife-throwing booth. A thrill courses through me.

Something fun at last.

I started throwing knives out of boredom as a child, hurling them into stumps of wood in one of the sheds on our property. Then John caught me. I expected to be scolded, but he ended up teaching me the proper technique instead.

It's come in handy a few times over the years.

As I walk up to the booth, the attendant looks surprised to see me. No wonder. He really got a bad placement this year. With several trees partially obscuring it, his booth would have been easy to miss.

I pay for three chances and take the knives he hands me. I hold one in my palm, feeling how the weight slides forward to the blade. It's cheaply made, but I expected that; these carnies have to win somehow.

I give the attendant a slight smile. They won't be winning today.

I rest two knives on the counter and take the first by the blade. Placing my thumb along the blade, I draw back in a single smooth motion and release. The knife sinks into the target with a chop of sound.

Point one.

I pick up the second knife and repeat. The knife lands beside its brother. The attendant whistles.

I pick up the third knife and draw back for the final toss when a voice stops me.

“Throw that one in between the first two.”

A man’s sexy rumble whispers in my ear, and I jerk around to see temptation-made flesh standing entirely too close for comfort. Thick, dark hair curls at his neck, just a little too long and begging for a woman’s fingers to comb through it. Sapphire-blue eyes laugh at me above a mouth full enough to belong to a woman but crooked in a smile that’s all man. His scent drifts to me beneath the smells of carny food, something spicy and woody-toned that makes my stomach clench involuntarily.

This man is dangerous.

I take a wary step back, glancing around for my guards. They’re watching intently, as are several other men. I realize it immediately for what it is: a clashing of two entourages. I look back at the man, lifting my chin, but don’t otherwise respond.

“I know you can do it. I’ve seen you do it.”

I narrow my eyes. *How the fuck would he know...?*

He leans comfortably against the booth, crossing one ankle over the other. “When something pissed you off at that abbey school, you used to sneak off into the woods and throw knives at the trees.”

“And how do you know that?” The breath is tight in my lungs as I watch him.

“No. That’s not how this game works. Make the strike, and then you get an answer.”

I draw back my arm, flick a glance at the target, and throw the knife. The hit is clean, dead center in the tiny space between the other two knives.

The man smiles. He looks at the booth attendant and holds up a few banknotes.

“You look like you haven’t had dinner yet, sir. You go ahead, and I’ll watch the booth for you.” The attendant looks as though he’s considering a protest, but the blue-eyed man smiles, and the objection dies on his lips. He takes the money and scurries away. The man glances at his men—security from the look of it. “We’ll have some privacy, please, gents.”

I heave a sigh. He’s boxed me in neatly. If I don’t tell my men to do the same, it’ll appear that I’m afraid of him.

Damnit.

I nod at Sean. “Go on.”

“But ma’am—”

“Leave us.”

When we’re alone, I mirror the man’s posture, sliding my hand into the front pocket of my jeans, where I can feel the tiny pocket knife I keep stashed there. I won’t go for the big one at

my back unless there's need. "Now, how about you tell me who you are and how you think you know me."

His gaze is warm and curious, almost a physical caress as it explores me. "You used to visit years ago. I was always curious about the American girl whose family was in the same business as mine."

"What are you, a stalker? And I'm Irish-Italian."

"Eh, curious, maybe. I'll give you that. But a stalker?" He grabs a knife from behind the counter and runs it along his cheek. "Such an ugly word. I don't think I'm inclined to just give you answers, Evie O'Hanlon. I'll play you for them."

"You're wasting my time." I straighten as if to leave. His hand on my bicep stops me.

"Are you a gambler, Evie?"

I manage to meet his eyes and speak levelly, but the touch of his hand has my blood thrumming in my veins. What is with this man that the simplest of touches can do this to me? "No, I like my money too much."

He trails the tip of the knife over the back of my hand, and I just barely manage to restrain a shiver. "Oh, you won't be betting money, love."

It's a challenge. It annoys me even as it pulls me in. I jerk my hand away. "Fine."

With a smirk, he turns toward the booth, draws the knife back, and lets it sail. It lands just above my last one, vibrating with

the force of his throw. He jerks his chin toward the collection of blades. “Let’s dance.”

“What?” I look at him in horror, understanding he means for us to throw blades at each other.

“Scared?”

“These are shit blades—”

“Scared.”

I pinch my lips tightly closed and suck air in through my nostrils. “I’m not going to let some yokel I don’t know throw shit blades at me—”

“It’s okay.” He shrugs. “I’m a scary guy.”

“Fuck. You.” I march past him and yank the knives from the back of the booth, then toss them with a clatter to the counter in front of him before returning to lean stiffly against the wooden surface.

“Such fucking language. So ladylike. Arms out a bit there, love.” He picks up a knife and gestures with it.

I eye the blade in his hand, ignoring his jibe. I ceased being ladylike the day my mother died. “You need to move your thumb down further—”

*Whoosh.*

The knife lands beside my head, stirring my hair gently against my eyelash. I don’t move as he comes forward and places his hand flat on the wall beside me, leaning in. His eyes catch and

hold mine as he takes his other hand and runs a finger beside the blade, measuring the distance between it and me.

“Two fingers,” he says, moving the fingers in question briefly to my lips before he uses the same hand to yank the knife from the wall. “Beat that, and I’ll answer a question.”

Swallowing, I straighten and walk around to the stall’s window. My hand is trembling, and I make a fist before shaking it loose.

*Get it together, Evie.*

*He’s just a man.*

Picking up a knife, I blow my breath out and settle my grip on the blade, then draw back and throw.

“Ow! Motherfuck!”

*Oh my God. I hit him? I hit him!*

I run around, only to realize a moment later that he’s laughing at me. He hasn’t even moved. “You asshole.” I measure the distance between the blade and his cheek, allowing my finger to brush his stubbly skin, and hold up the single finger in triumph. “One finger. Who are you, and how do you know me?”

“That’s two questions.”

“Pick one.” I yank my knife from the wall but don’t move away. Chemistry sings between us, a song neither of us seems inclined to ignore.

“I was also at school in Limerick when you were at the abbey. I used to see you—”

“You stalked me.”

He shrugs, the gesture somehow charming. “You say potato —”

“I say stalker.”

“Anyway. I remember you used to sit and study in this courtyard.”

I frown, thinking back. “That courtyard was fenced.”

Again with the shrug. “It was chain-link. On a public street. Not exactly private.”

“Go throw your knife.” He moves, and I take his place against the wall. “And keep it out of my hair this time, or I go for your balls.”

To my endless satisfaction, he flinches. “Witch.”

“A woman’s hair is her crowning glory.”

This time, the blade sinks in next to my hip. When he approaches and flattens the palm of one hand next to my face for leverage, I realize I should have thought this out better. He keeps his gaze steady on mine as he lets his other hand drift slowly down beside my hip, grazing my torso in the process.

“Steady there, cowboy,” I murmur.

His finger is warm through my jeans when he measures the distance between blade and body. “One finger,” he proclaims, bringing the digit in question up to my bottom lip.



“You seem to like living dangerously,” I manage.

His gaze is riveted on my mouth, and he’s silent for a long moment. “Sometimes it’s worth it,” he finally says and drops his hand to pull the knife free.

We switch places, and I have to force myself to break eye contact as I prepare my knives. I can’t look at him too long before throwing my knife. He’s a hazard to my equilibrium. Instead, I pick a point on his right shoulder—the opposite of the one I just threw at—and fling the knife instinctively and without overthinking it, a practice that’s always served me well.

Damn, but it’s close.

Hoping to unsettle him even a fraction of how he’s unsettled me, I place my palm next to his left shoulder as he’s been doing to me and lean in close to the knife. I have to push his shirt close to his body and turn my finger sideways. When I pull it free, my fingernail snags a thread of fabric along with it.

“I win.”

His hands settle on my waist and tug me against his lower body. “I think I win.”

I place both hands against his chest to give myself the illusion of space. “Who are you, and what do you want with me?”

“That’s two questions again, love.”

“Yeah, well, I’m tired of this game.” I’m not, not really. But this man is pushing my boundaries, and I don’t like it. He’s in

my personal space, getting too close, making me feel too much. The thought from earlier surfaces.

He's dangerous.

Maybe he understands that my patience—never my strong suit—has run thin, because his reply is simple and straightforward. “Cassidy O’Rourke.”

O’Rourke.

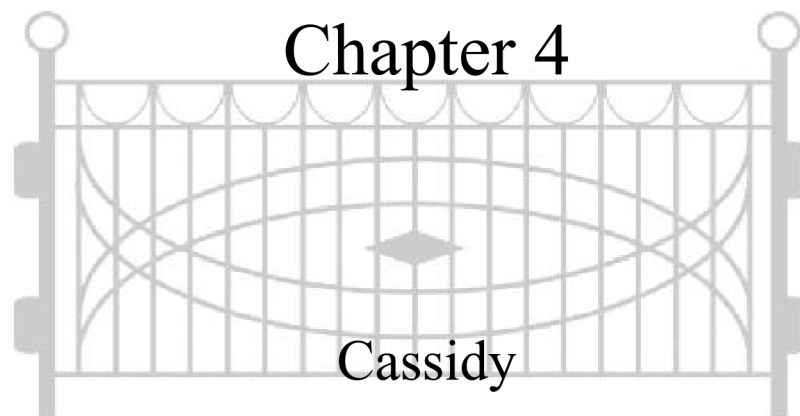
*Ah.* Interest flares. The O’Rourkes are one of the families I was considering aligning myself with. Is he here because he sees me as a potential ally?

Or a threat to be neutralized?

His fingers flex on my waist as he waits for my response. I open my mouth, still unsure of what to say, when the crackle of fireworks booms overhead. I jerk within his hands, looking up.

Cassidy smiles as the sound sputters into a staccato beat, and people scream.

“That’s my ride, love.”



---

THE YEARS HAVE BEEN kind to Evie. Her blue eyes have deepened; I think that's with life experience, and I find myself wanting to know each and every one that's marked her.

I want to know her.

My body still buzzes as I stride away from the booth and back toward the crowd. Playing with her gave me more joy than I've felt...ever.

Her perfume clings to me, or maybe it's bodywash. My cock pulses with a need I try to push down. I can't let myself get distracted, though.

Not tonight, anyway.

As I get closer to the bigger booths, my men start to appear from the shadows. They blend in among all the partygoers, but the way they carry themselves makes them stand out to me. Years of being around men who can handle themselves makes them easy to identify.

They move in a wider circle around me, and a pathway opens up ahead. Fire roars into the sky, lighting up the faces of the spectators. The fire breather looks out over the crowd with a white-painted face before he inhales a large swell of air and spits fire into the air again. The crowd claps, and smiles stretch across their faces.

Suddenly, a scream melts the smiles off everyone's lips. Heads snap in the direction of the sound, which seems to be coming from the middle of the festival grounds, before people start to move in the opposite direction.

I slowly walk closer to the tree line and out of the way of the stampede of panicked people. I jut my chin out at one of my men, and he manages to go against the tide of frightened spectators as he makes his way to the outskirts to make sure we are ready to leave.

I think of Evie as I glance back to where I came from, but I can't see past the streams of pedestrians, and I'm too far from the booth where we played our deadly game. My cock throbs just thinking of the way she felt against me.

I've never been so distracted by a woman before, but while leaning in against her body, it had taken every ounce of my strength not to tear into her and fuck her hard. If she were before me now, I'd fuck her in front of everyone. That's how badly my cock wants her.

I glance to the center of the festival to distract myself from Evie. But there really is no stopping my brain from going over

every detail. She is fiery and dangerous, but she always has been. A rule breaker, but now, she's matured into perfection.

As I see my guard make his way back to where I stand in the tree line, my thoughts don't completely move on from Evie; I want to know why she's in Ireland.

"The appointment has been made." Matty, my guard, informs me. He's new—only a few months broken into this game. His name is on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow it, not completely sure if he actually is Matty. It doesn't matter anyway.

"Let's go," I command. The screams have stopped, and the panicked people have disbursed. With the pathway cleared, we merge with the tree line and cross the copse of trees until we reach the bank of the river, the sounds of rushing feet still at our backs.

A boat pulls abreast, and I step off dry land onto its rocking surface. Once I'm seated, the rest of my men climb in, and we glide in silence and shadows across the water.

Lights from the Gardaí cars and emergency services flicker between the trees behind us, and the screech of sirens follows us like a creeping fog across the silver river. No matter how many paramedics arrive, though, there is no coming back from a headshot. What happened tonight needed to be done. The sirens wail for a few more minutes before they all cease to exist, and I face forward toward my residence.

Our destination.

One man rises and jumps swiftly from the boat with a rope in hand. We're pulled to a wooden pier, and I easily climb out, glad to be on dry land again. The walkway gives way to a fenced parking lot where there are three cars—all mine. I climb into the black Bentley, and the hum of the engine has me shifting gears and leaving. Headlights spring to life as my men follow behind me in the other two SUVs.

The drive home takes mere minutes, and when the large silver gates slide silently back, a group of waiting captains can be seen. I slowly make my way up the short drive, and the minute I climb out of the car, I'm slapped on the back with praise. The cheering doesn't stop as I invite the group into the house, which is lit up with the celebrations of our achievements tonight.

The scent of whiskey and cigarette smoke drifts from the front door, and I accept the praise as I make my way past all the men, not stopping until I spot my siblings, who let out a big cheer when they see me, too. I can't stop the smile that steals my serious expression away.

Rowan, my beautiful, red-haired baby sister, is the first to embrace me. Here, with my family, I can let down my guard and remove the mask I wear.

“This will go down in history.” Rowan is beaming up at me. “I played my part, too.” She grins.

I snort and release my her before running my hands through my hair, pushing it back from my face. “You did nothing but have your fill of wine. You'd better go easy on that.” Now that

she's eighteen, Rowan has enthusiastically embraced her ability to legally drink.

I've intentionally kept my sister as distant as possible from the business. It's a tough world for women, and she's young yet. I want her to keep her innocence as long as possible.

Her green eyes dance and her cheeks are flushed with the alcohol. We haven't gotten to relax much lately, so it's nice to see everyone having a good time.

My twin brothers are sniggering together, deep in their own glasses of whiskey. They're just turned twenty, and I can't help seeing them as kids who always sneak out to get up to no good.

"Have they been drinking long?" I ask Rowan.

She tuts and finishes her glass. "Relax. Let them have their fun."

She's right. Mark, one of the twins, finally breaks conversation, and he smiles as he walks over to me and Rowan, Derek following behind.

"You are a badass motherfucker," Mark starts with a huge-ass grin.

"I know," I say as I accept a drink from one of the servers. A lot of people are here, but they have respectfully kept their distance to let my siblings and me talk, and I take advantage of this rare moment.

"You are so full of shit," Derek says.

Rowan fires him a warning glare.

I take it all in good humor. “Maybe one day, you’ll grow up to be just like me,” I taunt Derek.

“I’ll whip your ass,” Derek fires back, the alcohol giving him some Dutch courage.

We all laugh, and Derek doesn’t like it. He can throw a decent punch, but he knows he’s no match for me.

“Let’s take this outside.” Mark places his drink on a nearby table and rubs his hands together.

I have no intention of wrestling my brother, but I shrug off my jacket.

“Shit’s about to go down,” Mark continues, and Rowan relaxes when I wink at her. She exhales loudly and takes part in winding Derek up.

“I’d remove that classy purple shirt...” Rowan’s serious expression has Derek looking down at the shirt in question.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” He pulls the front of the fabric. “Tailor-made.”

“I’d fire the tailor.” Mark sniggers.

Derek pushes his twin, but not enough to make him unstable.

“I’d remove it because if Cassidy has a go at you, it will be covered in blood.” Mark hoots with laughter, and I can’t help but smile as Derek huffs and puffs out his chest before walking away.



Mark's laughter follows his twin, and I notice a lot of the room is watching us. Automatically, my mask starts to slide into place.

A small group of men wait for me, and I have kept them waiting long enough. "I better round them up," I say to Rowan, who turns serious.

"Keep an eye on your brother," I say to Mark.

He doesn't like being left out of meetings. The time will come when they will be involved. But I'm trying to give them time to have freedom because when you fully enter this world, that's it—you're locked in, and the only way out is death.

Of course, Mark and Derek don't see it like that; they think I'm keeping them out, that I don't trust their abilities. They are O'Rourke's; therefore, they will lead one day. So, their ability to move in this world never comes into question.

Mark leaves, following the path through the room that Derek took, and I go after the group of men that make their way out back, where we often hold meetings if the weather permits.

Tonight, despite all the downpours we've had, is dry and warm.

Fresh drinks are waiting on a long, rough-planked outdoor table for us. I take my seat at the head of the table and pick up a drink, then place it in front of me.

I wait until all the men are seated, including Rob, my right-hand man, before I give a nod of my head to let them know they can start.

Whoops and excited chatter launch as glasses are raised.

“Holy Joe is no more.” Laughter breaks out.

It’s a relief to know that’s all behind us now. The Chief Executive thought he was going to drive the mob out of Ireland. He thought of himself as some kind of new age St. Patrick. The people’s savior driving out the evil from our green pastures.

“He thought he was invincible,” another states.

“You can’t dodge the O’Rourkes.” Another cheers, and glasses are raised again.

I glance at Rob; his expression as serious as mine. But I see the humor behind his deep green eyes.

“You can’t dodge bullets.” The men laugh, and my upper lip curls slightly.

I clear my throat, and the noise settles down.

Tom is the first to speak. “My guy at Interpol says the O’Rourkes are high on their radar.”

I nod and cast my attention to Eddie, one of my higher-level captains. He had better give us a solution. He has a drink in front of him, but he hasn’t touched it yet.

“It’s a tenuous situation,” he begins. “Disappearing for a while would be the wise thing to do, but right now, with our new alliance with the Colombian cartel, going dark isn’t an option.”

Rob nods, and he glances at me. “I’m in agreement.”

I look at our IT guy. “Tom, tell your guy to continue to monitor the situation. If he even gets a whisper that they might make a move, we need to know.”

Tom joins his hands in front of him, and I appreciate how all my men stay ink-free. It’s a rule that they must obey to work for me or my family. No tats, no markers that might lead someone back to us. “I’ll make sure he keeps a tight watch.”

I take in each man. “Our heroin shipment got a secondary inspection this morning.”

“Fuck!” Eddie isn’t pleased; but then, neither was I. “We need to start creating some distance between us and the product.”

I agree. “It was disguised in bags of animal feed, but the inspector missed finding it. We got away by the skin of our teeth.” I reach for my drink and bring it to my lips.

“How about we get another group involved?” Rob suggests.

I lower my glass. “How would this help?”

“It would be a temporary alliance,” he says, probably thinking I’m going to disapprove. “It would give us distance between us and the product.”

I exhale and take a slow drink. “The O’Hanlons,” I say, not meeting anyone’s gaze.

“They will want something in return,” Eddie states.

I grin. “I wouldn’t worry about that.”

Eddie shifts, clearly uncomfortable with the idea.

“Spit it out, Eddie.”

Rob's impatience has me looking at him sharply; he normally keeps his cool. I wonder why he's so snappy.

"The O'Hanlons don't fuck around. They'll want you to do something for them, and with our alliance with the Columbians, do you think it's wise?" Eddie asks me.

"One of the O'Hanlons just touched down in Ireland. If they get out of hand in any way, I will make sure she disappears." I raise my glass.

"She?" Rob asks, and something in his voice makes me tighten my fingers on my glass.

"Yes," I answer.

His gaze narrows. What does he see on my face? When I look at the rest of my men, they clearly don't see whatever my closest friend does. They wait with raised glasses.

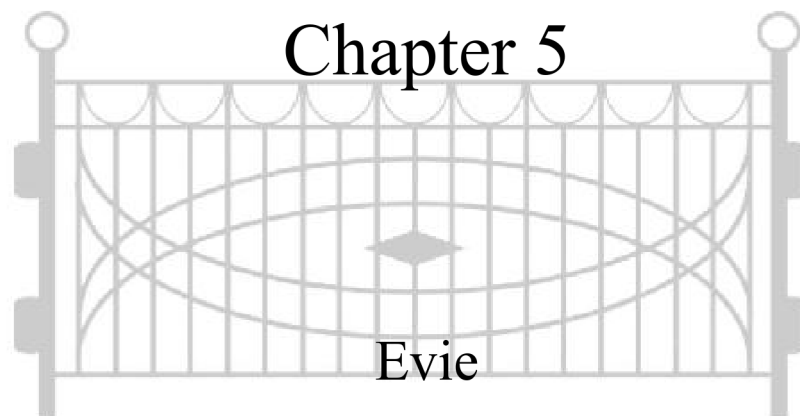
"To Cassidy," Rob says, and the men drink to my name.

While Rob downs the liquid, he watches me. I grin and finish my own glass. I'm sure he remembers Evie; he might also remember my obsessive behavior with her when she was a teenager. But I won't give in to his suspicion. That was a long time ago, and no matter how hard Evie makes my cock, it won't deter me from my path.

I drink the whiskey to finish the toast and seal the deal on the plan. Maybe, just maybe, I might have Evie O'Hanlon to myself for a while, even as I ensure the safety of my crew on the docks.

I like the sound of killing two birds with one stone.





---

THE LAPTOP BEFORE ME hums softly as the proxy server takes its time connecting. I lean back in the chair as I wait, my gaze drifting toward the small flat-screen television on the dresser. On its screen, a dark-haired news anchor intones soberly about the Chief Executive's assassination last night at the Limerick River Festival.

It's all they've been talking about since I woke up. The Chief Executive led the Limerick City Council, filling the members with grand promises of working with the Garda Síochána and Interpol to crush organized crime in Limerick. His death is a tragedy, a huge loss for the law-abiding people of Limerick and those who would see justice done.

By Cassidy O'Rourke's quick exit last night, I know full well he had everything to do with the man's murder.

I sigh and flick the TV off, then pick up a pen and begin doodling on the envelope sitting beside the computer. It's like

coming back here reminded me of how I used to love it when I was younger and now I find it oddly soothing.

As much as I hate the idea of a husband and father's death, the Chief Executive had called out the mob directly. I understand why Cassidy made the move that he did.

Dublin was a different story. Dublin's mob had turned into a legitimate cartel; the O'Hanlons have always given that group their space, and I had no interest in expanding into that territory.

But Limerick is still a contender, and the loss of the city would have been a hit to my business. Cassidy did me a favor, as much as I hate to admit it.

It makes me uncomfortable, though. It brings home the fact that he's a dangerous man, a man not so very different from those I deal with in New York. But unlike them, Cassidy intimidates me. I'm not ashamed to admit as much here in the privacy of my bedroom.

I'm not used to it, though, and I don't like it.

My reaction to him surprises me.

Although I tried to be wary, cautious, and pragmatic, I was nothing but sparks off his flint last night. As much as my instincts are telling me to keep my guard up around this man, I can't help but yearn for another encounter with him.

I'll have to monitor that reaction. Stifle it. I'm not some foolish schoolgirl to be swept away by a handsome face.

With a final hum of sound, the proxy connects, and I load a chat app and then make a video call.

Before long, one of my captains in New York is on the screen. Of all the captains, Tommy is the one I trust the most from my New York branch.

“Ma’am,” he greets me respectfully.

“We need to go over a few things before my meeting with the Irish branch, Tommy. Tell me what’s happening so I don’t sound like a fucking idiot.”

“Never that.” He clears his throat at my look. “Vivi Valachi is back in New York.”

“Oh.” I frown. “That’s interesting. I guess Angel Valachi figures the threat has been eliminated.”

Tommy nods. “Things do seem to be pretty stable at the moment. It’s kind of fucking boring, to be honest.”

I laugh. “Only a guy would say that. Keep going.”

“We have a bid on a construction gig in Jersey. New York wants to build a kind of swimming pool that is actually in the Hudson.”

I lift an eyebrow, and he nods.

“Weird, I know,” he continues. “It would be public access. The swimmers would be in chemically treated water while at the same level as the water from the Hudson.”

“Odd, but I guess it could be profitable.”



“For sure. We made our bid, but there are some environmental wackos who are fighting against the project. Something about possible leaks and the effects on wildlife, as if this stinking city isn’t already dumping shit into the water.”

“I assume you have a plan to make certain the bid goes our way.”

Tommy grins, and I’m reminded why he’s in the position of trust he’s in.

“There are a few screws that need pressure applied, but I’ve got it under control. How’re things across the pond?”

“Interesting.” I run my tongue across my upper teeth as I think about last night. “I’ve had a run-in with Cassidy O’Rourke and his band of merry misfits. Pretty sure they’re responsible for an assassination—ah, but I shouldn’t speculate, I suppose.”

“Be careful with that one, boss. The O’Rourke kids have had a chip on their shoulder since they were young.”

“Any particular reason why?”

“Goes back to their parents being killed in a car bomb when they were younger. Just be careful. When you don’t know the face of your enemy, every face looks like an enemy.”

I end the call and close the laptop, rising with a stretch to prepare to meet my Irish captains. It’s a different world over here, one I have to immerse myself in and learn fast if I want not only to survive but thrive.

A knock sounds on my open door, and I glance up to see John.

“Hey, Old Man.”

His rheumy gaze skims the room, recalling, no doubt, my parents and mother in particular. “They want to meet at a pub in Limerick. Tadgh will take you.”

“A pub? Why not here, where we can speak openly?”

“They don’t know you, gal. Not all of them feel safe meeting you here, in your home. They prefer neutral ground.”

I snort. “Neutral ground.”

None of it’s neutral ground. I only have a handful of people who followed me to Ireland, spacing their flights so as not to show up on anyone’s radar—not the U.S. government’s, not Ireland’s, not any of my Irish associates’. They’re asking me to trust them with my life before I’ve trusted them with anything small like picking up my groceries—these people I don’t know and have only a nominal connection with.

In NYC, it would feel like a trap.

“It’s disrespectful, and you know it.”

John nods.

I drum my fingers restlessly against my hips. Still, I have to meet with them. Better to find out now whether I can trust them or not.

I pin my caretaker with a hard glare. “You let them know that anyone so much as looks at me carelessly, he’s a dead man. I’m not fucking around.”

“Understood.”



THE PUB IS A dimly lit, ancient wood-framed building that sits right on the street in Limerick. I step over the threshold into a din of sound and motion, voices and music, and the clatter of billiards and food prep all blending together. I pause for a moment to isolate the chaos into individual sounds.

My eyes adjust to the dim amber lighting, and I see one of my new captains sitting at a round table with his back to the wall. Catching sight of me, he waves me over. My step falters halfway there, my attention arrested by the sight of Cassidy O'Rourke seated to his right.

“What the hell is this?” I say under my breath, slanting a look at Tadgh.

He shrugs a little. “Not sure, ma'am. We've got your back, though.”

*We* refers to the four men I brought with me, a few of them the same ones who accompanied me earlier to the festival. Two have taken up positions on either side of the entrance. One—Sean—has claimed a seat at the bar, turning so he can watch over the room. And Tadgh follows me, hovering just behind my shoulder.

I recognize a few of the potential captains from video calls over the past several years and the infrequent visit. They don't work for me, though—they work *with* me. It's a purely symbiotic relationship. None of them hold enough power on

their own to run an enterprise on their own merit, so they rely on the O'Hanlon family's support. And we, in turn, rely on their muscle and the framework of their immediate connections.

O'Rourke, though...he's a wild card. He does have enough power to run his own enterprise. So why the hell is he here? And why is his presence both terrifying and exhilarating in equal measure?

Steeling myself for another unsettling encounter, I stride forward and place my hand on the back of the chair to pull it out. "Gentlemen."

Cassidy rises to his feet and tugs the chair from my grasp before I move it, sliding it out and indicating for me to sit in an oddly gallant gesture.

I roll my eyes and sit. A waitress leans over me and places a pint glass in front of me, its dark-amber contents heady with foam. *Guinness*. "Thank you." My eyes travel to the other occupants of the table as I lift it to my lips and take a long sip before licking away the foam from my lip. "Right, then. Who wants to start?"

The man across from me leans forward a couple of inches. "Cassidy here came to us with a proposition—"

"It's Niall, right?"

He pauses, his eyes narrowing. He doesn't like being interrupted, and probably even less by a woman, which is why I did it. I wait patiently, and after a moment, he nods. "Yes.

Niall. As I was saying, Cassidy here came to us with a proposition, and it's one I think you'll like. It's a good investment for us all."

I turn a bland expression on Cassidy. "Aren't we competitors? I'm all ears."

His gaze drops to my chest before he starts speaking, and I feel heat touch my cheeks. "The O'Rourkes are under constant observation," he says mildly. "We need an influx of new blood to mix things up a bit...divert attention, keep business moving steadily along and on an upward trajectory."

I tilt my chin, considering. "So, we provide...diversionary measures to get some of the attention off you. What do you provide, exactly?"

"We would provide a thirty-seventy split on all drug imports during our negotiated partnership."

I draw in a quiet inhale. I'm not familiar enough with the regional politics to know if it's a good deal or a shitty one. If it was New York, I'd be tempted. Tadgh leans over to whisper in my ear.

"The money's good. The proposal's a surprise. O'Rourke isn't one to share."

I eye Cassidy, irritation bubbling beneath my skin. If this were New York, it would be a no-brainer. The deal is intriguing, but a thirty-seventy split isn't good enough for me to risk my security.

I'm nervous, though, my uncertainty at whether I can fully trust my people compounded by my unwilling attraction to the man seated next to me. I stare at him, wordless communication passing silently between us.

*Trust me*, he seems to say.

Fuck that.

“Not good enough,” I say clearly.

Immediately, a chorus of voices babbles up, my men vocal in their disagreement and unafraid to express it. I hold up a hand, silencing them. “It’ll be forty-sixty or nothing at all.”

Cassidy smiles the same wicked twist of his full lips from the night before.

“I have no quarrel with that.”

He rises to leave, threading through the tables with a lean-hipped grace that leaves me struggling to keep from leering. As he approaches the door, he snaps his fingers, and nearly every patron in the pub stands and starts to follow him out.

My jaw loosens. I was fucking surrounded and never realized it.

By the looks on my captains’ faces, they were unaware, as well.

“That’s fucking unacceptable, gentlemen,” I bite out and quickly drain the rest of my Guinness to keep from saying something I’ll regret.

Niall shakes his head, looking annoyed. “Apologies, ma’am. They’re a big brood with plenty of men. I didn’t recognize half of them.”

“And that wasn’t a sign? I’m depending on you, damnit.”

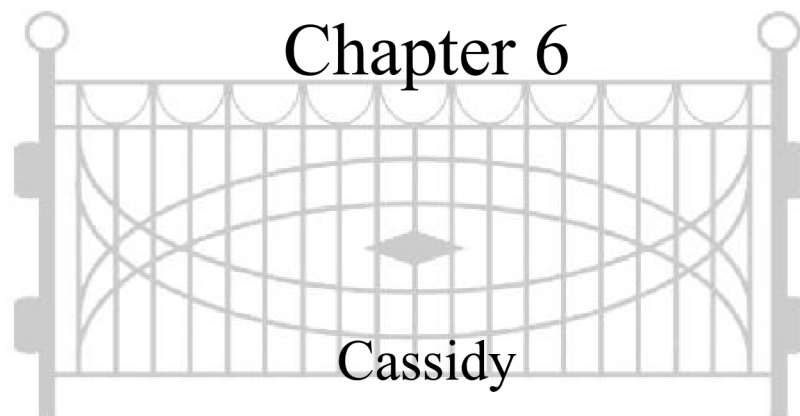
He nods. “It won’t happen again.” He rises, hitching his pants up at the waist as he prepares to leave. “There’s plenty of them to step into Cassidy’s place, but I doubt any of them could do what he does.”

“What are you driving at?”

“Just want you to understand how things work around here. None of them have any intention of getting into the kind of money we’re talking about and then stepping quietly away. They don’t have that kind of...honor. The O’Rourkes will fall, Evie, if Cassidy is not in the picture.”

I drain the remainder of my glass and head for the door. I take his meaning.

I just kind of hope I’ll have the opportunity to enjoy a piece of that very pretty target before it gets hit.



---

I HAD THOUGHT EVIE would have snapped my hand off at hearing I was willing to part with a measly thirty percent of my money. What I didn't expect was for her to tell me it was forty percent or nothing. I'm still smiling at Rob's outrage as we leave the pub. He demanded I go right back in there and set her straight.

I laugh. "I'm beginning to think no one sets Evie O'Hanlon straight."

Rob grips my arm, stopping me from climbing into my Bentley. "This isn't a game."

The smile melts off my face. "Do I ever play games?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. "I've never seen you look at someone like that." His voice is low, his eyes still suspicious.

"Like what?" I growl.



Both his brows rise, and I try to tamp down my irritation. I always control my emotions, so that slip will not go unnoticed.

“Like fucking that, Cassidy,” Rob barks.

I open the car door, and this time, Rob doesn't stop me from leaving. I have no answers for him. Not right now, anyway.



THE NEXT AFTERNOON I walk to the front sitting window of the O'Hanlon manse and hold my hands around my face to try to see inside. I don't give two fucks about the interior: I'm looking for her. For Evie.

We came to a tenuous agreement last night, but there's more to be determined today.

The large room appears empty, and I step back, nearly knocking over a basket of freshly planted flowers. I'm surprised they have survived our wet summer.

“Can I help you?”

I turn to the rich voice. The man is elderly, but I'm sure he was fierce in his day. It's how he holds his head high; even age doesn't drag him down.

He reminds me of my father, and an automatic rush of respect has me ready to dip my head, when my brain catches up and reminds me that he isn't my father, and I bow to no man.

His gray eyes take me in. “You must be Cassidy O'Rourke.”

Before I can confirm or deny who I am, he continues to speak.

“I wasn’t contacted by anyone in regard to your arrival.” He glances at the window I was looking through before directing his sharp gaze back to me.

Yeah, I don’t blame him for looking at me like that. I was caught red-handed. Once again, I know not to back down.

I grin and step closer, holding out my hand to him. “I’m not the king of England. Just Cassidy O’Rourke.”

He scoffs at my remark but wisely takes my hand. I grip his, a small reminder of who has strength here.

“I have no need for red carpets,” I continue. “And I didn’t catch your name.” I release his hand.

“A courtesy call would have been appreciated, Mr. O’Rourke.”

As I continue to look at him, his name comes to the forefront of my mind. The minute I realize who he is, I understand my innate need to show him respect. He once was a big player in all of this, and not many of us reach old age. You have to be smart to exit the game, yet something tells me he hasn’t left completely.

“I will try to remember that next time,” I state, more courteously.

He nods.

I place my hands behind my back. “But I’m sure Evie will put me on the fast list.”

“Why would that be?” he asks and takes a step toward me.

I grin. “Out of her own free will, Mr...” I tilt my head.

“You can call me John.”

I can think of a few choice names for him, but I keep my mouth closed.

“What is it you want?” he finally asks.

Regardless of who he is, I don’t like the way he speaks to me. I consider putting him in his place. He doesn’t seem happy that Evie would think anything of me, so I’ll make him believe there’s something between us just to piss him right off.

“Why, Evie is what I want.” I exhale loudly. “She won’t refuse. Trust me.”

His fist curls, but he quickly relaxes his hands—just not before I spot the motion. I widen my grin, and there is nothing friendly about it.

“You can get her now.”

We have a stare-off that I like to think I win before the old man tries not to move too stiffly into the house but fails.

How easily I could crush him. His hate-filled gaze falls on me one more time, and I don’t grin or pretend I return the hostility; I only allow the violent thoughts to show in my eyes.

His brows drag together, and it’s then I notice an elderly woman in the kitchen we enter. She’s his age, so I’m assuming she’s his wife.

“Cassidy O’Rourke, pleasure to meet you.” I move past the old man and take her hand, pressing a kiss to the back of her

wrinkled skin.

Her smile is wide, her light blue eyes widening and her cheeks flushing. I look at the old man, whose displeasure with me has deepened. I want to tell him I could kill both of them with a click of my finger if he continues to piss me off.

“You were about to get, Evie,” I remind him.

“Meredith, go get Evie.” He speaks, never taking his eyes off me.

I release Meredith’s hand, and she smiles, but her eyes are no longer bright. Her husband’s rude attitude isn’t lost on her.

She clears her throat. “Of course.”

They share a look as she passes him, and I lean against the counter.

“You can wait in the foyer.” His words are spoken through gritted teeth.

I follow the old man, but I’m still keeping my surroundings in check. I’m sure he’s thought of clipping me a few times. He does seem to lean more on his left leg at times, and it’s not a limp. I wonder if his gun is on the left side of his body. I make a note and file it away. Mine is tucked in the back band of my trousers. That’s why I’ve held my hands behind my back throughout most of the conversation. We arrive in the foyer, and I’m expecting John to leave, but he keeps the door open and sits in a chair that’s been placed in the corner of the room.

When I again move my hands behind my back, he seems to sit straighter, not seeming to like my hands being out of sight.

Good.

I hear the footsteps on the stairs, and we both stare at the opening. The old man rises when Meredith arrives with Evie, who seems different. Her hair is loose and her cheeks rosy; she has a youthful appearance, but to think she's innocent would be a fool's thought.

"Can we speak in private?" I ask her.

The four of us stand, awkwardly facing each other in the small space.

"Leave us." Evie speaks; her voice doesn't have the same softness her face has. There is no forgetting who she is—the daughter of one of the most powerful combined mafia families in Europe at one time and now the United States.

And now, with the deaths of her brothers Damon and Marcus, she's apparently the boss. The oddity of a woman in such a position is intriguing to me, and strangely compelling. I've never particularly cared for soft, simpering, weak-willed women. Give me a woman who knows her mind and her worth, one who won't hesitate to put me in my place if I need it.

The denim jeans she wears are painted onto her flesh. They flow across curves and wide hips. Just fucking perfection. She holds her head high as I assess her. The cream sweater that reaches her abdomen has a nice V-neck that gives me a glimpse of her breasts.

The door closes, and I'm alone with Evie. I take a step toward her, and I'm aware of the swallow she tries to cover with a flick of her hair. She's nervous. That's a nice touch. I remember her pinned against the wall as I leaned in and removed the knife. I wanted to fuck her so badly.

My gaze lowers to her swollen lips; the sheen on them makes me bite the inside of my cheek. Her upper lip curls slightly, and when I meet her gaze, I see amusement there. She must clearly see the effect she has on me, because unlike her, I won't cover it up.

I almost tell her I want to bend her over the chair in the corner of the room, but I hold my tongue, remembering how fluidly she throws knives.

"You have a bit of a reputation in our world," I say instead. She folds her arms across her chest, and I take another obvious leer at her breasts. "I'd dare to say you are a kept mafia princess." I've struck a nerve. Fire burns in her gaze, and my cock grows hard. I'm waiting for her to get angry, but instead, she surprises me when she smiles.

"I've heard a bit about you, too."

I grin. This, I have got to hear. Especially from her perfectly bow-shaped lips. "Do tell. You have all my attention, love."

"We weren't all raised with silver spoons in our mouths."

I raise both brows and shrug. "I thought you could do better than that. I'm disappointed, Evie."

She flinches at the word disappointed, and I file that knowledge away. Who said that to her and left a mark? Now I want to know.

“But for the record, yes, I was raised well. I don’t deny my heritage,” I say and smile sweetly at her.

“What exactly do you want, Cassidy?” Evie takes a step toward me, and perversely I want her to turn away so I can see how well her ass fills her jeans. “Why are you here?”

“I want to make sure I can trust you,” I say honestly.

“We agreed to terms last night. Do you accuse me of not being true to my word?” she asks.

I can’t resist and take another step closer. “Are you—“ I glance at her lips. ”—true to your word? I don’t have much to go on.” When she licks her lips, I suppress the grin that will tell her I’m winning.

“Yes, well, neither do I. If we are to go on previous history, I’d say stalking when you were younger is a major red flag.”

This time, I grin and hold up my hands. “Guilty.” I tilt my head “I’m also very good with a knife.”

Even through her reddening cheeks, Evie doesn’t back down.

“Not as good as I am.”

“Why don’t we put our trust for each other to the test?” I know she will say no. Evie is a woman I can’t imagine playing games with.

She raises one eyebrow in amusement. “Sure.”

I cover my surprise by running my hand over my jaw. I expected her to back down, but if she wants to do this, I'm ready to go.

"Then come with me."

"Now?" She draws back.

"If it doesn't suit, I understand." I pour as much laughter into my words as I can muster.

"Let me get my coat." As she leaves, I get to take in that glorious ass.

Evie speaks hushed words to the old man in the hall outside the foyer. I smirk at him as I leave, just to piss him off. He must be something of a father figure to her. I'm not trying to win her hand; I'm trying to win her trust, so I don't need him on my side.

Although with everything I know of his past, I wouldn't mind having him on my side. He's the real deal.

I get into my Bentley and adjust the mirror so I can watch Evie make her way to my car. She appears at ease—fierce is a word that springs to mind as she takes each step with a confidence that's been planted and nourished in this woman. She's a queen.

I look away, because I'm not sure I like my thoughts, and face forward. She slides in, the seat belt clicking a moment later, and I drive away from her home.

John is like something from a horror movie, standing in the doorway, watching us leave. I raise my hand and wave with



two fingers. When I glance at Evie, she pivots in her seat and looks over her shoulder. Then she turns and gives me a sharp look before facing the road.

“So where are we going?” she asks.

“Not far. Don’t worry, I’ll have you back before midnight,” I jest.

Evie isn’t paying attention; her focus is on her phone.

I drive into the town center. A small, dedicated space close to the fountain has parking. It’s for the city leaders. I drive up and park my car in one of the empty spots.

I know I’ll get a ticket, but the same person who places it on my car will be the one to clear it up.

When I unbuckle my seat belt, Evie has her phone put away and gets out of the car. The spray of the fountain doesn’t reach us. A few people sit on the step, and one tosses coins in, making hopeful wishes to a cement bowl. They would be better off pocketing their money.

The metal table and chairs near the fountain belong to the small café that I approach. The line has a few people in it, and I could demand we get served immediately, but I join the queue. One of Evie’s brows rises in question, and I see a spark of amusement in her gaze.

“I may have been raised with a silver spoon in my mouth, as you like to put it, but I do have exceptional patience.” I allow my words to linger, along with my focus on her mouth. “So, waiting in line isn’t a big deal.”

“How admirable,” Evie snaps back.

I face forward so she doesn't see my smirk. She has no fear of me, and it's refreshing. She doesn't try to impress me, but with her lack of effort, I can't seem to get enough of her.

I place our orders, and we take our seats inside the café.

“So what are we doing here?” she asks as she opens a packet of sugar and pours it into her cup.

“You will have to wait,” I say.

She picks up her mug. “Is this a test of my patience? Because I'm telling you now, I will fail.”

“I have noticed patience isn't a virtue you possess, love.”

She wrestles with a smile. “I assume you have all seven virtues.”

I snigger. “Yeah, all seven.”

Her smile stretches even wider, and I like how it looks on her face.

She assesses me as she drinks her coffee, but I don't mind. The silence between us is comfortable until I see the shift as time passes and our coffee cups empty.

Evie sits back in her seat as I rise. “Another coffee?” I ask.

She nods, but her gaze dances around the room.

I return with two more coffees. “Now, that should have given everyone enough time.” I sit down.

“Everyone?” Evie asks. Her shoulders tighten, and she sits upright. Aware. Alert.

I nod and add milk to my coffee. “It gave everyone enough time to get here. As in my people.”

Her jaw tightens at my admission.

I sugar my coffee. “And your people,” I add.

There’s a brief glimpse of shock as I call her out. She blinks and looks away, but not before I catch the look.

“So the challenge begins,” I declare.

Evie doesn’t speak, but she nods like she’s ready. Honestly, I think she’s still reeling.

“Find my men in the crowd, and I will find yours.”

“Fine,” she answers, but neither of us looks around.

“Do you want to tell me what you are doing in Ireland?” I say bluntly, dropping all pretenses.

“Things got a little stifling in New York. I see one of your men by the fountain. He’s pretending to read a paper.”

I take a peek. “Well done. One point to you. I heard you were arranged to marry.” The idea doesn’t sit right with me now, and I reach across and take Evie’s hand. She’s startled enough that she doesn’t have time to extract her hand until my fingers tighten.

“One of your men is three seats away.” I lean in as she tries to withdraw her hand. “We should keep up appearances, Evie. Make it look like we’re two lovers, out enjoying the evening,”

I state and run my thumb back and forth across her flesh. She stops fighting me. “I would fire him, to be honest.”

“Who?” Evie’s pulse flickers in her neck. My hold on her hand is affecting her. Good.

“Your security is three seats away. He keeps looking at me. He stands out a mile away.”

Evie glances over her shoulder at the man in question. She grins and looks back at me. “He doesn’t like you.” She sounds happy. “He’s not trying to blend in.”

“Another suitor of yours?” I ask her.

When she frowns, I realize I’ve tightened my hold on her hand, giving my annoyance away.

Now she smirks, seeing the effect that another man near her is having on me. I loosen my fingers on her and continue the slow back and forth of my thumb that sets her pulse racing again.

“The arranged marriage would have been wise, but it didn’t work out,” Evie says, and she watches me with a steady gaze, waiting for me to slip up and show my irritation.

“I’d say it’s a pity, but...” *It isn’t.* “Very creative. One of your men has parked his bike across the street. He’s fiddling with the lock and chain a little too long.”

*Victory*—I see it in her eyes.

“I heard you crashed a Formula 1 car.”

This makes me laugh. “That is true. But it wasn’t due to my lack of driving skills. I veered the vehicle at 160 miles an hour so as to not kill a rabbit.”

“A rabbit?” Amusement lights up Evie’s gaze. “A rabbit on a Formula 1 track. This is like a pub joke.”

I grin. “I thought the same thing, but it was more like sabotage. It worked.” My tone darkens. But I bring the light back into the conversation. “You can never say I am not merciful,” I state.

This time, Evie laughs. “To rabbits.”

“To rabbits,” I answer.

“One of your men is sitting in a booth near the back,” Evie says, and while I look over, she uses the moment to pull her hand from mine.

I face forward. “He’s not one of mine. Are you sure he isn’t yours?” I ask.

Evie places the cup on the saucer and shakes her head. “He’s not one of mine. I’m certain.”

“He must be one of our Gardaí friends or an Interpol officer,” I state.

Evie drums her fingers on the table—the same fingers I just held. “Interpol?” She doesn’t sound pleased.

I give her my sweetest grin. “They’re here for me, don’t worry.” I touch my chin. “But once they figure out who you are, they will be watching you, too.”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” Evie says, but her body language tells me she’s nervous.

“Don’t worry, Evie, I can keep you safe.”

She slams down her mug and leans in close to me. “I’m not some damsel in distress. I was raised in a house of men who took what they wanted, leaving me to fend for myself. So, don’t you think for one second that I need a man to keep me safe.”

She sits back, clearly startled at her own outburst. She tries to recover, but I’m reeling with her revelation. “This has become boring and, frankly, tedious,” she says. “Are we done?”

Seeing her fire off sends a shock of electricity straight to my cock. I know Evie doesn’t need my protection. She’s a fucking leader, but that wouldn’t stop me from protecting her.

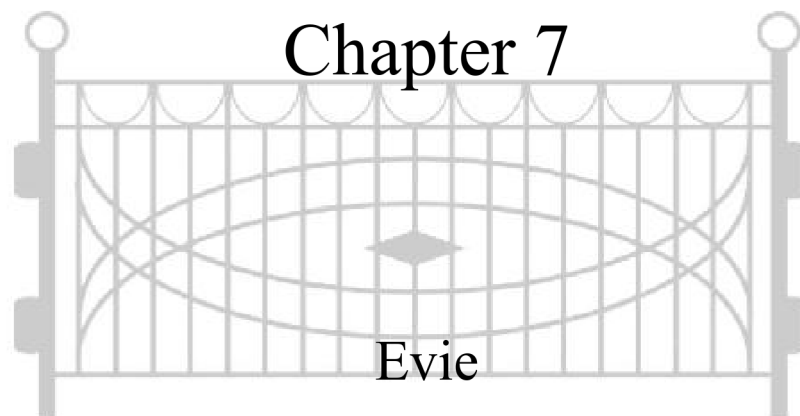
“There is something else we need to do tonight, or this arrangement between us will not work,” I inform her.

There’s a mix of emotions that play out across her features, but she gives me an impassive glare, covering up whatever she doesn’t want me to see. “What is it?”

“Meet me by the abandoned church on Mount Shannon Road.”

I rise from my chair, not waiting for her answer.

As I pass her, I stop and lean in slightly, inhaling her scent before I speak. “Bring a gun, love.”



## Chapter 7

Evie

---

THE TEA IS HOT and sweet on my tongue as I sit at the kitchen table and listen to Tadgh and Old Man argue back and forth.

“She doesn’t even have a fucking gun yet,” Tadgh says. “You shouldn’t have let her go with him, not by herself.”

“She’s a grown woman. She’s The O’Hanlon now, boy. You have to let her act like it.”

Despite his bland statement, John’s expression masks unease. He doesn’t like that I went out with Cassidy on my own, either. I shift in the wooden chair, setting it to creaking. It’s time to shut this argument down.

“I’ll need a gun for tonight.” I swipe a lazy design on the tabletop with my fingertip, waiting for their reaction.

Tadgh shoots a disbelieving look in my direction before turning back to his father. “Now, see what you’ve started? She’s thinking she’ll be off again—”

I set the tea down with a thump, ignoring the liquid that sloshes over the rim of the old porcelain. “*She’s* in the room, you know. We could all discuss this matter together, like adults, or you could shut your pieholes, seeing as how I’m your boss.”

Tadgh blinks, and John lets out a little huff of amused laughter.

“That’s better.” Picking up the napkin beside my teacup, I dab carefully at the tea on my hand, then set it down on the table.

“Now. Tell me what really has you bothered, Tadgh.”

Tadgh lifts his gaze ceilingward before pinching the bridge of his nose. “The O’Rourkes are just looking for a fall guy, Evie. Cassidy’s setting you up. I was suspicious before, and the Interpol guy in the square earlier just confirmed it.”

“I’m not here to sit in my room and play it safe, Tadgh. I came to Ireland to find allies to support my business, both here and in New York. The captains of the families here made the decision to go with O’Rourke, not me. I’d look like a coward if I backed out now.”

“That doesn’t matter. Interpol and Gardaí need a face, and yours is a good one. Fresh.” He shifts uncomfortably. “Easy. If they can pin something on you, Gardaí gets credit for taking in someone not even the Americans could get their hands on.”

I sigh, keeping the gesture silent and contained. I’m taking risks, and no one is more aware of that fact than I am. Yesterday’s encounter with Cassidy O’Rourke was nothing more than a tango on a tightrope, where one well-placed knife would have ended me.



I don't have an explanation for why I danced with the devil.

"You make good points," I finally say. "I'll keep it all in mind. Now...about that gun."

I could have checked a gun in my luggage, but I elected not to, not wanting to draw attention to myself. I knew it would be a simple matter to get one once I arrived.

John nods, a quick jerk of his chin. "I'll see that you get one."

"Today. I don't entirely trust Cassidy or his plans, and I'd like it quickly."

"Take mine." Tadgh pulls a revolver from his waistband and hands it to me, still warm from his skin. I test its weight in both hands, open and check the clip, and thumb the safety off and on again.

John opens and closes his mouth, electing to give a small nod and then stride from the room. I guess when it comes down to it, despite his words about me being the O'Hanlon, my independence is something he still struggles with, himself. I shrug and place the gun at my own waist.

That's something he'll need to get used to.



A FEW HOURS LATER, I pull into the weed-filled parking lot of the abandoned church Cassidy directed me to. My headlights illuminate the hulking shapes of several vehicles; their passengers spilled out into the pitch-dark lot. They lean

against their metal forms in deceptively casual stances, cherries of cigarettes glowing red against the night.

There are a lot of them, and nerves pull my stomach tight as I climb from the car. This will be a very different sort of meeting, then, from the one we had earlier.

My gut is still churning, as it is, over the words John and I exchanged as I was leaving.

“I don’t want to be intrusive—”

“You’d better stop talking, then.”

He clamped his lips closed and stalked from the room, and after a frustrated beat, I left. I wasn’t being fair; I know that.

But Old Man still sees me as the young schoolgirl who used to visit all those years ago.

Cassidy, for all his alpha nature, sees me for who and what I am now.

He smiles at me, the curl of his lips playful and catlike. That smile is all it takes for my senses to narrow into hyperawareness. My vision centers on him, spotlighted in the blackness of the night by nothing so much as that crooked smile. My ears pick up every move of every man around me—the flick of that one’s cigarette butt as it arcs to the asphalt, the scuff of that one’s foot across the pavement. My gun sits heavy at the small of my back, a living presence.

Cassidy steps forward. “Evie.” He gestures loosely behind him. “My crew.”

I can't help but notice I'm the only female, but I'm not surprised. Change comes slowly in organizations such as ours. I nod. "Gentlemen."

As though they were just waiting on my arrival, everyone starts climbing into two vehicles. Cassidy motions me toward the back seat of one. "You can take the middle."

I laugh softly. "I don't think so."

He lifts a brow. "Problem?"

"I'd say. Would you offer a male associate the middle of the back seat on some midnight venture to cement your partnership?" Cassidy frowns. "I'm not your lackey, O'Rourke. I'll sit in the front."

I open the door and wait for the man seated in the passenger seat to move his ass. Cassidy jerks his head. "You heard the lady."

With a grunt, his man moves, and I take his seat. It's a small thing but a victory nonetheless.

We drive in silence for a while, until Cassidy and the other driver pull to the center of the road, blocking it.

"What are we doing?" I ask.

He looks sideways at me. "Shopping." I'm about to ask him to explain when headlights appear in the distance and his body tenses. "It's showtime."

I watch the lights—pin dots at first—grow closer with a feeling akin to horror. "What do you mean, showtime?"

He doesn't answer me, but his hands tighten fractionally around the steering wheel.

“Cassidy? Is that a fucking truck?”

One of the men in the back racks his gun and snickers. “It'll be our fucking lorry soon enough.”

He's lost his fucking mind. I grip the oh-shit handle with my left hand, grinding my teeth to keep from spitting the accusation at him. His agenda is crystal clear, and as I watch the headlights grow closer, it takes everything I have not to reveal my burgeoning panic.

Law enforcement has all but eliminated this kind of hijacking in both Europe and the States by making drivers use main highways that cannot be easily blocked. A lot of tractor trailer drivers circumvent the law to maximize route times, but the laws are there to protect them and their cargo.

Here's one idiot who'll learn that lesson painfully tonight or kill us in the process.

“Main highway's under construction,” Cassidy murmurs, his gaze fixed on the approaching truck. “And this guy has a cargo I want. He's been taking the backroads for weeks now.” He slants a look in my direction. “Easy breezy.”

“Yeah. Except I don't think he's gonna stop, Cassidy—”

For a protracted moment, we're all a frozen tableau captured in headlights that magnify stardust and engine fumes. Then everything explodes in sound and fury.

The men in the other car must have the same mind about their quarry not stopping, because they get out, scrambling toward the side of the road as the semi pulls in their direction without any apparent reduction in speed. Cassidy muffles a curse and puts the car in gear, sliding to the left just as the truck crashes into the tail end of the other vehicle and sending it careening off the road. Pieces of metal go flying.

“Motherfucker!” Cassidy shouts, adrenaline pulsing like a living thing through the car. “We got a runner!”

Tires screaming, Cassidy spins the car around and takes off in pursuit. In seconds, we’re alongside the trailer of the truck, only an approximate ten inches and the will of the man behind the wheel separating us from a gruesome death.

Our vehicle creeps forward a few feet, then drifts back as the truck driver increases his speed.

The truck is on my side of the car, close enough to touch if I were to open the window and reach my arm out. Nightmarish visions run through my mind as Cassidy inches closer and then veers away, his laughter flying through the enclosed space like that of a kid on a roller coaster.

In the back seat, his men whoop and cheer.

I stare at him with a cross between wonder and horror. He’s playing chicken with a vehicle that can smash us all to pieces, and he’s having a good time.

He truly doesn’t give a fuck if we all die here tonight.

I'm obviously the only rational one left. I have to put an end to this before he kills us.

I pull out my gun. "Slow down and get ready for him to pull toward us," I say and start rolling down the window.

Cassidy looks at me sharply. He gauges my intent immediately and slackens his speed. "Atta girl."

I ignore the warm glow his approval gives me and focus through the cold air rushing against my face. Aiming carefully, I fire several shots at the front left tires.

It happens in slow motion—the rubber exploding and unraveling and the truck jackknifing to the right before sliding forward with a screech of brakes and grinding gears. Cassidy keeps us out of the way until the truck comes to a rest a hundred or more yards down the dark, silent highway, then stops and turns the engine off. We begin to climb from the car, the guy behind me popping his door open and exiting first.

He drops almost immediately, his head exploding like a pomegranate across the pavement.

"Shit!" I duck behind the console, managing a swift peek to see the truck driver hovering in his open door frame, a rifle in his hands.

Cassidy swiftly racks his weapon and kicks open his door. He sticks his head over the edge just far enough to aim and fire off several shots in quick succession. "Got him."

Rising, he begins to walk toward the tractor trailer, followed by his men. After a brief hesitation, I join them.

The man isn't dead—not yet, anyway. He lies groaning on the ground, bloodied hands clutching a wound in his side that pumps sluggishly. One of Cassidy's men goes to finish him off, but Cassidy stops him.

“No. We find ourselves in a bit of a situation, gentlemen. Evie, how do we get out of this?”

I run my tongue across my teeth. It's a test—a different sort from the one in the crowd earlier. He wants to know how I handle myself in stressful situations, how I extricate myself and those under my command when everything goes to shit. I get it. I'd want to know the same of anyone I was putting my trust in.

I eye the driver thoughtfully and then waggle my fingers at Cassidy. “Gimme your gun.”

Without blinking, Cassidy does so. He knows his men will cut me down in a heartbeat if I so much as think about threatening him with it.

I point the gun at the driver and motion toward the dead crew member. “You. Get over there.”

“Fuck you, bitch.” He spits on the ground.

Disrespect is nothing new to me, but this fool doesn't realize it doesn't go far. I fire, clipping his ear and eliciting a high-pitched keening of agony. “Move.”

He starts to drag himself along the ground until he's around ten feet from the dead crew member.

“That's sufficient. Stop.”

He slumps against the pavement, exhausted and cursing me. Ignoring him, I tuck Cassidy's gun alongside mine in my waistband and strip off my long-sleeved tee, leaving only my thin silk camisole and bra. My skin prickles in the cool evening air, and my nipples tighten involuntarily.

One of Cassidy's men whistles, and I hear the sound of flesh impacting flesh.

*Cassidy. My hero.*

I can feel the heat of his gaze on the back of my neck.

Removing his gun, I use my shirt to wipe his weapon clean of prints. Headlights sweep over me as the damaged car from earlier limps to the scene and pulls up alongside me.

*Perfect timing.* I motion for the driver to roll the window down.

"Back up, and then with as much speed as possible, run it into the ditch right there."

"Huh?" The driver looks at me in confusion.

Clasping the gun with the shirt, I walk to the dead man, careful to avoid stepping in the splattered blood and brain matter. Positioning the gun in his hand, I aim at the truck driver and force the dead man's finger to pull the trigger.

Once. Twice. Three times.

I fire until the clip is empty.

The driver is dead long before then.



I look back at Cassidy's man. "It needs to look like a case of road rage. Like this guy and the truck driver got pissed off at each other, ran each other off the road, then got out and finished each other off." I look at Cassidy. "The guns aren't registered, right?"

He shakes his head. "Of course they aren't." Rubbing his jaw, he nods to his guy, giving him tacit approval to finish off the car. "If the cops don't look too closely, it may just work."

"Better than nothing," I say. "You're dumb as fuck, you know that, right? There's a reason we don't do things like this anymore. We're not common thugs, O'Rourke."

He grins, not at all affected by my insult. "It was fun, though, wasn't it?"

We clear out of the way, and the driver wrecks the car, then we begin making our way back to the church. It takes two trips, and I refuse to allow Cassidy to take any of the cargo, as that would tip off the police to what really happened.

"I feel like you aren't all that concerned with the goods, anyway," I tell him, leaning against the hood of my car as everyone starts clearing out.

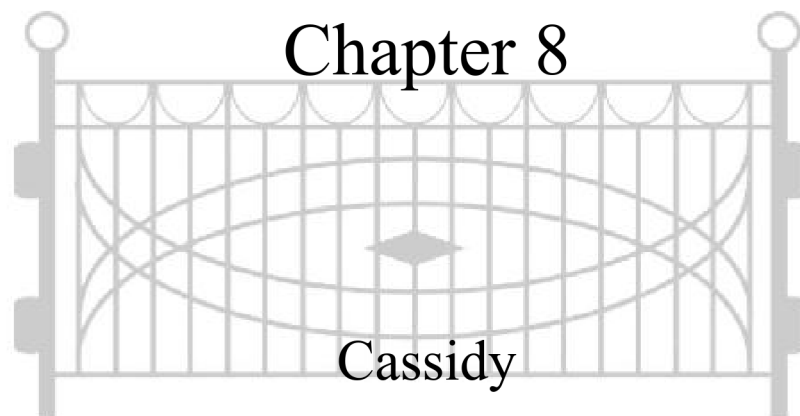
"I don't really need them," he confirms, taking off his jacket and tossing it into his car. I watch the play of muscle beneath his shirt as he moves toward me, unbuttoning his cuffs and rolling up his sleeves.

Cassidy O'Rourke is a fine-looking man, the veneer of sophistication he's adopted over the years unable to

completely hide his rough edges.

His darkness.

“I just like it,” he adds. “The thrill, I mean. I don’t need to hijack a truck. I just want to.” He runs a forefinger across my collarbone and leans in, so close the scent of him fills my senses. “Like I want you.”



---

I'M STILL PUMPED FROM the chase, but more from watching Evie kill. I've never seen a woman take charge in such a manner. She didn't shy away or falter in front of all the men who are now gone. She still hasn't put her blouse back on, and I think it's intentional, as she leans back atop the hood of the car, the gesture thrusting her chest forward. The night is cold, but she looks up at the stars like she doesn't have a care in the world.

I open the passenger door and throw the coat in. I take in her shoulder blades and how the camisole dips a bit low, showcasing flawless pale skin.

All my men have agreed that when this is done, she needs to die. I have a moment of not wanting that to happen; it's a brief moment. I know it must be done, but she doesn't have to die right now.

I join Evie in front of the car.

She looks me in the eyes. "What if it had gone wrong?"

I know she means the hijacking. “It happens,” I answer, knowing I’d have some Gardaí, solicitor, or judge who is paid well make my crime disappear. “When you have money, the world is your playground.”

“Just because you can use a gun doesn’t mean you have to kill.”

I slide off the hood of the car so I’m facing her. Her legs are slightly parted, and I like to think she’s wet in between them. I move closer until my hands are planted on either side of her thighs. “You didn’t seem to mind.”

She exhales slowly. “I was covering up your mess.”

I smirk. “Or maybe you were trying to impress me, love.”

She smiles. “If I wanted to impress you, Cassidy, you’d be fucking dazzled right now.”

I laugh at her cursing, but my laughter dies, and my smile fades. “Hmm,” is all I say before gripping her legs and pushing them apart.

She takes a sharp intake of breath. Her own smile melts from her face. I tighten my fingers on the inside of her thighs, knowing the skin is most sensitive there. I drag her closer to me until she’s pressed against my cock.

“Who’s dazzled now?” I ask, moving one hand to grip the back of her neck. I’ve always wanted to fuck Evie O’Hanlon. I fantasized about it as a boy, and she’s here now. Ripe for it.

Evie blinks up at me, and before she can answer, I slam my mouth on hers. It’s like a match to a flint. Her hands sink into

my hair, nails nick my scalp, and the burn has me tightening my hold on her thigh. I'm shocked when her teeth clamp down on my lip. I release her leg, and in return, she releases my lip. A metallic taste fills my mouth, and my tongue flicks out to lick up the blood.

"You bit me," I say.

Evie watches me, but her gaze burns brighter than anything I've ever seen before.

I shrug and wipe the blood away with my thumb before brushing my hair back from my forehead. I smirk. "That's okay. I like it rough." Before she can respond, I grab her legs and drag her completely off the hood of the car. Her hands are plastered against my chest, and there is a shimmer of fear in her gaze before I spin her and slam her chest down on the hood of the car. I press her face into the black metal and lean across her body, my cock pushing against her ass.

The noise of the city can be heard across the hills, and even though we are parked off the main road, I'm sure a curious passer-by could still see us. The idea gives me a thrill, and something tells me it does Evie, too.

I take the top of her ear between my lips as I run my hand down the side of her body, all the way until I'm touching the inside of her thigh.

"Anyone could see us," I say and let my teeth nip the top of her ear.

She pushes her shoulder upward, shoving me away, and I laugh before sliding my hand to her pussy. The dampness has seeped through her trousers.

I keep one hand on her head so she doesn't try to rise as I wrestle with the front of her trousers until the button pops open. She arches her ass back, giving me room to pull down her trousers while her ass rubs against my cock.

I release her head and tug her trousers off; they land heavily on the ground, and Evie doesn't move. I expect her to try to get up, but I don't expect her to touch herself while sprawled across the hood of my car. Fuck me. I didn't even fantasize about this, but I should have expected it. A woman as strong as Evie won't wait for her man to satisfy her...she'll take her own pleasure.

Pre-cum wets the top of my cock. I can fuck for a long time, but clearly, with Evie, that isn't going to happen.

She cocks her ass high in the air, giving her hands more room. Her breath fogs the dark windshield in front of her as she groans.

I could stand here and watch her, but my cock wants to be buried in her pussy. I need that release. The sooner I get it, the sooner I can get her out of my system.

I unbuckle my belt, and at the noise, she stops and spins. The small white thong doesn't cover much and matches the small cami in color. I remove everything except my shirt, then reach down and spread her legs as far as they will go.

“Are you on the pill?” I ask while I stroke my cock, rubbing the pre-cum all over the head. I have no condoms, and if she says no, I’m not sure I can walk away from her.

“Yes.” She bites her bottom lip, her gaze focused on my cock.

I smirk. “Good.” It’s a reminder that this is just a good fuck.

I position myself between her legs and drag her down until her opening is right above my cock. She reaches out her hand, and her fingers linger on my lips. It’s then I smell her pussy. I take three fingers into my mouth and suck. Evie isn’t waiting for me and lies back, shimmying down until her pussy suctions my cock inside her. I release her fingers and tighten my hold on her hips, forcing her down hard on my cock. Her head rolls back on the hood, and there is no better picture than watching her head roll from side to side like she’s unsure of what to do with the feeling as I pound in and out of her pussy.

I’m close to coming—my balls tighten, and I pull out, much to her disappointment. But I don’t want this to end. Her hands fit neatly in one of mine, and I pull her easily off the car until her body is flush with mine.

She tilts her head back, and I want to kiss her, but I spin her around so my cock presses into her ass. She wiggles her backside, and I force her away as the urge to come rises hard and fast again.

“You are a tease.” I push her back to the hood of the car and release her hands.

She holds herself up as I position myself behind her. Before I enter her pussy, I slap each ass cheek until my handprint appears. Her body tenses when I slap the outside of her thigh, and before she can say anything, I slam hard and fast inside her pussy. A car speeds past beyond the tree line, and my adrenaline and speed spike. Evie's cries drive me faster, and once again, I get the urge to stop, but this time, I'm not able.

Evie arches her ass higher again, and she lies on the hood of the car, allowing her to use her hand to stimulate her pussy.

"Come on my fucking cock," I demand. The sound of flesh slapping against flesh has my balls so hard that when they slap against Evie, I'm sure it inflicts pain.

Evie's groans grow louder, and I can tell she's going to come. My hands grip her ass cheeks, and I spread them apart, allowing myself that small bit of greater access to her pussy. The pull causes her to hiss, but when I slam as deep as I can inside her, the hiss turns to a cry, and I fuck her harder than I've ever fucked anyone. My cum sprays inside her, and she screams as she comes on my cock.

I slow my pace but give a few final pumps before I loosen my hold on her ass and pull out of her completely. My cream drips out from her pussy and onto the ground.

"Fucking glorious," I say, watching each drop of cum. Some has caught on the inside of her thigh, and when she reaches back and touches it, bringing it to her pussy, I think I might come again just watching her.



Evie is a woman who knows her body and isn't ashamed to show it. When she straightens, she gives herself a few minutes, and I remove my shirt.

She takes it and uses the material to clean herself. As she does, I get re-dressed. Evie keeps taking peeks at my chest, and I smirk as I slip the suit jacket from inside the car across my shoulders. I don't button it. When she's dressed, she holds onto the shirt. It's rolled into a tight ball. She doesn't offer to give it back, and I don't ask for it as I open her car door for her.

Evie climbs in, and I love how tousled her hair is and how her eyes shimmer with what we just did.

She's quiet as I lean in over the door frame, but I take solace in the silence. I have fantasized about fucking her for so long that it didn't do the real thing justice. A pity I can't keep her.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I tell her.

"Tomorrow," she agrees. There is no doe-eyed girl looking at me but a woman who just got fucked and is back to business.

It makes me like her all the more.

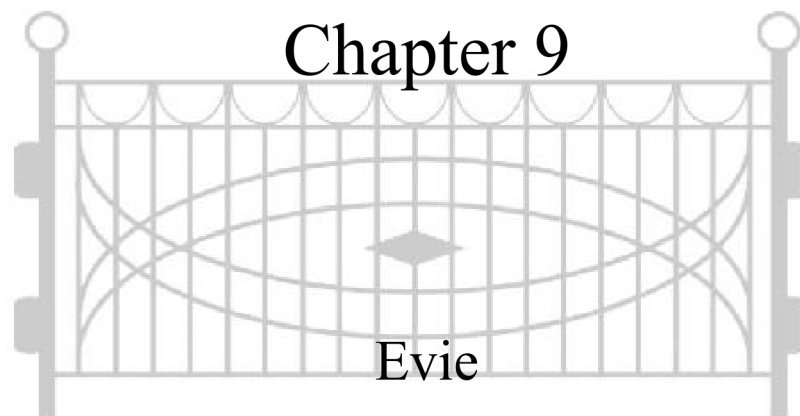
As she pulls away, I raise my hand in a gun gesture and pull an imaginary trigger. "Pow."

What a shame.

I climb in my own car and watch her taillights fade in the distance.

Yeah. It's a shame she has to die.





---

THE STABLES ARE COOL and dim in the early morning light, the scent of earth and manure ripe in my nostrils as I kneel on the concrete slab floor. The stalls are piled with unused farm equipment—an ancient upturned rowboat, bales of forgotten hay, and cords of wood.

We raised horses once, or so I'm told. I was too young to really remember. The stables haven't been used for proper farm work for more than two decades, not since my mother turned from her roots and headed to Italy to take up official residence with the Papparado *famiglia*. Most of the land has since been sold off to developers as Limerick spread, year after year, until the O'Hanlons were left with roughly ten acres, a barn, and the memory of horse flesh.

I bring the back of my hand up to wipe my cheek. A dusty hubcap leans against a half-open stall door, and as I shift on my knees, the reflection of my brown eyes, weary but exhilarated, catches my attention. In front of me, the reason for both emotions whimpers low and pained, drawing my gaze,

and I look back down just in time to see another pup slide from the mother in a slippery gush of fluid.

“Oh, what a good mama you are,” I croon, resting a hand on the Irish Setter’s head as she nudges her newborn and licks steadily to remove the birth sac.

It’s such a miraculous thing how these creatures know exactly what to do.

I’ve been here most of the night. After the interlude with Cassidy—oh hell, who am I kidding? After *fucking* Cassidy on the hood of a car that didn’t even belong to me, I needed to clear my head. Instead of going inside, I veered off and chose a walk, trailing around the outskirts of my property.

As I rounded the stables, I heard whimpering from the stables, and upon investigating, found an Irish Setter bitch in the midst of labor.

I couldn’t leave her.

I wouldn’t want to be alone.

She had delivered one pup, and as I settled next to the wary female, she shifted, settled at my crooning, and birthed another. I didn’t care how long it took after that; I was there for the duration.

I’ve seen the dog a few times, but only from a distance. While most setters are friendly, this one appears to be a stray. Now, as she permits me to stroke her matted chestnut fur and peers up at me with pain-dimmed, cautious eyes, I wonder if someone has been cruel to her.

“Never again,” I murmur to her.

As the sun rises, the dog relaxes, and six puppies curl into her teats. I think she’s finished. I give her several long strokes and rise stiffly. She needs food, and I need sleep.

After making sure she has plenty of water nearby, I return to the house, where Meredith is starting breakfast.

She startles at the sight of me. “Good Lord, child! Look at you, all nasty and smelly! What on earth have you been up to?”

I look down at myself ruefully, taking in my stained jeans, and give my pits a sniff just as John walks into the kitchen. “There’s a stray setter in the barn who gave birth to puppies overnight. I was out there with her. What can I take her to eat? She’s tired, poor thing.”

“Ah, poor thing indeed.” Meredith, ever soft hearted, begins opening the cabinets.

“She won’t want to eat right away,” John says. “I’ll run out and get her some puppy food. That’ll be best for her. But make her up some rice and eggs in the meantime. Some liver, if we have any.”

“How many pups are there?” Meredith asks. “We haven’t had anything like that around here in ages.”

“There were six when I left. I’m pretty sure she’s finished. She seemed relaxed for the first time all night.”

“You were there all night? Goodness, child, you need to get to bed. Go. Go!” She shoos me on when I stand there, swaying

and indecisive. “I’ll take this to her.”

“Thank you,” I finally whisper and move toward my room. I want to take the treat to the dog, but she’s right. I’m dead on my feet.

And besides. I have to trust someone, sometime.



I SLEEP UNTIL AN hour before noon. When I wake, I’m groggy with that sense of off-timed slumber, but a cup of espresso and a quick shower, as well as a message from Tommy in New York, gets me moving. Sitting in front of my computer in a robe and socks, it takes me several times to log on to the proxy server.

When the server finally connects, I can tell from Tommy’s face that the news isn’t good.

“What’s going on?” I ask. “It’s only five a.m. there.”

“Rumors are going around.”

“What kind of fucking rumors? You’re going to have to be more specific, Tommy. I had a night.”

“Rumors about Russian involvement. Rumor has it, Angelus Valachi was seen welcoming the Russians into his home.”

I stare at the screen for a moment, waiting, then let out a bark of laughter. “Is that all? Tommy...let’s not borrow trouble. Idiots wag their tongues, and they usually don’t know what

they're talking about. Angel Valachi is young, but he isn't a stupid man."

Despite my assurance, I don't entirely trust Angel Valachi. My dead brother's brother-in-law doesn't make decisions that don't benefit his family in some way. But he isn't stupid enough to invite the Russians into his home, not when the Italians worked so hard and spilled so much blood to assure the death of the Russian influence in New York.

Still. I'll have to keep an eye on him.

I drum my fingers on the table, my gaze drawn out of the window to where Tadgh is in the yard. He glances up and catches my eye, and I motion for him to come up. It occurs to me that I don't really know anything about his schedule or about what he does during the day. I need to rectify that.

"Let's keep an eye on him regardless," I tell Tommy. "I'll feel better."

"Keep an eye on whom?" Tadgh enters on the heels of my statement, and I fill him in. He nods, tipping his head toward Tommy on the screen. "Absolutely keep an eye on the Russian, and Valachi, too. The Valachi *famiglia* overtook the Marzanos, who were once the top family of the NYC Five—more through cleverness than muscle. We don't see a benefit in connecting to the Russians, but Angelus Valachi might."

I regard him with reluctant respect. "Your understanding of the Five is impressive. I didn't expect someone on this side of the pond to have such a keen grasp on the inner workings of the families and our politics."

Tadgh smiles crookedly. “We’re all tied together. What affects you impacts all of us.”

“So it does. I’ll remember that.” I tip my chin at him before turning back to Tommy. “Anything else?”

“The Scarpettas have also cast a bid for the river pool project, and they mean to take the matter to Angelus.”

“Nice.” I roll my eyes. “Keep me informed and make sure we do whatever it takes to get that bid.”

Closing my laptop, I sigh. “We need to get the men in order so their tenure at the docks can begin.”

Tadgh nods. “Consider it done.”

“Orderly. Organized,” I tell him. “I don’t want any bullshit.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“They show up, they do their job, no drinking, no fighting—”

“I’ll take care of it.”

I hold his gaze for a prolonged beat of time, then jerk my head toward the door. “See that you do.”

My captains in New York know me. They’re loyal to me, eager to prove themselves. It’s different here. The Irish know one another, but they don’t know me. I’m a stranger, and a woman to boot. We’re all still proving ourselves.

It’s maddening, this back-and-forth tease we’re all engaged in. I want to demand that they trust me and that they give me a reason to trust them.

But I can’t.



I have to prove myself, just like I did to Cassidy last night.

My thoughts are a beacon, it seems, as my phone lights up with a text from him.

*Cassidy: I have something for you.*

I run my finger along my lower lip as I contemplate how to reply.

*Me: Oh yeah? Is it big and hard?*

*Cassidy: Come alone.*

The terse message is accompanied by an address and a time, and my lips twist as I toss the phone onto the bed.

Guess I read that completely wrong.



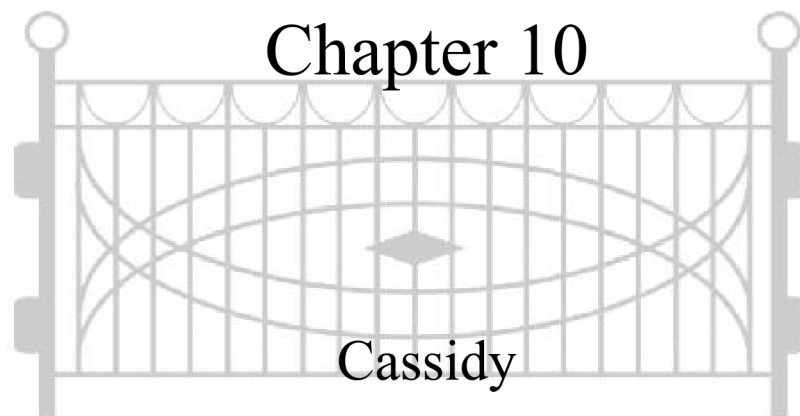
THAT NIGHT, I DRIVE into Limerick and pull up outside what appears to be a high-end clothing store, its windows dark. The street is empty of people and hollow with night. I climb from the car and stand uncertainly, wondering if I got the address wrong.

I'm about to leave when Cassidy steps out from the alley beside the store, his form a reassuring shadow separating itself from the rest of the darkness.

I don't know why I find it reassuring. He could have lured me here to kill me, for all I know. I twitch my ankle, feeling the weight of steel against my skin.

“Cassidy—”

“Follow me.”



---

SHE DOESN'T ENTER THE open doorway. She tilts her head and clutches the strap of her bag, dragging it higher on her shoulder. Basically, she's stalling.

I clear my throat. I caught the little twitch of her ankle. She has one of her knives there, I'm sure. Over her shoulder, she contemplates what she sees as she looks at me.

I could make this so much easier. I could go in first to show her it's safe. But it's too much fun watching a woman I fucked on the hood of my car shift with unease at the thought of stepping into a dark room.

She never shows this uncertain side of herself. Her confidence is always at the forefront. But I notice the smallest things about her, and she can't seem to keep her emotions in check. That says she likes me far more than she even knows, even while she doesn't trust me, and that fills me with far more pleasure than it should.

Evie finally walks across the threshold, and I'm on her heels, pulling the door behind us and plunging us temporarily into darkness. Evie is frozen, standing in the way of the light switch. Faint light from the streetlamp filters in from the large front shop windows, just enough to cast shadows across us. I move into Evie, and she takes in a sharp breath but doesn't move a muscle. I inhale her. She's wearing perfume.

"Are you trying to impress me, love?" I ask her.

Her head snaps to the left, in the direction of my voice.

"Excuse me?"

I move until my mouth touches the bottom of her earlobe.

"You are wearing perfume." Before she can respond, I press a kiss to her neck and reach for the switches behind her head. I hit them, and the lights flicker on.

When I lean out, Evie touches her neck before glancing around the space. She takes a step closer to the racks of clothes. Everything here is expensive, from the ball gowns and the tuxedos all the way to the lingerie.

"What the fuck is this?" Evie spouts.

I laugh, but she doesn't return my smile. She folds her arms across her chest, clearly pissed. This is new. Most women would orgasm over having a store shut down for them. Not Evie.

She taps her foot with impatience on the floor, and my smirk widens.

"I wanted to take you shopping," I admit.

Her look is deadpan. “You could have taken me here during the daytime. You didn’t have to shut down the shop.”

I swallow my laughter. She’s so fucking hot when she’s mad. She glances over her shoulder. All the lights have finally come on. Some of the fluorescence was slow to come to life, but the entire store is lit up now.

“It almost seems like *you’re* trying to impress *me*, Cassidy.” She raises a brow.

I shrug but don’t respond, and she moves toward the first rack.

“Anything you want, you can have.” I take a step closer to Evie.

Her head rises, and she’s staring at the row of counters at the back of the service desks. Wine fridges are filled with chilled white wine, while the shelves hold rows and rows of red wine.

When Evie glances at me, her lips are set in a thin line. Any other guy would know he was standing on a sinking ship with her. But I have a lifeboat and one strong paddle. I take a step toward Evie.

“I don’t want to owe you anything,” she admits, folding her arms across her chest. “And I pay my own way. I don’t need a man to buy me trinkets and clothes.”

*Hmm.* I hadn’t thought of that. Evie is considerably different from other women, marked by strength and a sexy independence. She’s not the kind of woman to be bought.

I try again. “The owner of this business owes me a favor, so technically, I’m just passing the favor to you.”

“And what business would a boutique owner have with you?”  
Evie starts to finger through the row of dresses, drawn to the finery despite herself.

“Not every ally has to be in the business, love. Sometimes, a little favor to someone on the outside will make them owe you something that will benefit you later.”

“And I am the later?” Evie asks as she steps to another rail.

“Maybe,” I hedge. “Maybe I just want to see you in pretty things.”

She glances at me and continues looking through the clothes. She’s skipped over all the pretty, expensive dresses. Most women know that the risk of being with a man like me is heavy, but the rewards in luxury are vast, so they expect to be treated well. Any other woman would be piling the diamond-heavy dresses onto the service desk. Not Evie; she’s holding a pair of jeans to her thighs.

“Not a fan of dresses?” I ask.

She folds the jeans carefully. “They aren’t practical.”

I raise a brow in bemusement. “I didn’t bring you here for practicality.”

“No, you brought me here, as you put it, to give me anything I want.” She holds up the jeans. “I want these.”

I shrug and walk through the rows of clothes. “Very well. But I shall select a top to match.”

A snort draws my attention to Evie. “So now you’re a stylist.”

I ignore her comment and pick a red halter top with a plunging neckline. Two strings make up the back of the top, and it cuts off at the midriff.

*Yeah, this is perfect.*

“Come with me.” I walk toward the large double staircase that opens up onto the second floor of the store, clutching the top tightly as Evie tries to see it. This area is more spacious, and in the center is a podium with mirrors surrounding it. I hold out the top as Evie clears the final step. “Let’s see them on, then.”

Evie takes the top and assesses it. “I’m not wearing this. And I don’t need to try on the jeans. They’ll fit.”

I turn so we are toe to toe. “I won’t buy a pig in a bag. So, try on the gifts I want to give you.”

Evie’s gaze flickers. “I won’t be bought.”

“Get undressed, Evie.” I force a challenge into my words.

She tilts her head, and her gaze narrows slightly. Her fingers tighten on the garments before she spins on her heels and marches toward the fitting room. But Evie doesn’t go behind the screen.

She stands in front of the mirrors, her gaze clashing with mine in the mirror as she removes her boots and socks. Next, she pulls her sweater over her head. Her light blue bra is filled with the swell of her breasts. They rise and fall in a perfect rhythm with her agitated breath.

Evie opens the button of the jeans and pulls down the zipper before shimmying out of them. The matching panties look

glorious on her. Light catches in her deep brown hair as she finally glances at me over her shoulder.

She's a rare beauty. She holds eye contact as I walk toward her. I stop and remove my suit jacket, then place it across one of the chairs that allow people to wait for their loved ones.

I scoop up the red halter top off the ground. Evie faces the mirror again, and I walk in a circle around her until we are face-to-face.

“Raise your hands.”

She holds both of her slender arms in the air, and I tie the halter around her neck. Gripping the two red strings, I lean in and inhale her scent. Evie drops her hands, and they rest on my forearms as I tie the strings together across the middle of her back. My touch lingers, and I don't want to step away from Evie; she smells and looks divine.

“I'm going to unclip your bra,” I whisper softly in her ear. She doesn't object, and I do as I promise. I move back and slowly slide the straps down her arms. My fingers graze her flat abdomen, which clenches as I reach under the top, grip the bra, and pull it away.

The heat in the cups of the bra has me holding it, my thumb stroking the area where her breasts just were.

“It's perfect, except...” I walk back to Evie and reach behind her. A flush has started across her chest, but she doesn't shy away from me either. With one hand, I pull the band from her hair, letting it flow down her back.



“Now you are perfect.” I love the effect I have on her. How her breaths are uneven.

She looks away from me and glances in the mirror. “I don’t think walking down the street in my panties is very appropriate.”

I grin. It’s clear she’s trying to hide how much I affect her.

I place her bra beside my suit jacket before picking up her jeans. “Well, we will have to rectify that. Won’t we?”

Evie holds out her hand. “I can put them on.”

I kneel down and look up at Evie. She gives me a look that suggests I’m being ridiculous. “I know you can, Evie, but I want to.”

I reach out and touch the calf of her leg. She’s toned, the muscle firm and defined and yet soft to the touch. It’s like Evie herself. Deceptively feminine but with a core of strength.

My fingers trail down to her delicate ankle, and she raises her foot as I slip her leg into the jeans. I repeat the process on the opposite leg before I start to pull the jeans up her thighs.

She keeps her arms held away from her sides, and it gives me time to let my fingers linger on her smooth skin. I raise my hands, slowing down at the strings of her panties, my thumb stroking the band, and she sucks her breath in before slowly letting it out.

I purposely allow my fingers to trace her ass as I pull the jeans up over the perfect orbs. That’s Evie; she’s perfect. I’ve never

wanted to dress a woman before, but with Evie, I want to slow down time and worship every single inch of her.

I don't want to close the button. I want to slip my fingers into her panties and spread her lips so I can explore her wetness. I restrain myself by buttoning and zipping up her jeans. I walk back around her and fix the bulge that will be easily spotted in my trousers before I face her gaze in the mirror. She lowers her arms to her side. Her red lips are moist, and I wonder if she licked them when I wasn't watching her.

"People warned me about you." I speak before lowering my mouth to her bare shoulder. I can't resist placing a kiss on her soft flesh.

"Yeah? I was warned about you, as well," Evie fires back.

"They say you're a heartless monster." I look into Evie's gaze, wanting to see if there is any truth to the rumors about how heartless she can be. She holds my stare, and my attention goes from each angled mirror to see if I can detect a shift in her stance, any odd movement, like the clenching of her fist, the tightening of her jaw, the rapid blinking of her eyes, but none of that happens.

In each mirror, she watches me. "Yeah? I'm told the same about you."

Evie tries to turn, but I keep my hands on her shoulders. I like all the angles I can see her in; it allows me to interrogate her properly. I wonder if it will dawn on her why I really brought her here.

“We weren’t always monsters,” I say and shift so I’m standing at her opposite shoulder. I break eye contact and place a kiss there. “Once, we were innocent.”

I want to know what took Evie’s innocence away.

“I can’t imagine you innocent, Cassidy.” There is a level of amusement in Evie’s voice.

“I was once in my mother’s womb,” I declare. “I was innocent then.”

Evie snorts, and her hair shifts. She’s truly beautiful. But women like her are often the most dangerous. I need to watch myself with her. I find myself liking her too much. If I’m not careful, I won’t be able to do the job I know I have to.

“We would never survive in our world unless we do what we need to do.” Evie frowns as she speaks her truth to the mirrors like they are her judge, jury, and executioner. Her gaze is distant as she studies her reflection. “And what we do creates monsters.” This time, Evie turns so she’s looking at me. “We have no other way to survive.”

“What if we did?” I ask. I don’t know why, but I don’t want her to be hardened by this world. I brush the hair back from her face. “Have some other way?”

Her jaw tightens, and she shakes her head. “Don’t tease me with that, Cassidy.” Desperation fills her words. “I have lost so much. I don’t have much more to lose. I can’t afford to dream or think of a world where we were—“ She looks away for the first time. ”—normal.”

“What exactly did you lose?” I ask her, and she flinches, just like I knew she would.

“My mother. And then my brother. He died protecting our family, and now it’s up to me to protect the rest of them.”

“Are you protecting your family or yourself?” I ask.

Evie’s nostrils flare, and she turns back to the mirror, and I think she’s really seeing herself. Not the beauty in the red halter but the girl who hides behind anger and strength. I want to take some of the burden off her, but I also need to remind myself that what I want isn’t exactly possible.

Sadness fills her big blue eyes, and even though I know I’m supposed to kill this woman, I want to take it away. Make her happy.

*How fucked up is that?* I roll my shoulders in frustration. “Tell me something you care about.”

“Why should I tell you that?” She speaks through clenched teeth and a glare.

I need to end this. All it’s doing is making me more confused and conflicted, and she’s right; she has no reason to tell me, but I can’t stop myself. “To prove you are still human.”

*And it’s giving me a reason to believe we’re not the monsters we claim to be.*

“Humans can be wicked beings,” Evie states, focusing on herself in the mirror. All the recent sadness has drained from her eyes, leaving them a mass pool of darkness.

“You still haven’t answered my question.” I lean in and pull the string on the halter top across her back. The material gathers at her front but still keeps her breasts covered.

“There’s this dog at my house. A red setter. I found her the other night in the barn, in the middle of giving birth to six puppies. She’s a stray and she was all alone, but she was out there doing what needed to be done. Bringing life into the world in the most amazing and elemental way.” She lifts her gaze to mine. “That’s what I care about.”

Tonight is the most honest and vulnerable I’ve seen this girl, aside from when she used to sit in the courtyard at the abbey school and was blissfully unaware of my presence. Something in my chest pangs with the realization. “Okay.”

“As much as I try to be the thing I need to be to survive, I’m still just an orphaned girl from the city. Just like that orphaned bitch.” She snorts a laugh that shows me her pain. “Doing what she needs to do...alone.”

I walk around so I’m facing Evie and tilt her chin up with one finger. “The dog had you, Evie,” I say and want to add, *you have me*, but the words lodge themselves in my throat.

I let my hand trail to her neck and wrap my fingers around the back where the final knot holds the halter together. I tug and watch the material as it floats across her breast, past her abdomen, and pools onto the floor. Slowly, I take in her breasts and pink nipples before looking back into her gaze. She stays still as I unbutton the jeans and pull down the zipper.

“Are you happy with these?” I ask.

Evie nods. “Yes. But I don’t need you to give them to me. I can buy my own—“

“Evie.” I put a finger on her mouth. “Shut up.”

She falls silent, her eyes flaming. I’ll send these to her house, along with some other things. I saw her admiring. She may not need me to give them to her, but I know she’ll never get them for herself.

And there’s this weird, possessive part of me that wants to see her dressed in clothing that I provided for her.

My thumb grazes her hip bone as I push the denim material all the way past her knees, and I kneel at her feet, looking up at her. She grips my shoulders to help herself balance as I pull the jeans completely off, and she’s standing before me in a thong.

“You’re beautiful,” I say as I rise and walk behind her. Her skin is warm under my touch; her reaction is a shiver that has her closing her eyes before she opens them again. I hold both palms over her tightening nipples. I want to touch her so badly, but there is something tearing through me as I stand here, with the heat rising off her skin.

“Touch yourself,” I say.

She leans back into my chest, and the contact has my hard cock painfully straining against my trousers. My balls are two rocks as Evie slides her hand across her thigh before dipping her fingers under the thin material of her panties. At contact

with her pussy, she lets out a breath, and her eyes flutter closed.

“Open your eyes. I want to watch you.”

Unwillingly, she opens her eyes and meets mine in the mirror. Her breaths are harsh, and there is a vulnerability in her eyes as she allows me to watch her pleasure herself.

Her body is pure perfection, and as much as I want to drive my cock inside her, watching her gives me far more pleasure. My hands cover her breasts, and when I move my fingers to her nipples, gripping them between my thumbs and forefinger, she hisses, her ass arching back into me.

I feel a wave of pain from wanting to fuck her, but that pain quickly turns into pleasure I've never felt before. Evie moves her fingers quicker, in a circular motion over her clit. I'm sure if I dipped my fingers inside her, I'd find her soaking, but I continue to play with her breasts. Pressing a kiss to her neck has her gaze widening, her mouth forming an *O* as her climax continues to build. She's panting, breathing loudly in the quiet space, and it's clear she's getting off on being watched.

I keep squeezing her nipples, and when her gaze flashes with pain, I ease off before applying pressure again. I keep this rhythm, seeing how it's driving her mad.

Her hand dips lower, and she spreads her legs, dipping her fingers inside herself. She pulls them back out and rubs the moisture across her pussy before she continues circling her clit. She's rammed right against my aching cock. She's so close, and a part of me wants to stop her and push her against

the mirror so I can fuck her from behind, and we can both watch.

Her eyes flutter closed, and like her brain remembers I'm watching, she opens them. Her mouth widens as she moves faster, and I squeeze her nipples, not stopping this time until Evie comes hard and fast on her fingers.

She's fucking perfection.

I take her hand and bring her fingers to my mouth, sucking them deep and licking every drop of her juices off of each digit. When I finish I shove her forward gently. She stumbles and spins around to face me, but I've already turned away from her. "Get dressed and go home."

"What?" The confusion in her voice tears at my gut but I force myself to ignore it. This has to end.

I'm supposed to kill her, not fall for her.

"You heard me." I start walking in the other direction, holding the jeans up. "I'll have these sent to you."

"Excuse me?"

"Go, Evie." If she doesn't get out of here, right now, right this minute, I'll bend her over one of these chaise lounges and fuck her until the sales women show up in the morning. I won't stop. I won't stop until neither of us know where I end and she begins, until her every exhalation is my every breath I take, until she's mine and I'm hers...

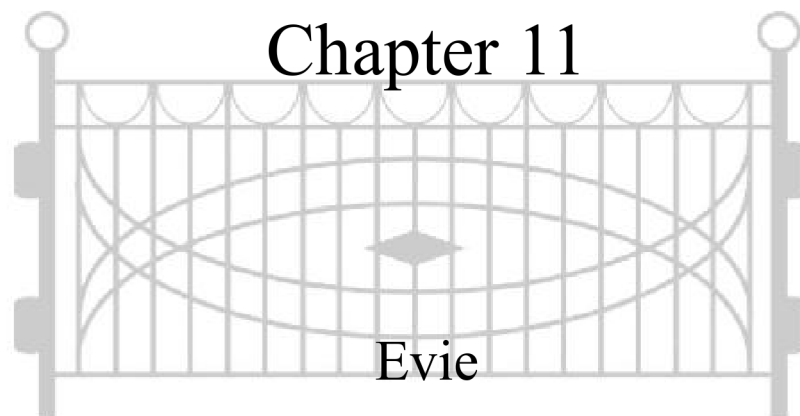
...until this idea of killing her is nothing more than vapor and dust.



So she has to leave. Now.

Fabric rustles. “Fuck you, Cassidy O’Rourke, and the leprechaun you rode in on.”

The door slams behind her.



---

BENEATH THE FLOOR-TO-CEILING WINDOWS of the second story of the warehouse, the dock spread out below bustles with activity. Boats large and small crowd the marina, their sails bright against the waters of the Limerick River.

I lean against the window, the cold glass pressed against my forehead, and watch my men as they load a pallet onto the nondescript vessel tied to the marina in slip number six. There's nothing about it to call attention. Nothing to indicate that its cargo is heroin concealed carefully inside packages of animal feed that will be headed down the river for a larger port in a few hours.

There, it will join a cargo ship and head for the States.

It's the O'Rourkes' heroin—mine by association. That idea makes me acutely uncomfortable.

"How's it going?"

Tommy's voice in my ear reminds me that I'm on a call, and I straighten from my lean. "Good, I think. Better than in the

beginning, for sure.”

It was a struggle at the start. The O’Hanlons had never dealt in drugs; we didn’t believe in accommodating the dealing of such death, no matter how removed we were from the end game. To get involved in this now felt like being a sellout, and my men didn’t like it.

I didn’t like it.

I wasn’t sure how long I could make myself do it, to be honest.

But all it took was that first paycheck to come in. The men were on board after some money lined their pockets. It was more than they’d ever seen in their lives.

“I think it’s going to work out well,” I add. “The men are happy with their cut, and—“ I break off, my attention caught by a flurry of activity on the boat’s deck, a familiar way of moving. “O’Rourke is down there.”

“What is he up to? Isn’t the whole point for you to take the attention off him and—“

“Yeah, I don’t know. Talk later, Tommy.” I disconnect with a press of a button and focus my attention on the scene beneath me.

It’s been several weeks since the Night of the Shop, as I’ve come to call it. The night he tried to handle me as he would any of his women and realized he couldn’t...and yet he still managed to unravel me, all the same.

I watch as he talks to one of my guys, then claps him on the shoulder and moves briskly away, out of sight.

It's the first time I've seen him in weeks, a reality that rankles. I'm not sure what happened there in the shop after he demanded I touch myself and watched me get off—if I annoyed him, or he just got busy afterward, or maybe he had what he needed from me and simply didn't have any further use for me...but his absence has been a constant itch under my skin. He sent the jeans I picked out along with a pile of other items I did *not* choose, and simply disappeared.

It's confusing and frustrating and...hurtful.

It hurts.

I opened up to him—because he didn't really give me much choice—and I feel a little like he decided he didn't like the peek he got of my soul. Like maybe my monster isn't sweet enough, or something.

He's so different from Luca or even Angel or Damon. He doesn't carry their same sophistication, dressing and acting just like his own crew. But beneath his unpolished veneer, he's equally as dangerous. Perhaps even more so because he's far more volatile than any of the other men I've been close to. He's like an unpredictable, untamed beast.

One I want to pet.

A mewling whine rises behind me; at the same time, a knock sounds on the door, and I swivel to see the inspector—a familiar face over these past several weeks. Despite Limerick Marina being relatively small, he's been acutely interested in every aspect of our little operation.

“Hello, Inspector.” My greeting is cool, tempered with a polite smile. I gesture, inviting him in, and then turn to the source of the whine.

The Irish Setter rejected the runt of her litter and, unable to watch it fade slowly away, I’ve been taking it with me wherever I go, feeding it and caring for it. At first, it was with a nipple on a bottle, but the little thing can stand on its own and eat from a plate now. I run my hand over its head and pick it up, bringing it close to my chest.

“Good morning, ma’am. I have your customs paperwork for next month if we could just add in your delivery schedule.”

“Thanks.” I take the papers with my free hand and set them down without glancing at them. “I’ll get right on that for you.”

Instead of taking his cue to leave, he pushes his hands into his pockets and steps further into my office. His gaze drifts around the small room and then through the window at the bustle of activity below.

“I’m not used to seeing a woman running a business such as this.” He waves a hand idly at the docks before turning a narrow-eyed look on me. “I have to say, I’ve been impressed.”

I shove down the irritation that rises within me and set the puppy down. Am I supposed to thank him for that patronizing assessment? “Yes, well, I learned how to run a business from my father.”

“Do I know him?”

“I very much doubt it. He’s dead.”

“Ah.” He rocks back on his heels, brow furrowed. “Did he work here, though?”

He’s clearly trying to figure out where I land in this landscape. He knows I’m likely not entirely legit, but it isn’t clear where I fit.

“He was Italian,” I tell him. “He married an O’Hanlon and whisked her away to Italy and the States, where they lived happily ever after. He didn’t have much use for your country.”

The words have the desired effect. The inspector draws himself up stiffly. “I see. I’m glad you see things differently.”

“Absolutely.”

“Have a nice day, ma’am.”

“You do the same.”

Small talk done, the inspector leaves the office. I watch him make his way down the stairs and onto the main part of the dock. The polite smile vanishes from my lips, and my eyes narrow on his figure as he cuts in and out of the people milling about.

There is nothing out of the ordinary in the way I handle my crew. They show up, and they work. This is the way most crews work.

Someone’s talking.

I draw in a deep breath through my nose and let it out, lips pressed tightly together, and then go to sit at my desk, a heavy

metal relic from the mid-twentieth century. One more thing I'll have to keep an eye on.

Hours later, as I close up for the day and make my way down to my car, Cassidy's men snag my attention. They're here most days, loitering as they are now and making little effort to appear productive. It's stupid. We're supposed to be handling this part of the arrangement. It's almost like Cassidy doesn't trust me, when I'm the one putting everything at risk.

I pause and tip my chin at one, who makes eye contact before his gaze slides away. "Evening, boys," I offer.

He twitches a toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other. "Ma'am."

"Anything I can do for you?"

"No, ma'am, we're good."

We stand in awkward silence, combatants facing off, until I mentally throw my hands up and walk past him, checking his shoulder with my own. "That's good, then. Let's keep it that way."

My phone rings when I'm halfway home. I give it a cursory glance over the edge of the steering wheel, see that it's Cassidy, and answer.

"What is it?"

"Ouch. What did I do to you, love?"

*It's what you haven't done.*

The thought rises unbidden, the memory of sex on a car and hot touches in an empty shop. And then nothing for weeks. It hurts more than I want it to, this feeling of being forgotten. Dismissed. I don't want the whim of a careless man to have the power to abrade my tender feelings. That wouldn't happen with a man; it shouldn't happen with me.

Because of that, my answer is terser than it needs to be. "Nothing. I'm busy."

"You're driving. You're not busy."

His voice, deep and rich, cuts through the road noise and flicks a pulse to throbbing between my legs.

God, I hate him.

"What do you need?" I try again, reaching across the console and into the box to stroke the puppy. His fur is soft. Soothing.

"I thought I might take you out tonight. If you're interested."

Is that a thread of uncertainty in his voice?

"What do you mean, take me out?"

"Forget it. It's dumb."

"Wait."

Silence hovers between us.

I sigh and curse my own stupidity. "What time?"





I'M WAITING ON THE stoop when Cassidy pulls up in front of the house, and I dart swiftly over to climb in before he can get out. I feel like a teenager sneaking out to meet her boyfriend, darkness covering over my escape, and neither Old Man nor his son any the wiser as I speed away alone with a man who could just as well be my enemy as my ally.

I can't bring myself to care.

I'm feeling things, things I never felt when I was in New York, and I don't want to stop feeling for the sake of being safe. Stupid? Probably. I'll deal with that tomorrow.

Cassidy takes me to a farmhouse around forty minutes outside the city limits of Limerick. It's a quaint house furnished with pieces that haven't been in vogue in decades, thick with a haze of weed and filled to bursting with people holding drinks. Laughter and music, some piped in through speakers and some played on actual instruments, fill the air.

I look at him curiously as his fingers curl around my hand, and he tows me forward through the crowd. "Friend of my great-granddad," he says. "We've always partied here."

Snagging a Guinness with one hand, he hands it to me before grabbing another for himself. He contemplates an armchair for a moment and shakes his head, walking past it and out a pair of sliding doors to a backyard lit by a glowing fire pit. It's quieter out here, less frenetic.

Cassidy jerks his thumb at a young man sitting in a cushioned patio chair by the fire, and the man scrambles to make himself scarce so Cassidy can sit, pulling me down to sit on his lap.

I only struggle for a moment. I want to be there, even if I don't want to admit it to myself. I sit stiffly, though, frowning at a girl who walks past and glares at me, until Cassidy sighs and pulls my head against his chest.

“You're mad at me.”

It's not a question. I'm struck anew by how observant he is—how much he sees, even when he doesn't appear to be looking. I shake my head. “I'm fine.”

A groan rumbles in his chest. “You are definitely not fine. What did I do?”

“Well, damn, Cassidy. Most girls like a guy to call or text after he puts his fingers or his dick or anything else in their pussy. That's all.”

I struggle to sit up, but his arms are like steel around me, holding me in place. “My apologies, Evie. I'm not good at...”

I go still. “At what?”

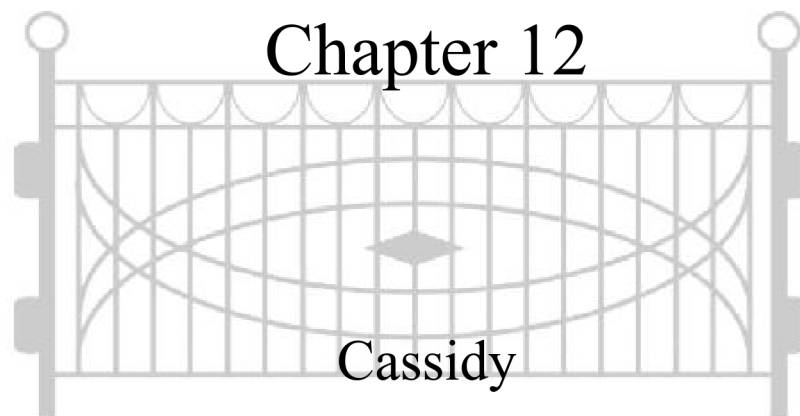
He's silent for a beat, then abruptly removes me from his lap and rises. “Let's take a ride.”

Frustration rises in my throat, its flavor bitter in my mouth. What was he about to say before he changed his mind? I turn to flounce away, halted once again by the catch of his hand on mine. “I'm not the kind of girl to go riding around aimlessly in cars, Cassidy. I have better things to do. Just take me home.”

“I mean on horses.” His tongue darts out to lick the corner of his mouth, the gesture somehow challenging. “Not

leprechauns.” I roll my eyes, remembering my jibe. “You do that, don’t you?”

“Fine.” I huff a sigh. “You fucker.”



---

DISTANCE MAKES THE HEART grow fonder—no truer words have ever been spoken. My separation from Evie over the last few weeks was close to agonizing. It was a new kind of torture for me.

But now she's here, and she's all fired up. Just the way I like it.

A light has been left on in the stables. I requested that the two horses be ready for my and Evie's evening ride. I also made sure that no one was around.

I approach the first stall. Evie has crossed her arms over her chest. The thin white shirt she wears is no barrier to the evening chill.

I shrug out of my brown padded jacket. "Hold out your arms," I say to Evie.

She was very obedient in the clothes store, but right now, she isn't unfolding her arms. "You look cold. I'm trying to be a gentleman and offer you my jacket."

She still keeps her arms folded. “I’m fine.”

“I’d feel a lot better if you wore it.” I take a step closer, and she frowns slightly, but I win as she drops her arms and allows me to put the jacket on her. When that’s done, I return to the horses.

“They are unusually wide,” Evie says with some concern in her voice.

I smile while rubbing the side of Gobby’s head. I didn’t name him; my brother did. The gray horse kept throwing Mark off, so he constantly called the horse a gobshite, and the nickname Gobby stuck.

“I’m sure you are used to a wide bulk between your legs.” I glance over my shoulder and love the blush that fills Evie’s cheeks.

“What I place between my legs is none of your business.”

She’s right, it isn’t.

But it also is because while I’m playing with her, I don’t like the idea of anyone else playing with my toys. To distract myself from the thoughts of other men touching what is mine, I pop open the door. The latch rings louder than it should, and I try to reel in my anger.

“Something wrong?” The teasing in Evie’s voice tells me she can see that the idea of another man near her has pissed me off.

I close the door and turn to Evie. “Yes, I don’t like the thought of anyone else touching you.”

My honesty causes the smile to evaporate from Evie's perfect lips.

"We are clearly attracted to each other," I state and reach out and fix the collar of my jacket on her. I like her in my clothes.

"We are," Evie says in the most businesslike fashion.

I grin. "I might even say you are attracted to me far more than I am to you."

She snorts. "I'm not the one getting angry."

"So if I tell you that tomorrow night at a charity event, a woman with deep red hair and stunning green eyes will accompany me, you wouldn't get jealous?"

Evie smirks. "Enjoy yourself."

I smile back at her and lean in. "Lies," I whisper against her lips. My breath is visible in the air; the contrast of the heat rising from the horses and the chill of the night allowing us to trace the swirls of our mingled breath.

"You wouldn't mind another woman on her knees sucking my cock." I push a bit harder.

Evie's gaze flashes, but she has more control than I do. She shakes her head. "Whatever you're into."

*I'm into you, Evie O'Hanlan.*

I take a step back. "Okay." I smile and love the uncertainty that wavers her gaze. "Let's take the horses for a ride. I return to opening the gate and lead Gobby out of his stable. He might

not have liked Mark, but he's a well-trained horse and stands patiently as I get Dubh, my own horse, out of the stalls.

When I return, Evie is attempting to mount. It's entertaining to watch a city girl trying and repeatedly failing to get up on the horse.

"Do you need a hand?" I ask, slipping the reins across Dubh's head.

"Nope," Evie says as she takes a running start, grips the saddle, and almost makes it.

"I can get you a stepladder," I say.

Evie glares at me, and as much as I am enjoying her struggle, I step forward as she jumps, grab her ass, and push her onto the saddle. She lets out a little yelp.

I get onto Dubh in one swift movement and grab the reins. When I look up, Evie is staring at me. "Fucking show-off."

I click my tongue, and Dubh takes the lead. Gobby follows in a slow trot until we leave the pass that takes us into the first open field. Gobby moves up beside me, and we make our way across the field.

As we pick up some speed, it's clear that this isn't Evie's first time in a saddle despite her awkward attempts to mount; her hips move up and down in perfect sync with the horse. She's a natural.

I nudge Dubh to move faster, and Gobby copies as we race across the open field. Evie's long hair lashes out behind her, and as she rises in the saddle as the horse gallops beneath her,

I can't help but be impressed. A ditch that runs along the property line comes into view, and I pull back on Dubh. He starts to slow down, and Evie settles back into her seat. Gobby matches Dubh's pace until we almost stop. The horses move in slow circles around each other.

"You can ride?" I say.

"I like riding," Evie fires back, and I see the humor in her gaze.

"Clearly, you can handle something powerful between your legs."

Evie fights a smile at my teasing, but she grows serious far quicker than I want her to. "What do you want, Cassidy? Why am I here?"

"I want to show you something." I click my tongue, and Dubh starts to move. The moonlight spotlights our route, but I know it by heart. As we approach a gate near an old tree, I stop Dubh, and Gobby stops beside us. I slide off the horse and tie his reins around the large tree. Evie hasn't dismounted her horse.

"Trust me," I say, holding out my hand.

Evie ignores my gesture and slides off the horse. I take in the view of her perfect ass. "I don't," she returns tartly.

I laugh at her honesty. It's so fucking refreshing. Evie hands me her reins, and I tie her horse up before pushing the gate open into a much larger field. Evie doesn't walk behind me but



matches my step. She stops when I reach out and grip her wrist. “Stay beside me.”

She frowns but nods. In the moonlight, it appears just like a field, but we’re walking into the marshes.

The marshes look much like any other grassland area until you get closer in; then the cordgrass gives way to scattered patches of pond and mucky wetlands. They’re prime areas for concealing bodies, difficult to mount a proper search and vast in scope.

The moment she realizes where we are, Evie stops, and her gaze swings all around her before she looks at me. I expect to see the fear of God in her gaze, but I don’t. I see anger, defiance, a question.

“What is going on?”

It hits me. Despite her sass, she does trust me.

She shouldn’t, though.

“Mike Brady is out there somewhere. He was my best friend. An ugly fucker, to be honest, but he thought he was God’s gift to women.” I’m smiling at the memory of him dancing, rubbing up against every female; each woman ran off, but it never put him off from trying. I glance back in the direction of the house. “His last party was very similar to the one we just left. We came here—or I should say, I led him here.”

I take a quick peek at Evie.

“He had to be disposed of. It wasn’t personal. It was business.”

I turn fully to Evie so she can hear every single word. “You see, this house is like a mouse trap. We throw a party, and everyone in there knows who’s going to die, who’s going to be led away by me, and who will never return. No one will ever know what happened.”

Evie swallows, but she isn’t running back toward the house; in fact, she pushes her shoulders back, a fierce gesture of bravery.

I take another step closer. “Everyone in the house, Evie, knows that you left with me. No one tried to warn you or protect you.” I can’t help but to reach out and push some hair behind her ear; she flinches but holds still. She’s so fucking brave.

“You are more alone than you’ve ever been in your life, love. No parents. No siblings. Half of your power is in shambles. Why would you go out to be alone with me?”

She knows I’m a dangerous man, and yet she trusts me. It’s such a stupid thing to do, and yet Evie isn’t a stupid woman, not at all. I don’t get it.

“Maybe I like the way you scare me,” she murmurs.

I like the way she makes me feel like I’m losing control. The two of us are seeking something beyond what we can find alone. I’ve also never felt the same thrill I feel when I’m around Evie. I think about her far too much, and even when I taste her, it’s never enough. I don’t know what would make me feel satisfied.

“Was it quick?” Evie asks, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“What?”

She juts her chin toward the marsh.

She's talking about Mike. Something in my gut twists. It was the hardest kill I ever made. I nod. "Yes," I admit. The cold air clings to my skin at the confession.

"That's the best we can give our friends in our line of work." Evie looks back on the marshes, and I wonder if she pictures the quick kill.

"What about business partners? Do they get the same treatment, a quick death?" I ask.

"That depends, Cassidy." Evie faces me, and a coldness has settled into her deep brown eyes, turning them almost black under the moonlight. "Are we friends?"

"I'm not a friend." I've just confessed to killing my best friend because it was business and not personal. "No one has ever called me friend."

Evie raises a brow. "Is this the part where I'm meant to feel sorry for you for not having friends?"

She's playing with fire.

"No, this is the part where you are supposed to realize I'm the devil. I'm the thing that goes bump in the night. I'm the thing that scares you, not the thing that saves you." I'm breathing hard, willing her to understand. "I'll never save you, Evie."

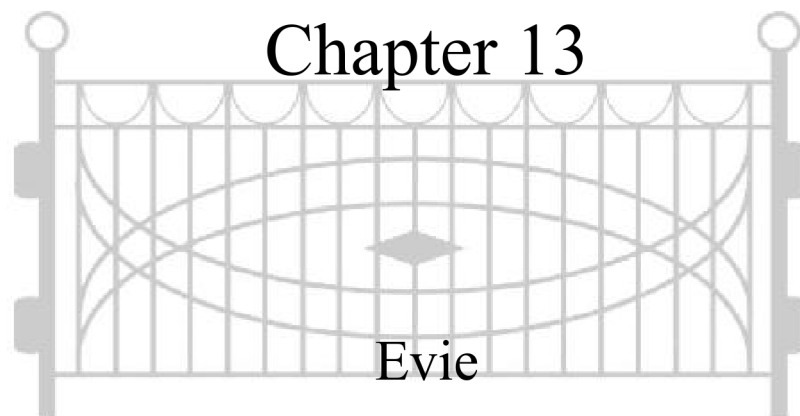
"You're not the first devil I've made a deal with, and you certainly won't be the last."

She should be afraid; I'm trying to warn her away from me. I shouldn't. I made this deal, but I also want her to know that just because we're fucking, it doesn't mean it will save her. Nothing could have saved Mike.

“What do you want from me?” A promise of friendship or more? I didn't expect to ask the question.

Evie takes a step closer and pulls up the sleeves of my jacket that's covering her fingers. When she looks up at me, I'm not sure what I read in her gaze.

“I think...I think I want you to scare me.”



---

“I WANT YOU TO scare me.”

The words hover in the air between us, laden with expectation. I wait, listening to the marsh breathe around us.

Never has my own idiocy screamed so loudly in my ears as it does in this instant. Cassidy O’Rourke has no feelings for me. None of the finer variety, at any rate. There’s plenty he feels with his dick and plenty of ways he wants to use me to his own advantage.

The fact that I’m standing here before him, on the edges of a dark bog where he’s just told me—no, warned me; that was a warning—he killed a man, asking him to scare me...

I may be boss of the O’Hanlons, but I’m a damn fool.

Dollars to doughnuts, Cassidy O’Rourke has plans to kill me when all is said and done here in Ireland. I’d be wise to keep that in mind and keep my wits about me.

I’d be even wiser to kill him first.

A large boulder rests just behind me and to my right. As I watch him, part wary, part excited, and part pissed at myself, his gaze flickers past me to glance off the rock and then to the cordgrass beyond the fence.

Frogs *burrup*.

A breeze ruffles the strands of my hair.

Insects chirp a sonata in the gloom, and a star falls before he speaks.

“You don’t know what you’re asking.” Tension threads his voice, lending me confidence. He’s not as bold as he appears.

Reaching up, I slowly push a button through its mooring. “Don’t presume to tell me what I know and don’t know, Cassidy.”

He watches as I unbutton my shirt with agonizing languidness, but he makes no move toward me. I suffer the smallest moment of hesitation when I realize he’s going to make me take it off myself, then shrug inwardly and continue. I take the shirt off and toss it behind me onto the rock.

“You’re playing with fire, Evie.” This time, when he speaks, Cassidy’s voice is pure sandpaper. He licks his lips. His chest rises and falls.

It’s tell enough.

Feeling more poised, I reach for the front hook of my bra and undo it. It gaps open, clinging to my nipples, and my hands go to the waistband of my pants.

I've never felt like this about a man. I've always managed to maintain control, but here I stand, all fumbling fingers and shortened breath in front of this one. I think it's because I know I'm not in control, when the entirety of my life, that's all I've had.

Being the only daughter in a household ruled with hard fists and a cruel tongue, I learned early to dole out in scraps only what was necessary to maintain the peace. I gave my brothers bits and pieces of my soul, my mother my heart, my father nothing at all...and I kept the rest for myself.

Now they're gone, and it's just me. And here's this man, who without even trying, demands everything of me. My business. My mind. My body.

My heart has never been up for grabs in any kind of relationship, but I can feel the tug in my chest now as it leaps inexorably toward Cassidy O'Rourke, recognizing a kindred kind of soul, perhaps.

I want to feel him pressed against me. I want to feel his hands on me. I want him to tear into me, to devour me here in the fetid air of the bog, right here where his friend lies decomposing, and yet he just stands there, hands curled into fists at his sides, refusing to give in to this beast between us.

Just watching.

And there were all those weeks where he didn't bother to even contact me, to say a word about what was happening between us. It was nothing but business.

*Can you manage this for me, Evie?*

*Can you make sure this delivery goes off without a hitch?*

*This will be coming in at four in the morning; see that someone's around to receive it.*

My chin goes up.

What the hell am I doing? O'Hanlons have more fucking pride than this. I won't beg any man for scraps of affection.

My hands go still on the button of my pants, and I push it back into place. I turn to collect my shirt from the rock. "Fuck this," I mutter. "And fuck you, too, O'Rourke."

The words are incendiary. Cassidy springs on my half-turned form, a rough and incomprehensible groaning falling from his lips, and then he's grabbing me and hauling me to him.

His hands in my hair hold my head still long enough for his mouth to press a hard kiss against mine before it trails fire along my throat. "I tried." His words are thick. "I really fucking tried."

I drop the shirt as he tears at my bra, pulling the straps down my arms to get it off my body. I'm not much help, wrenching at his own shirt at the same time and yanking at his belt buckle.

Eventually, our clothes puddle at our feet in the ankle-high grass, and he latches his hands on the backs of my thighs and lifts me against him, bringing our mouths back together in a clash of lips and tongues as I wrap my legs around his waist and lock my ankles.



He buries his face between my breasts, and I hold on as he inhales deeply, snaking my arms around the back of his head and winding my fingers through his hair.

“God, why the *fuck* do you smell so sweet?” Turning his face to the side, he picks one and sucks hard at the flesh beside my nipple.

My cry rings out in the night, startling one of the horses into shying on its tether, and his hands flex on my ass, his fingers sliding into the crevice between my cheeks. One finger rims the tight rosebud of flesh there, seeking every inch of darkness I possess.

I tense involuntarily, arching against him, and then force myself to relax at his low laugh.

“Am I scaring you yet?”

I shake my head. “I don’t scare easy. Work harder.”

“Challenge accepted.”

Setting me down, he turns me against the rock and bends me over its cold surface. Its roughness abrades my nipples and the tender flesh of my stomach, but I can’t bring myself to care, more concerned with his hands between my legs, searching out the folds of my pussy. Two fingers shove up and into my slick without preamble, driving me forward up and over the stone before he catches me with his other hand on my shoulder and brings me back down to him.

My low moan has him pumping his fingers slowly in and out, a third reaching forward to work my clit. “Good?”

“Mm.”

“Tell me what you want.”

“I want your cock instead of your fucking fingers.”

I feel him then, the blunt head of his cock pushing for entrance, but it's not at my pussy. Instead, it nudges at my ass while his fingers work my pussy. “Is this what you want?”

I've never been fucked in the ass. I'm not opposed, but it strikes me that it's the ultimate form of submission, the ultimate act of trust, and I'm not quite ready for that with this man.

“Not there,” I manage. “In my pussy.”

He hesitates a brief second, and then his cock replaces his fingers, and he surges forward and into me in one sure, powerful stroke.

The action shoves me up and over the rock again. I try, through the storm of sensation assaulting my body, to grab hold of something to keep myself in place, but there's nothing other than the widespread edges of the boulder. I latch onto them and hold on under his onslaught. He fists a handful of my hair in his grip and pummels into me savagely, the motion forcing my clit into harsh contact with the unforgiving surface of the stone with each pass.

I come fast and hard, the breath soughing out of me in harsh gasps.

He slows his pace, his grip relaxing in my hair. His hand is

almost tender as he turns my head so I'm facing the marsh. "He's over there," he grunts. "Right where that alder tree rises up."

The tree in question is a few hundred yards distant, a pale-limbed specter of death that marks the spot where Cassidy's former friend lies festering under the boggy ground.

"You're sick."

Another climax is building, making the words thready and weak.

He hears the lack of conviction in my voice and laughs, his hand curling around my throat. "You like sick."

He's not wrong.

I push my ass back against him, seeking the next release. "Why didn't you call me?"

His fingers tighten in my hair once again, and then he reverses our positions, pulling me up to straddle his hips and scrape my knees against the clammy stone. The rock is flat enough that his position is stable and I can mount him easily, taking him into my body in a quick downward motion that has him hissing out a surprised breath, his fingers tightening on my hips. Then he lifts me up and yanks me back down in a swift, sharp move.

I grin. "I should have known you wouldn't relinquish control."

"Never," he agrees.

“Why, Cassidy?” I slow the roll of my hips and lift my arms, trailing my hands up my abdomen and over my breasts before drawing my hands back behind me and resting them on Cassidy’s thighs. He holds me securely despite the angle of the rock, keeping me from falling.

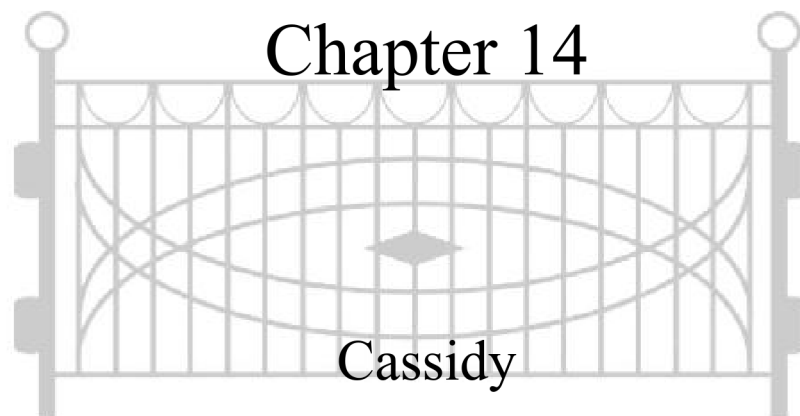
In spite of everything between us, I trust him in this, at least.

He refuses to reply, but I know the answer, anyway. It’s because there’s no real relationship here. There’s nothing real between us—just sex and a comforting sort of cruelty.

His hips piston up, forcing his cock into me with every bounce and roll of my body. I demand, and he answers. I rule, and he serves.

Or at least, he gives me the illusion of such.

We both know, though, as I find another release and collapse against him, absorbing the impact and the ripples of his climax, that the only power here is his body over mine.



---

I'VE CALLED A MEETING, and as I look out on the garden where the meeting will be held, I can't stop thinking of Evie. Hence the reason for the meeting.

I drain the glass of brandy impatiently, ice cubes rattling in the bottom as I turn to the bar and refill the glass.

Initially, killing her was fine. With most women, once I have them, the want drains out of me quicker than life draining out of someone's gaze after I've killed them. With Evie, though, each touch has my want growing.

It should be my warning to stop, but I fucking can't. I can't stop wanting her, touching her, needing her. The thought of letting her go won't let me sleep.

I return to the window but pause to drink from my glass. Rob enters the garden, the moss-green shirt he wears the same color as his eyes. I suppress a smile. I'm sure Derek would give him shit for that. He's on the phone, and whomever he is speaking to, the conversation is clearly heated.

When he ends the call, his gaze clashes with mine. He gives a small shake of his head, and I finish my drink before joining him outside.

“What’s wrong?” I ask just as Matty and a few other of my men arrive and take their designated seats outside.

“Just Derek. He went to a party with Mark last night, and we can’t seem to find him.”

I relax and take my seat at the head of the table. “They are young. Let them have their fun.”

Rob doesn’t seem appeased by my response. “They need to start earning their keep, Cassidy. I put a guard on them, and they ditched him.”

Matty snorts. “Sounds like it’s more of a guard problem than a Mark and Derek problem.”

Rob doesn’t like the comment, and Matty shrugs; he isn’t taking back what he just said.

“Matty’s right, get better men,” I say. I have my own men on my brothers. If anything ever happened, I would know about it immediately.

I turn my attention to the group. My brothers aren’t the focus of this meeting, and I want to start before I change my mind.

“I think Evie O’Hanlon is more valuable to us alive.”

“You think we can wager another deal before we fuck her over?” Rob asks.

I bite down on my disapproval of his words and remember if this was before, I'd be thinking the same thing. How can we get the most out of someone we intend to kill, before we kill them?

“Evie O’Hanlon is very well connected. The Dublin crew has ties in France and Spain, but Evie has ties in New York. She makes a lot of money.” I look at each man, eyes narrowed for emphasis. “Limerick doesn’t have to be our only goal.”

“So you want to go international?” John asks. He’s removed a pack of matches from his pocket and fidgets with it.

“I want to grow and expand, yes.”

Eddie glances at Rob, and no one seems entirely convinced. But my word is final here. I don’t voice that but let them all ponder.

“I don’t think aligning ourselves permanently with Evie O’Hanlon is wise, boss.” Cillian speaks up.

I was hoping for his backing. He has served us well and is deeply respected. He is the third generation to work with our family, and I see Eddie and John nod in his direction.

The double doors into the garden open, and all the men rise as Rowan walks toward us, a book in her hand. She smiles, and all I see is our mother.

My sister has grown into a young woman who causes men to trip over their own feet, and when I glance at Rob, he’s half-snarling at the men who can’t hide their lust for her. He’s

always been as protective of her as I am. He sees her as his own sister, and I trust him around her implicitly.

The white dress she wears covers every inch of her body. She rarely shows skin, a fact that makes me ridiculously happy. She stops at my seat and places a kiss on my cheek.

“Sorry I’m late,” she says. “I lost track of time.”

Reading, I’m sure. Rowan has a tendency to get lost in her books, most of them classic literature that makes me want to snore. Oscar Wilde and Shakespeare and Jane Austen.

I shake my head. “You don’t even need to be here,” I return. She doesn’t. She’s been trying recently to take more of an interest in business matters, but she’s too young and I don’t want her involved. It’s too dangerous.

“I’m not a child, Cassidy.”

*Yes, you are.*

Aloud, I say, “I never said you were. Here, sit and be quiet.”

She smiles at Rob and sits in the seat that Eddie has pulled out for her, accepting it with a pleasant smile.

“I was speaking about Evie O’Hanlon. I’m considering doing business on a permanent basis with her.”

My sister tilts her head. Both ruddy brows rise, but she doesn’t speak. I’m not sure what’s worse. “Interesting,” is all she says.

I take my focus off my sister. Rowan is the type to mull over information. She will have plenty of questions for me later, even if I don’t want her involved in things.



I have no idea what exactly I'll do with Evie business-wise, but this was the first bridge to cross.

“So, it's settled. I'll have further instructions soon.” I rise, wanting this over with. It's clear to my men now that Evie is not to be harmed, and that's what this meeting was for—to take the subject of her death off the table. Eddie, John, Matty, and the rest leave me with Rowan and Rob. I won't avoid their questions as easily.

Rowan rubs her forearms. “Can we go inside? I'm a bit cold.”

My sister rises, and I take a moment to look at Rob, who hasn't spoken, but his eyes say a million things. Like, asking what the fuck I'm doing.

I'm not sure what I'm doing myself, never mind explaining this to them.

When we enter the kitchen, our housekeeper Marge places plates of biscuits and cups onto the table. The kitchen smells like coffee and warmth.

“The boys are just home and will be down soon.” She bustles around the kitchen, getting milk from the fridge as she speaks.

I've known Marge long enough to know she's nervous, likely over my reaction to the twins evading their guard and staying out all hours. I want to remind her that Derek and Mark are men, not boys, and they can take their lumps, but she raised us. She's in her seventies and is showing no signs of retiring.

“Thank you, coffee sounds great,” Rowan says, and Marge pats her hand with love in her gaze. She's a mother to us all.

“You know we can do this ourselves,” Rob says, reaching up to get the sugar from the cupboard.

“I like taking care of you.” Marge stops him and pats his cheek. He leans down and places a kiss on her cheek, making her blush.

“Maybe one day I can take care of you,” Rob says.

Rowan almost chokes on her coffee.

Rob narrows his eyes at my sister’s dirty mind. She knows he doesn’t mean it in any way other than a son to a mother, but she’s been around the lot of us long enough for the teasing to come natural.

Marge steps away from Rob as Mark and Derek enter the room. Both of them have showered but still look like shit.

“Is that coffee?” Derek asks through bloodshot eyes.

Marge quickly pours him a cup, all the while watching me. She knows I’m pissed.

When she has a cup in both Derek’s and Mark’s hands, she stops by me. “Don’t be too hard on them,” she says before squeezing my shoulder and vacating the kitchen.

“You two want to be part of this business. How the fuck could I rely on either of you, acting the way you do?” I ask.

Mark tuts. “We only get like this because we are bored out of our fucking brains twenty-four seven.”

Rob hits the back of Mark’s head. “Language.”

Mark tuts again but sips on his coffee.

Derek is more serious. “You want us to be men?” he asks, placing both his hands on the table. “Stop treating us like boys.”

To me, they are my baby brothers, but keeping them in the dark isn’t working. All they do is party, and from what they’re telling me, it’s from pure boredom.

“Fine. You want more responsibility?” I ask. “Are you fucking ready for it?”

Both perk up. Cillian has spoken against me in front of my men; he will do as he says, but that still gives me concern. The only way Evie O’Hanlon will die is at my hands. No one else’s.

“We’re ready, Cass,” Derek says, and I’ve never seen my brother look so eager. “We swear it.”

Mark looks equally hungry.

I exhale a long breath. “Okay, then. I have a job for you.”

They are both nodding with serious expressions, but then they look at each other and grin.

*Fuckers.*

I shake my head. “No, you aren’t ready.”

They half rise from their chairs, objecting.

“Cassidy,” Rowan defends them. “You’re being mean. Don’t drag this out. Unless it’s your intention to drive everyone crazy.”

“And why would I do that?” I ask my sister.

“So you don’t have to talk to me about this Evie girl.” She sees too much, my little sister.

“Who’s Evie?” Derek asks, forgetting about his first job, which he might have already lost..

“Fine. You’re both going to tail someone.” I point at Derek and Mark. They yelp, and when I look at Rob, he laughs and holds up his hands with humor. “You’re the boss. This is on you.”

“We will tail the ass out of whoever it is.”

Once again, I second-guess my judgment here.

“This is life or death.” I keep my tone low.

All the fucking about stops, and my brothers sit back down, both nodding.

“Cillian Walsh is your target.”

“Cassidy!” Rob warns.

Rowan frowns.

“Just tail him. Tell me where he is going, and don’t let him see you.”

“Now?” Derek asks.

“I’m sorry, am I interrupting your brunch?”

Derek stands and heads for the door, taking his mug with him.

“We’re on it.”

Mark follows but stops before passing me, and when his arm goes around me in a half hug, I’m a little taken aback.

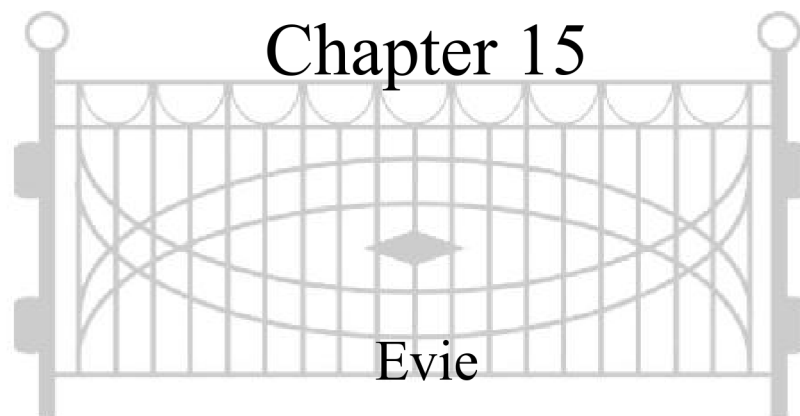
“Thanks, bro.” He releases me and follows Derek out of the room.

“Cillian Walsh? Really?” Rob isn’t happy. “What’s that all about?”

I wave off his anger. “Cillian would never harm them if he finds out they are tailing him. It’s an easy target,” I say. But that’s not really why I want my brothers to tail him. Cillian won’t expect it, and if he sees the boys, he will most likely assume they’re just in the same place as him. It’s almost perfect.

But more to the point, I don’t trust him. I didn’t like his reaction when I removed the target from Evie, and there’s a little niggle in my gut that feels he warrants watching.

Rowan takes a long sip of her coffee. “Well, since you sent our brothers on a wild goose chase, why not tell me all about this Evie.”



---

THE FORMAL DINING ROOM in the O’Hanlon manse swells with men here for my captains’ meeting. They spill out of the spindly chairs and lounge against the pretty papered walls, their muscled girths filling the space and sucking all the air out of the room.

I listen to the low-toned chatter and clink of whiskey glasses and try to hear what’s not being said, aware that even after a solid six or seven weeks of being here, I’m still the outsider.

I’ll always be the outsider.

Tadhg sits to my right, taking notes and occasionally nudging my elbow when someone says something he thinks I should pay attention to. He doesn’t understand that I hear it all, even if I don’t appear to. I hear it, and I process it.

“So, what’s going to happen when this contract ends, eh?” one of the men asks suddenly. “Because it is going to end; the O’Rourkes have been clear on that point. Are we just supposed to go back to picking through their scraps, then?”

“It’s the nature of a contract to be impermanent,” I explain coolly, picking up my own whiskey. “This was never intended to be a long-term affair.”

The words bring to mind my own arrangement, if it can be called such, with Cassidy. In a twist of painful irony, it parallels the matter between the O’Rourkes and the O’Hanlons. It’s nothing more than an affair of convenience, a means of scratching an itch.

For Cassidy, anyway.

Much like my own men, I find myself dissatisfied, wanting more of a man who has no need of me past a certain point. It isn’t exactly love, but something is happening there, in the quiet chambers of my heart.

It’s pathetic.

It could well lead to my own destruction, and yet the very danger of it appeals to me.

Under the watchful eye of the Valachi family and the Commission in New York, I was groomed to be a poised, efficient leader for the O’Hanlon branch after my mother’s died, and it became clear my brothers’ attention lay elsewhere.

Damon’s concerns were with the Papparados, but not openly. Instead, he allowed Marcus to be the public figurehead of the Papparado *famiglia*, while he led things subversively. He worked quietly to establish a link to the Valachi *famiglia* so he could learn who was responsible for the murder of our mother

and kill them. Marcus was such an idiot, he didn't even realize what was happening under his nose.

My dreams of honing the marketing and graphic design skills I had begun nurturing in my final years at the abbey school burned out quietly like fog in the morning.

Cassidy offers me something different. I feel this beast within me I didn't know existed. The abbey school tried to structure and subdue it out of me, and New York tried to keep it smothered, but it rises and roars in his presence.

Together, we could be a force with which to be reckoned.

“Yeah, well, that's not good enough.”

The room goes deathly quiet in the wake of the man's insult. I sit up straight, mouth open to reply, but the words never make it past my lips. A plate shatters on the floor, breaking the tension, and I look to see Old Man has come in and begun gathering the supper dishes.

“Sorry, Evie, ma'am...”

He makes himself busy cleaning the mess, his attempt at defusing the situation obvious. I settle back in my seat and wait, lips pressed tightly together.

Meredith usually handles the meals. John is feeling the need to watch over me, as usual.

It makes me feel like a child, even as I appreciate his sweetness.



I wait until he finishes cleaning the porcelain and food before speaking. “That’ll be all, Old Man.”

“But I just need to—“

“I said that’s enough,” I bite out. He sends me a cross look, and I soften my tone. “You can get the rest later.”

He retreats to stand just outside the door, I’m sure. I turn my attention back to the table. “Continue.”

Brian Doyle leans across the table. “I’m going to be honest with you since no one else is speaking up. The money’s nice, but we’re not entirely satisfied with this arrangement you cooked up for us.”

“I cooked up?” I arch an eyebrow. “If I remember correctly, I walked in on an agreement already in progress. O’Rourke wanted a thirty-seventy split, and I argued for forty-sixty. Everyone agreed to those terms.”

He waves a hand, dismissing such trivialities. “You didn’t leave us much choice.”

“Oh, now, that’s a crock,” Tadgh inserts.

Brian whips around to Tadgh and points a stubby finger in his face. “You know as well as I do that the O’Rourkes asking the O’Hanlons to be their errand boys is an insult. When all of this is over, she has the option of taking her sweet ass back to the States, but the rest of us are left with shit.”

Audible gasps sound around the table.

“You’re out of line, Doyle.”

“No, I’m not. We’ll have the loss of income to contend with when this job has tied up all our days and kept us from working other ones, and we’ll have lost the respect of every other criminal organization in Ireland.” He pauses long enough to swing his attention back to me, where I sit with my hands gripping my knees beneath the surface of the table. “We look like nothing so much as Cassidy O’Rourke’s little bitches.”

*Calm. Keep your head, girl.*

I hear my mother’s voice in my head, a relic from my days at school when the nuns used to drive me batty, and unfold my fingers, one at a time, from my knees.

“What is it you propose?”

“We need to do what we planned to do from the beginning: make the ultimate power move. Take Cassidy O’Rourke out and challenge his heirs.”

The room is silent. My nostrils flare as I breathe in his proposition.

“His siblings, you mean.”

“Yes, his brothers. That pretty little sister. Then we use as much muscle as possible to keep the docks for ourselves. No more splitting unless the O’Rourkes want to make a deal with us.”

Bringing my hands to the surface of the table, I drum my nails on the polished wood. “The O’Rourkes are the ones who have the contract with the South American cartel. We risk losing

our supply if we take out the person they've been doing business with. The one they've built trust with."

Doyle shrugs. "If you think they trust each other, you're dumber than you look."

Anger flares cold within me, and without consideration, I lift the knife beside my plate and fling it toward him. It lands with a solid plunk between two of his fingers on the table, and he brings his gaze up to meet mine, startled rage brewing in its depths.

"I think I've had about enough of your disrespect, yeah?"

He swallows. "Yeah. Anyway, the siblings will fill that role easily enough. The cartel might even find them easier to work with than Cassidy." He nods to himself. "He's the one we need to remove."

I look at Tadgh. "What do you think?"

He rubs his chin consideringly. "The financial gains may be worth the risk, but we cannot guarantee that the O'Rourke siblings will agree to our terms. Cassidy is a beloved brother. Such a move could mean war."

"The money's worth a war, in my opinion," another captain pipes up. "The O'Rourkes have more people, but the O'Hanlons have been in this business longer. We would win."

Discussion roars around me, and I steeple my fingers at my brow. This has gotten out of hand. These men are vastly different from my captains in New York. They've been left to their own devices for so long, they have no loyalty and no

clear vision of how things work. I can't strong-arm them, because I have only faint protection over here—a dumb move, but then, I foolishly assumed them to be devoted to the O'Hanlon name over their own purses and individual agendas.

“Stop,” I say. No one hears me, and I raise my voice. “Enough!”

They subside.

“We're not assassinating Cassidy O'Rourke.” Grumbles immediately arise, and I slam my hand down on the table, silencing them. “The current arrangement benefits our family greatly, and there are other groups that Cassidy could have offered this to, but he didn't. He wanted us. So we're going to honor our promises.”

Doyle sniffs. “Or maybe you just want to keep your fuck toy around a little while longer.”

That icy numbness washes over me again, and I push myself back from the table. “What did you say to me?”

He laughs and rises, hitching his pants lazily. “I didn't stutter.” His eyes are lit with a feral excitement, as though this is a fight he's been itching for.

Tadgh stands. “Doyle, it's time you left.”

He doesn't even look at Tadgh, instead keeping his eyes on me. “Nah, fuck that. You're not one of us. You're just a New York Italian. We remember what they did to us.”

I shake my head, wondering at his logic. He's talking about the days of Capone, I assume, who assisted in the murders of two

leaders of Ireland's largest criminal organization in the States. We don't operate like that now, though. My family was bonded by the blood of the Italian and Irish mafias a generation past. I don't play those kinds of games. I open my mouth to speak, but he continues, spittle flying from his mouth.

"You may look like your mother, but you are not her at all. You are a slimy *guido* like your father."

The room is deathly still at his insult, waiting for my reaction. In a second that feels like an hour, I consider my options.

*I can respond to him, give him words, and let him know how I feel about his insult.*

*I can allow Tadgh to deal with him, or Old Man.*

*I can shoot the motherfucker.*

Of all of the choices, only one feels decisive and strong. I'm done dealing with this asshole.

I pull my gun from my waistband, and I put a bullet in Doyle's forehead.

I look around the room, gauge the shocked expressions, and shrug. "He's been nothing but a pain in my ass from the start."

One of the men lifts a clenched, trembling fist. "That was my brother! You...cunt!"

Before I can fully register the insult, he pulls the gun at his hip and levels it in my direction. I have a second to process the

danger before the sound of gunfire rings in my eardrums, and Old Man shoves me to the side.

He takes the bullet meant for me and falls, blood pumping against rapidly graying skin. Tadgh utters a hoarse shout and shoots, but another of the captains decides he doesn't like the way things are going and fires back, hitting Tadgh in the arm. I lift my own gun and pull the trigger blindly, witnessing the man falling against the table amid a crash of crockery.

Chaos erupts.

Tadgh manages to push me toward the foyer and through the door, his body jerking as he takes another bullet and then another. I don't know if he's alive when he collapses in the driveway after managing to shield me long enough to get me to the car and push me behind the wheel.

*Oh, God, Meredith.* I don't know where his mother is. Hiding, I pray. A strangled cry makes its way past my teeth. She has my puppy, the runt I've been raising.

I hadn't even named it yet. It's been weeks, and I couldn't bring myself to call it anything other than 'pup.' Almost like I knew it wouldn't last.

Sobbing out a breath at how it all went to shit so quickly, I speed away.



THE SAFE HOUSE IS a two-bedroom apartment above a tavern on the opposite end of Limerick. Cassidy sent me the address when I called him from the car, barely able to get out a comprehensible sentence, and now I wait.

Cassidy should be here soon.

The straight-back kitchen chair I sit in is uncomfortable, but I barely feel it. The whistle of the teakettle on the stove pierces my eardrums, but I ignore it, choosing instead to stare into middle distance. Nothing matters after the slaughter I just witnessed.

“Drink this.” One of the O’Rourke twins, I don’t know which one, presses a cup of hot tea between my palms. “Your nerves must be shattered.”

I take it, noting the streaks of blood my hands leave on the porcelain with a detached sort of idleness. “Yes. Thank you. Can I...?” I lift one hand, showing him the blood. “It’s from Tadgh, I think. Or maybe Old Man. I don’t quite know—“

“Old Man?” Muttering a soft imprecation beneath his breath, he reaches for a kitchen towel and begins to wipe my hand. His brother stands behind him, watching.

“John. Tadgh’s father. I’ve called him Old Man ever since I was a little girl. He took a bullet for me, and there was blood. So much blood.” I scrub at my pants with my hand, trying to get rid of some of the stain.

Some of the guilt.

“I’m sorry.”

The click of a latch sounds, and suddenly, Cassidy is standing in front of me. “Give us some privacy, please.”

When they’re gone, he kneels before me and takes the tea from my hands, then sets it down on the table. “Are you hurt, love?”

I meet his eyes. Despite his soft tone, Cassidy vibrates with barely suppressed fury.

“I’m not hurt,” I answer. “I don’t know where Meredith is, Cassidy.”

“Tell me what happened.”

I hear the unspoken words beneath the spoken ones. *Tell me who I need to kill.*

“They turned on me,” I start, then break off with a bitter laugh. “Although I guess it isn’t really turning if they never gave me their allegiance in the first place, is it?”

His hand tightens on mine. “Evie...”

“No, I get it. I’m the interloper here. I have been since the beginning. They killed Old Man. Tadgh, too, I think. They would’ve killed me if it weren’t for him. His mother...I don’t know if she got away—“ My voice breaks.

“How many did you kill?”

My lips hitch up. “At least two.”

“You can’t stay here past the night. I’m pretty sure half of my crew wouldn’t mind seeing you dead, too.”



I close my eyes, exhale slowly, and open them. “They wanted me to kill you. I wasn’t going to do it.”

Leaning forward, he kisses me, his lips soft against mine. “They want me to kill you, too. But I don’t think I can.”

The pieces fall into place. This is why Cassidy has held himself distant, why he went weeks barely speaking to me. To get close would be to allow himself the possibility of lowering the fence between us, removing that last barrier that would enable him to kill me if it proved necessary.

Rising to his feet, he pulls me to stand. “Come on. The airports aren’t safe right now—between the two families, they have people everywhere. Let’s go to bed and figure out a plan for the morning. Maybe I can get you to the east coast and on a ferry to the mainland.”

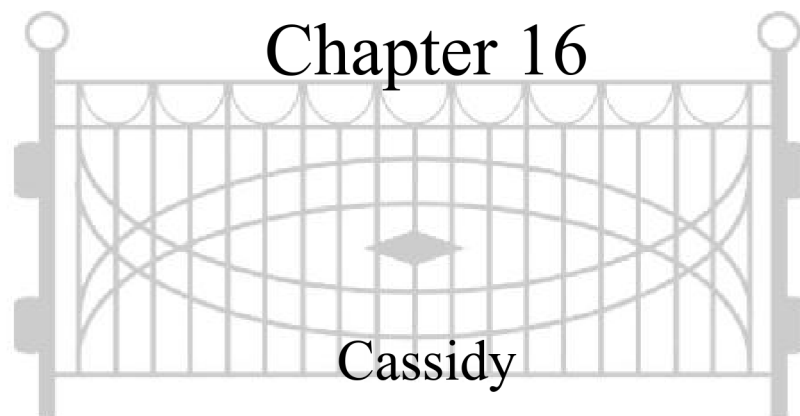
“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“I’m not a runner, Cassidy. I want my puppy, and I want my blood.”

He swipes the pad of his thumb tenderly against my lower lip.

“Then blood it shall be.”



---

SHE'S ASLEEP ON MY chest. Her smell is what wakes me. That, and the sound of the city outside the window. My fingers run along her bare shoulder, her skin soft to touch.

I like how she feels on top of me. We haven't taken time to do this, simply sleep together. Cuddle, skin pressed to skin.

Light streams in across her. It seems to catch in the dark brown hair that flows down her back. My cock continues to grow the longer I watch her. I'd love to lay her on her stomach and fuck her from behind as she sleeps.

I slowly move her off my chest and get out of the bed. Not this morning, I can't. I get dressed but continue to take in her sleeping frame. Evie and I being here feels strangely normal, despite the unfamiliarity of the room. Is this what normal couples do? Wake up in the morning in a medium-sized room?

I button my shirt and look out the window. Traffic has started already. I know it's early, even though I haven't checked my watch.

A large green trash truck has stopped outside the tavern. The bin men climb off their steps and gather up all the trash. I watch them for a moment and then return to getting dressed but pause at the rumble of words next door to my room. Mark and Derek are awake. I sit on the end of the bed and peek at a still sleeping Evie before slipping on my socks and shoes.

Even as nice as this is, being alone here with Evie and waking up like regular people, this isn't my world.

I get off the bed as Evie groans and rolls slightly. The light blanket shifts lower, and my cock stirs. She stretches, catlike, and there is a grace to her movements that I love about her.

She blinks lazily and rubs her eyes before she notices me. She doesn't startle or smile. She's watching, always ready, and that is something to be admired about a woman in her particular situation, on the run from the enemy, weaponless, naked in bed.

"Good morning," I say.

She sits up, pulling the blanket with her to cover her breasts. "Is it?" she asks. "Did you learn anything about Meredith?"

She hasn't broken down over the Old Man or Tadgh's death. Maybe she simply hides her sadness well. I hate that she feels she needs to do that. Right now, she just seems...blank.

"Rob says they didn't find her body, so we're thinking she got away." I watch as relief creeps over her face and she visibly sags. Her bottom lip trembles, and I turn aside. "I'll let you get dressed and meet you downstairs."

She nods.

I should leave, but I linger. I want to hug her. I don't think I've ever hugged a woman who wasn't my mother or my sister in my entire damned life.

"Okay," she says as I continue to stand there.

I leave the room and stop by my brothers' door, but I can't hear anything. They must have headed downstairs. The creaky steps would normally annoy me, but last night, I was happy to discover they creaked loudly. It might give us a few seconds' warning if we were attacked. Thankfully, we weren't.

Derek and Mark are seated in one of the booths. We are the only people here, and I join them.

"I was starving," Derek says as he shoves half a rasher of bacon in his mouth. My brothers are well built. It always surprises me how much they eat, although I guess it shouldn't. I was like that once—insatiable.

A waitress arrives with a smile and a menu that I accept but don't bother looking at.

"Where's Evie?" Mark asks, humor in his voice.

I give him a glare in response. The idea of me shacking up with a woman seems to entertain them highly. I've had my fair share of women, but one night was always enough for me. I don't know how, but I guess they can tell Evie's different.

Mark ignores the glare and stretches, arching his back. "That fucking bed did me in."

Derek sneers. “No duck feathers for you.”

Mark straightens and glares at Derek. “It was more like wooden slats that some little, fat fucker must have broken while jumping on.”

“My bed was fine,” Derek says while stuffing half a sausage into his mouth.

As entertaining as my brothers are, I’m not in the mood. I raise two fingers, and the waitress arrives back, but I pause as Evie enters the room. She’s wearing jeans and a cream sweater, but fuck me, even in casual clothes she’s stunning. She walks straight to our table, reaches across, and takes a sausage from Derek’s plate. I’m ready for my brother to explode, but instead, he smiles. “You built up an appetite.”

I give him a death stare, but Evie snorts a laugh.

“What can I get you?” the waitress asks.

“A minute, please. Evie hasn’t seen the menu yet.”

Evie waves a hand. “I’ll have a full Irish breakfast with coffee.”

The waitress smiles. “Perfect,” she says before looking at me.

“Just a coffee.”

She gathers up the menu and leaves.

“So what’s the plan?” Evie asks. Her hands move restlessly over the tabletop, drawing subconscious designs in the wood grain. I put my hand over hers, stilling the movement. She’s

really taking everything almost too well, a fact that makes me uneasy.

“I think we need to keep moving. I’ve a few places in mind,” I state. “But I’m a bit worried about Cillian. He seems the most outspoken, and my men have great respect for him.”

“They respect you more, brother,” Mark says, sitting back in the booth. His gaze shows me respect. “We tailed him the other day like you asked, and he caught us like I think you knew he would. He was all bark and no bite, though.”

Mark is right, but no matter what, I won’t be telling Cillian or any of the others our location. “The only people we share the location with are Rob and Rowan; that’s it. No one else.”

My brothers nod, and when I meet Evie’s gaze, she gives a curt nod, too; her focus is on the waitress, who’s approaching with her breakfast. She sets it down and leaves, and Evie tucks in.

I can’t stop watching her mouth work around the food. I never imagined watching anyone eat would be so sexy.

Derek clears his throat, and when I look at my brother, he’s fighting not to laugh. “So...where are you going?” Derek asks.

I shake my head in annoyance. “Tonight, Evie and I will stay at a motel. You and Mark go back home and get a sense of the situation.”

Derek is no longer smiling. “Okay, we can do that,” he says, looking at Mark.

Mark agrees.

“While you finish your breakfast, I’ll grab our stuff,” I say to Evie before getting up and heading upstairs.

I’m quick to pack. Running feels wrong. It goes against my nature, but staying and dying isn’t a good look.

I meet Derek on the stairs. He’s packed himself and Mark up, too. I stop him before he makes his way back downstairs. He seems to know what I want to say before I mouth the words.

“We’ll be careful, Cass,” he says, tapping a fist against my chest. “Just take care of you and your girl.”

Evie is finished with her breakfast, and Mark is stretching in the booth opposite her, teasing her about something. They look up at our approach, grinning, and get up.

Outside, the sun is warm on my face, and it takes me a moment to focus fully. People bustle past us. Compared to the cool dimness and quiet of the tavern, it’s a big change.

When my eyes adjust, I point out my car to Evie. “Let’s take my car and leave yours here.”

The one-way street grows quiet, and I’m ready to step off the sidewalk when Derek stops me. “Take my car, and we’ll take yours. It will make it harder to track you.”

He’s right, and we exchange keys.

Derek leans into Evie, his hand curling around her neck, and points at his own car. “That beauty over there is mine.”

Evie smiles at Derek. “It’s nice. Thanks for doing this.”

“Only nice?” Derek seems outraged. “It’s vintage! A classic! Show it some love, love.”

Evie laughs, but when she looks at me, her smile dissolves, remembering why we’re doing all of this, perhaps. I lean in and kiss her softly, uncaring of my brothers’ eyes, and after a small, pained smile, she walks to Derek’s car.

Mark pops up behind me and smacks me on the back of the head. My anger spikes as I spin around. “What the fuck, Mark?”

“Just trying to knock some sense into you. You know you’re doing all of this for a girl, right?” Mark looks over at Evie. “Although I guess she is fucking hot and all.” When he looks back at me, he shuts the fuck up.

“Shut up, you idiot.” Derek cuffs his twin. “Ma had the same effect on Dad.” Derek is smiling, and I both love and hate the comparison.

“What the fuck is this? Let’s get all sobby and turn into a bunch of women.” I want them to stop.

“I just want to make sure you know what you are doing.” Mark is serious now.

“I’m glad Ma and Dad died together,” Derek says, but he’s frowning.

I look at Evie, who’s standing at the passenger door. I raise the keys and unlock the car. When it beeps, she glances back at me before climbing in.



“I don’t think they would have survived without each other. I think you and Evie might be like that.” Derek is so fucking serious, and the truth is, he’s probably right.

Evie and I just make sense.

I’d sooner die than admit it, though. What’s between Evie and me is just that—between us.

“Are you done?” I ask Derek and Mark.

They nod, and Derek rolls his eyes. “I know my words will sink in. You just aren’t ready to admit that I see everything.”

“You didn’t see the women you were making out with at Darragh’s party, or you would have run,” Mark sneers.

“Right, boys, I’d love to stay and chitchat, but you know, I’m running for my life.”

I grip both of them by the shoulders and squeeze, my way of telling them I appreciate them.

Derek is grinning as he runs across the road to my car. “I’ll be gentle with her,” he shouts as Mark climbs into the passenger seat.

Both of them are laughing as Derek gets into the driver’s seat. He glances at me and winks, but I’m already regretting giving him my car.

Waving at me through the window, he turns the key, *and the world explodes.*

A fireball shoots across the road, a shockwave sends me to the ground, instinctively lifting my arms to shield my face from

the blast. My ears ring, but I recognize alarms ringing, people screaming.

Above my car, the gutters on the building start to melt from the intense heat. I stagger out onto the road; dimly aware of glass exploding from a nearby shop front, shards scattered across the road like bits of ice.

*Cassidy.*

*Cass.*

My name sounds as though through water. A hand grabs at mine and has me looking away from the horror that's slowly sinking in.

*My car just exploded. My brothers were inside. Derek waved and then—*

I sink to my knees, then stumble up again.

*No. No, this isn't right.*

“We need to leave.” Evie stands beside me, tugging at my hand. Her voice, far away and garbled by the concussion, sounds panicked. “The police will be here soon.”

She tugs me, and I take another step closer to the car. The heat is so fucking intense that it's hard to stand this close. But I have to...I have to get to—

“Cassidy.” Evie's hand lashes across my cheek, at last gaining my attention. “Please!” she begs.

She's right; we need to leave. In a daze, I climb into Derek's car.

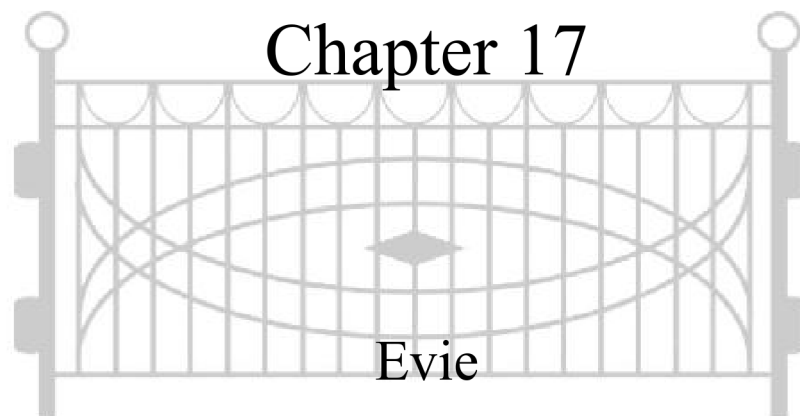
“The keys, Cassidy,” Evie says, patting my pockets in a panic. “Let me drive. You’re in no condition.” She finds them, but the noise of more sirens has me tightening my fingers around the keys before I stick them in the ignition. I look at Evie as I turn the key, and the engine hums to life. My hands shake with a tremor I can’t control, and I reluctantly slide from behind the wheel and into the passenger seat, giving control over to her.

I wonder if she’s thinking the exact same thing I’m thinking.

We should be dead.

Not Derek and Mark.

And not like our parents.



---

I DRIVE AIMLESSLY, UNKNOWNING where I'm headed or how to get there. It doesn't actually matter. The point is just to get us away from that scene. Away from the fire and the shrapnel and the deep, dark red that stains the pavement in places like viscous wine.

Cassidy slumps in the passenger seat, silent and brooding. His gaze is fixed on something outside the window, but I know he's not seeing anything. The road sounds beneath the tires, and the wind rushes past the windows, a gentle *whoosh* of white noise at variance with the violence in our hearts.

After a while, his voice cuts the quiet. "We need to find Rowan. She'll be in danger, too. I need to get her out of Ireland."

He sounds so flat. Unaffected. That's not the case, I know, but it bothers me. Reaching across the console with my left hand, I try to take his. "Cassidy..."

He jerks it away.

“Turn right at the next intersection.”

I put my hand back on the wheel and drive as he pulls out his phone and places a call. I’m not angry. My heart breaks for him.

We meet Rowan at the same abandoned church where Cassidy fucked me on the hood of my car. I remain in the car and watch them talk. I know when Cassidy breaks the news because Rowan starts screaming. Cassidy pulls her tightly against him, absorbing every blow she gives his chest with her fists until she runs out of steam and collapses in his arms.

He tucks her head beneath his chin as she wails and watches me with bleak eyes through the windshield, the visual reminding me of other losses I’d rather not remember.

After Rowan calms down, Cassidy leads her to the back seat and then shuts the door. He stands just outside the door, pulls out his phone, and starts texting.

My eyes meet Rowan’s in the rearview window. I expect condemnation, but there’s nothing but bitter, broken fury. She looks like Cassidy, except for that flaming hair and the sweetness in her eyes.

The twins looked like him, too.

“We’ll get the ones who did this, Rowan,” I say.

She nods, then presses trembling lips tightly together and turns her face to stare out the window.

Her pain reaches out to me, a kindred sensation that makes me want to reach back and enfold her in my arms. I felt the same

when the Valachis killed my mother, when they killed my brothers. I felt it when Old Man, more father to me than my biological one, died in front of me, and when Tadgh died getting me to safety just hours ago.

I have no one left.

No one but the man next to me, whose stoic expression unsettles me in a different way from how he normally manages to do so. There's a stillness there, a darkness that says wherever he's headed...he won't return from that place.

I guess I just need to decide if I want to go there with him.

It's really not such a difficult decision, though. I've been moving in that direction for weeks now, ever since he threw a knife at me at a carnival.

Cassidy flings open the door of the driver's seat, startling me. "Move," he says.

Hours earlier, I would have snarked at him. *Since you asked so nicely*. Now, I simply unbuckle my seat belt and slide out.

Our bodies brush against each other as I start to walk around the car. He stops me with a hand on my waist and presses me against the window. Leaning against me, he presses his forehead against mine before dropping a lingering kiss onto my lips.

"Sorry," he murmurs. "I need to drive now. I need...to be in control."

"It's fine." I press a kiss against his jaw. "I understand."

He moves to climb behind the wheel, and I continue walking around the car and get into the passenger seat.

“I have some friends who can help us get Rowan out of the country. We can’t go to an airport for the same reason you can’t go. We don’t know who’s friend or foe.” He slants a look in my direction, making it clear who he is speaking to. “But these people will help us.”

Things are different here, I realize. The ties are old in New York, but they aren’t like the ones here. History is rich and deep here in Ireland, rife with an opportunity for an alliance. The families don’t have to play an active role to be of assistance.

To be significant.

I want that for my own group in New York.

We drive for nearly an hour, the silence between us an invisible passenger in the small vehicle.

When Cassidy speaks, it’s unexpected. “The O’Hanlons killed my parents, you know.”

I stare at the dash, absorbing his accusation. It hangs in the air like a plume of cigarette smoke, bitter and unavoidable. I won’t apologize for the actions of people before my time, though. It’s the nature of our business, and unproductive.

“That was then,” I finally say. “We’re not them.”

He hums a tuneless agreement, and we lapse into silence again.

Something strikes me. “I’m no stranger to betrayal, Cassidy. If it makes you feel any better, I’m pretty sure it was my own brother who had my mother killed.” I feel, rather than see, his head turn so he can look at me, and I nod. “It took me a while to figure it out, and I’m still not a hundred percent certain. I can’t very well go to Angelus Valachi and ask him outright if it was his family who were responsible, or my own. Touchy subject, you know.”

“Hmm.”

“But I learned that Mother had cut Marcus off from managing any of our operations. He wasn’t welcome in the O’Hanlons, or the Papparados in Italy, or in New York. It would have been a blow. The thing was...when I came back from Ireland, he was still living it up like he was big man in charge. Like nothing was different. And he didn’t grieve the way Damon and I did.” I shrug. “So, I have my suspicions.”

“It sounds like they have merit.”

We fall quiet until we reach an inn in Cork. Rowan and I wait in the car while Cassidy gets a room, both of our gazes scouring the parking lot for anything untoward.

“I got us two rooms,” Cassidy murmurs when he returns, holding up two plastic key cards. I nod and take one, brushing past him as I look at the number scrawled on the bottom of the card’s cardboard folder.

“I’ll check it out.”



His hand darts out, stopping me with a firm grip on my upper arm, and hands me another key card. “You’ll be with me after you get her settled.” He swallows, meeting my gaze, and the uncertainty there takes me aback. “I want you to stay with me. Please.”

I nod, trying not to reveal how affected his unexpected emotion leaves me. Cassidy is never unsure of himself. Never demonstrative. “Of course. Just give me a few minutes to make sure the room is secure and Rowan is okay.”

The second-floor room is nondescript, more modern than most rooms, with a deadbolt and an additional locking mechanism that Rowan can swing into position over the door that will prevent entry. I close the curtains and show it to her. “Slide this into place after I leave. Don’t open the door to anyone but me or Cassidy.”

“I’m not an idiot.”

I look at her, sitting small and drawn into herself on the single bed. She clutches a small leather purse and a thick book in her lap. “I know you’re not. Are you okay, Rowan?”

“No. But I’ll get there. I’ll be fine.” She looks up, and a faint, unhappy smile tugs at her lips. “Go to him.”

Nodding, I let myself out, waiting until I hear the lock click into place behind me.

The second room is just beside Rowan’s. I let myself in and lock the door behind me—both locks. At first glance, Cassidy is nowhere to be seen, but then I hear the splash of water and

realize he's in the shower. Lifting my hands to the hem of my shirt, I begin to undress.

He turns when the cool draft of the bathroom door opening and closing alerts him to my presence. I see his body tense through the steamed-over glass that encloses the shower and step forward, sliding the glass open without speaking and pressing my body against his under the spray. I nuzzle into his chest, my tongue darting out to lick the water from a pec before my lips graze his flat male nipple in a tender kiss edged with teeth. He shudders at the feel, and his hands, slick with soap, lightly grip my jaw and tilt my face up to his.

"I have no one," he whispers, his voice raw with grief.

"Not true," I return. "You have Rowan. You have me."

He presses his cheek against my hair, lost in his own misery.

Cassidy O'Rourke and I are two halves of the same coin. I know his pain. I traveled this same awful journey not too long ago, losing two brothers on the same day. Afterward, it felt like it was me against the entire fucked-up world.

Coming here changed that. Despite the circumstances that brought us together, I know now that Cassidy would stop the world for me if he had the means to do so.

I have to make sure he understands that I will do the same for him.

Lowering myself to my knees, I trail my fingers around the globes of his ass and around to the front, where I take his cock in my hand. Grief is no deterrent to the impact our naked

proximity has on his body, and he's hard for me, ready for me. I squeeze upward from root to tip, relishing in his indrawn breath, and stare up at his face. "Look at me."

He looks at me.

"We share so much, Cassidy."

*Squeeze and twist.* Cassidy's lips part, but he makes no protest.

"Both our parents died violent deaths. We both lost siblings far too early."

*Pump and suck.* I open my mouth for him, and Cassidy forces his cock almost violently past my lips, hitting the soft place at the back of my throat. I lean the back of my head against the wall and give him a moment to fuck my face before pulling back and resuming control of the situation.

"Your enemies are my enemies, and my enemies are yours."

*Tug and squeeze.* I nuzzle his cock with my cheek, loving the feel of him—velvet-covered steel.

"Put me in your goddamned mouth, Evie, or so help me—"

"Patience. I'm almost there. We may not survive this, love."

His gaze softens as he stares down at me, seeing in my gaze what I haven't yet expressly put into words. With a gentle tug, he pulls me to my feet.

"And yet you're with me, Evie, aren't you." It's not a question.

I nod without hesitation. "I'm with you."

He kisses me, water from the shower mingling with the taste of his tongue against mine.

“And I am with you.” He rolls his forehead against mine, breathing me in, our mouths separated by millimeters. “I was always just some guy on the other side of the fence. That fucking fence. It’s not going up between us again, hear? You’re mine, and I’m yours.” He kisses me again, hard and hungry, our teeth clacking together in our need. “I’ll put a fucking bullet in anyone who tries to stop us.”

Any other words wither with his declaration. He lifts me against the wall, wrapping my legs around his waist, and pushes into me with a single smooth thrust.

I cry out at the invasion, jerking at the feel of the cold tiles as he presses my back against them.

He stills, his blue gaze catching on mine. “Did I hurt you?”

My heart squeezes at the torment there and I shake my head. “No. Never that. Use me, Cassidy. Fuck me—”

It’s all the permission he needs.

Gripping my hips and ass in both hands, he holds me firmly against the wall of the shower and begins to fuck me in earnest, slow, powerful thrusts of his cock that pierce me steadily with deliberate force and render me helpless.

*In.*

*Out.*

Helpless, but not a victim.

I revel in his fucking.

Everything narrows to that one point where our bodies are connected.

He leans back just enough so he can see his dick pumping almost lazily in and out of my pussy. I follow his gaze, watching as he pulls almost all the way out then plunges back in.

“Touch yourself,” he commands.

I obey, lifting my hands to slide over the sensitized tips of my breasts and then further down, over my mound to my exposed clit. He watches with a hot gaze as I strum my clit with two fingers, still thrusting steadily in and out beneath my hand.

Pressure builds at the dual sensations of his cock and my fingers, and I grab onto his shoulders and move restlessly against him, not content to wait for him but intent on chasing my own pleasure. I move faster and faster, perfectly in rhythm with his own increased pace.

My climax hits me, the aftershocks rippling through me and causing me to go rigid in Cassidy’s arms. He pulls me away from the wall and tight against his chest, one hand on my back and the other on my ass as I whimper and rock shamelessly against him.

“That’s it, love.” He kicks open the door to the shower and steps out. Dimly I’m aware of the shower still running as he carries me out of the bathroom and to the bed, but I’m too busy pulsing against him, squeezing out every last drop of my orgasm that I can, to worry about it.

He follows me down to the bed, spreading my legs wide and disengaging briefly before pushing back into me with a powerful, almost painful thrust that makes me bow up against him.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me, Evie?”

I thrash my head from side to side, another orgasm, incredibly, building. This one feels just out of reach, originating from somewhere deeper inside.

*No.*

*No, I have no idea.*

He pumps in and out of me, striving for his own release.

“I only know what you do to me,” I confess. I don’t know where I gain the courage to speak the words. All I know is that Cassidy O’Rourke leaves me feeling stripped bare in ways that have nothing to do with clothing or sex, and to not speak these truths would be to do us both a disservice. “It’s everything and not enough and too much all at once.”

Above me, the harsh planes of his face soften. His body stills. He bends down and brushes my mouth with his, then pulls me close and resumes thrusting, almost feverishly, into me. I clasp him to me, close my eyes, and let his body carry mine past the edge of pleasure, freefalling into an ecstasy I’ve never known until now.

He comes with a guttural roar, his fingers clutching my hair, seconds after I score his back with my second release.

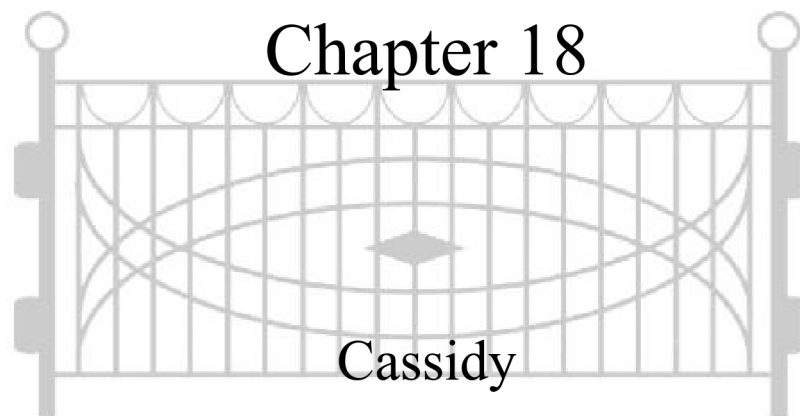
For long minutes, we lie locked in each other's arms, sweating but unwilling to let go.

He kisses my hair.

I taste his shoulder with my tongue.

Sometime later, he rises to turn the shower off, then returns to wrap himself around me once again.

Whatever the dawn brings, we're ready for it.



---

*TWO MAFIA LEADERS ENTER a bar ...it's the opening to either a joke or a bloodbath. My limbs have a lightness to them that makes my arms sway as I walk. My heels lift higher off the floor, bouncing almost like a boxer ready to take a strike.*

I take in the room as I enter, observing every patron who glances at me. I'm greeted with nods or interested stares that I ignore. Normally, I would play the part and smile and nod. But all that consumes me now is a deadness when I think for even one second of pleasing any of these people.

I slide into a booth in the corner of the bar. I don't even have to search for Evie. I'm drawn to her. She's perched on a stool at the opposite end of the bar, doodling on a napkin. She's always doodling, I've noticed. Just the sight of her drags a reluctant smile out of me.

We decided that we needed to sit separately to avoid drawing attention. I see the sense in it, but the longer we sit here like this the less I like it. I want...need...Evie close.



The waitress arrives with a false smile and a tilt of her neck that leaves it open to anyone. I wonder if she's involved with Cillian, if he likes to take her behind the bar into the stockroom after hours and fuck her according to his whim. If she's his woman.

I could grab her so easily and snap her fragile bones. I'm staring at her neck too long when her smile falters and her gaze darts around my face before settling on my hands.

Inhaling deeply, I calm myself.

“A whiskey.”

She rushes off, and when she is gone, Evie fills my sight again, centering me. Thoughts of killing subside, and I bring my fingers to my nose and inhale the sweet scent of her pussy. Evie isn't looking at me, but from the roll of her shoulders and the flash of the dimple in her cheek, she's aware I'm watching her.

My glass appears like magic in front of me, and the waitress moves away faster than before. My mother used to say when we got a shiver down our spines as kids that someone was walking across our graves. Or when our ears were burning that someone was having a great chat about us. I wonder what alarm bells went off in the waitress's head, what she saw in my eyes. Or was it instinct, a feeling telling her a killer was inches away from her?

“How can someone walk across my grave when I don't even have one?” Mark had asked.

I pick up the whiskey and bring it to my lips. The fumes from the alcohol don't completely free me from my brother's voice.

"Why are you such an idiot?" Derek sneered. "It's just an expression. We all end up in the ground."

I smile painfully around the glass before I down the full glass of whiskey.

"Maybe I'll get cremated, jackass." Mark barked back, receiving a smack on the back of the head from Mother for his sass.

We all continued eating breakfast to hide our laughter, while Mark scowled.

I raise my glass at the waitress. She's behind the bar. She swallows and nods before turning to the side to speak to a male co-worker. He glances at me, and I can't suppress the smile. I want him to question me. I want him to walk right the fuck over to my table so someone can clean up the glass I will smash with his face.

He says something back and continues serving customers. The waitress sulks and a minute later arrives back at my table with another whiskey, her head bent. I can only assume she must have asked him to take the drink to me, and he wisely said no.

Once she moves, I check for Evie again; she's sipping on a Guinness. I scan the pub for Cillian, but he hasn't arrived. I'm not sure he will. We have staked out this place for a few nights now, and he hasn't shown up yet.

It's his favorite spot. Cillian inherited the pub from his father, who inherited it from his father, and so on. All of the Walshes have gotten trashed and cheated on their wives in this very spot.

The fact that he isn't making an appearance is telling.

I bring the drink to my lips, the conversation with my family still pressing against my forehead.

*"Even if you were cremated, where do you think the ashes would end up?" Derek asked.*

*Mark tutted with pure irritation.*

*"Leave him alone." Rowan spoke up before rising with her bowl and placing it into the sink.*

*"The sky," Mark half-whispered.*

*Derek grinned. "Why don't you try that, Mark? Take a handful of clay and throw it into the wind."*

*I choked on a laugh before draining the milk from my cereal bowl. "You are both idiots," I said and rose.*

*Neither of them liked that and started toward me. I caught my mother's smile as I left the kitchen. She knew exactly what I was doing. I was the villain, allowing them to unite again.*

It was automatic for me.

But in the end, it didn't matter.

I drain the glass of whiskey, ready to tell Evie I'm calling it a night. I need to hurt someone, but just then, Cillian Walsh enters the establishment.

*At last.*

He props himself up at the bar, and the waitress quickly places a glass of what looks like vodka in front of him. He doesn't acknowledge anyone but picks up the glass and directs the bar staff to turn up the game that plays out across the screen. Kerry and Limerick are playing football, and already Kerry is hammering them.

I don't order another drink but hold my glass in my hand and occasionally bring it to my lips. Evie is out of Cillian's line of sight, nursing a second beer. Like me, she hasn't moved past a first refill.

Unlike Cillian. He likes his drink; every time his glass is empty, it's refilled within seconds. He might not touch it for ten or fifteen minutes, but then it disappears. He watches the television and mutters under his breath in response to some bad plays Kerry makes.

Kerry has a reputation for winning, so even people who aren't from there still support them. Nothing like jumping from a sinking ship.

My father taught us a captain goes down with its crew, so I'd be fucked. It's just embedded in me to stay on the ship. It's funny how no one approaches him; in fact, I could say people are leaving a wide berth around him. His reputation as a loner seems to be known here.

The game ends, and I glance at Evie, who meets my eye but doesn't hold it. A drink arrives at her table, and she gives a pleasant smile to the male bartender and says something to

him. When he leaves, Evie is still smiling, and I release my hold on the glass so it doesn't shatter in my hand. Her wide grin tells me I'm not hiding my jealousy well, but I don't give two fucks.

I soon understand when a drink arrives at my table. She ordered me a whiskey. I raise the glass, take a sip, and nod at her. She goes back to ignoring me, and I go back to watching Cillian, who makes several trips to the bathroom, only to return and continue drinking.

Around one a.m., Cillian heads to the door. I rise, and so does Evie. Cillian's steps are balanced and unfaltering. From behind, he doesn't look like a man who's been drinking for hours. The drink has had hardly any effect on him.

Evie and I are shoulder to shoulder and right behind him when he turns and glances at us. His gaze is steady, but they widen in recognition before he spins and races out the door. I grin at Evie.

This is going to be fun.

Cillian might look okay, but all that vodka has to affect his judgment. When we step outside, a drizzle has started. Cillian is trying to get his car door open but glances over his shoulder before giving up and darting away from the car.

"It's best you stop right now," I shout to Cillian, my voice like a gunshot.

He springs into step and sprints away at a speed that surprises me.

“Fuck,” I mumble before racing after him.

He pivots, and at the last second, I nearly smash into a couple. The man grabs his woman and roars at me. I glare at him, and he shuts his gob before I run after Cillian down an alleyway.

He’s toppled garbage cans to try to slow us down. All he’s doing is slowing himself down as I leap across each obstacle. In the dim light, I don’t see the large empty steel milk trolley that he pulls from the wall and into my path. I spin, and it misses my shoulder, but the action costs me a few seconds.

I glance behind me, seeing Evie on my heels.

Her eyes widen, latching on to something beyond me. Turning, I see Cillian pulling a gun and aiming.

“Cassidy!” Evie’s scream of pure panic has us both hitting the ground as bullets whizz about our heads. I rise when they stop and duck again as Cillian fires another shot.

I’m up even as Evie shouts at me to get back down, running full speed down the alley. Cillian must see the murder in my gaze, as he gives up firing and focuses on running.

A chain-link fence blocks the end of the alleyway, and I pick up speed with thoughts of beating him with his own gun. He grips the fence, rattling it as he begins to climb, and I’m nearly on it when he scales it and lands on his feet on the other side. I smash myself against the wall as he fires again.

I look back for Evie, who has copied me. I give her a nod, and we both push off the wall and scale the fence easily.

We land gently on our feet and give chase into the park. We gain ground quickly, and Cillian fires, but nothing happens; he's empty. He throws the gun at me, and it connects with my shoulder, but the pain is like a red flag to a bull, and I'm rushing him before smashing into his back. We both hit the ground hard.

I'm on top of Cillian, and like a man, he at least keeps his mouth shut. He doesn't beg as I grip his shirt collar.

"Evie, hand me his gun." I'm breathless from chasing him. I keep him steady with one hand as I hold out the other, which is filled with cold steel. "Never!" I smash the handle of the gun into his cheek, and he screams. "Run!" I hit his shoulder this time. "From me!" I smash the gun into his temple, and he stops screaming. I'm still trying to catch my breath, and when I look up, a dog walker has stopped and is looking at me.

"You want a go?" I ask him with a grin.

He wisely pulls the dog's lead and continues to make his way through the park. "Who fucking walks a dog at this hour?" I say to Evie.

"Weird people. Like, who chases a man and beats him with his own gun at this hour?"

I grin at Evie. "I do."

She smirks back. "I'll go get the car."

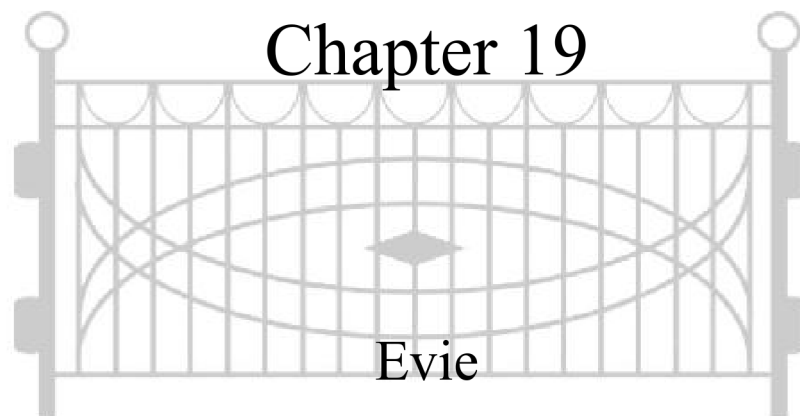
As she leaves, I'm tempted to keep beating Cillian, but I need him alive. He's out cold, his face smudged with clay with grass sticking to his cheek.

I give him one final hit when I really shouldn't. He doesn't even groan. I dig an elbow into his gut as I lean on him while waiting for Evie to return. She does minutes later with the car.

It takes a lot of effort for both of us to haul his heavy ass into the trunk. Once his body hits the floor, I reach for the lid and slam the trunk shut. Evie grins at me. We are having far too much fun. I reach across and grab her arm, dragging her toward me. I place my lips on hers and kiss her with a hunger we need to douse and fast.

We have things to do. Men to question. People to kill.





---

THE OPERATOR’S CAB OF the massive crawler crane is disproportionately tiny. I stand beside it with a hand on my hip, my bottom lip caught between my teeth. “Are you sure about this? Not the general idea, but me operating this thing.”

The crane extends upward from the sleeping construction site, countless yards into the blackness of the night sky, its hook dangling some distance away over a deep basement, where the crew laid concrete down for a planned high-rise construction.

One hand on my ass, Cassidy boosts me up and into the cab. “You can do it.”

“There are at least ten, twelve different gears here...”

“And we’re only using this one and this one. Here, let me show you. Put these on first.”

He hands me a pair of noise-canceling headphones and adjusts a pair over his own ears. Apparently, the crane is supposed to get *loud*.

Cassidy sits in the seat of the cab, me leaning over his shoulder, and gives me a crash course in how to operate it. His forearms flex on the gears, the veins rippling across the surface of his skin beneath a light dusting of dark hair, and I have to force myself to pay attention. It isn't fair that he's so attractive. The evening's events have spiked my libido.

"Evie. You get all that?"

My gaze travels from his arms to his face, which is staring up at me with a tiny bit of irritation. Leaning down, I plant a hard kiss on his mouth. "That and more, darling."

He grins at me. "If I were a betting man, I'd say you were enjoying yourself."

I lick my lips. "You should buy a lotto ticket without delay."

I am enjoying myself. Immensely. I should feel sick about that because tied to that hook with his own headphones and mic is Cillian Walsh. Cassidy works at the wires of the cranes, twisting them this way and that so Cillian swings wildly on his tether. I watch his hands push and pull at the gears in fascination.

Oh, the things those hands can do.

At that moment, Cillian awakes from his nap. He snuffles about at first, unsure of what is happening and why it must feel as though all the blood in his body is in his head.

"I bet his head is throbbing," I murmur to Cassidy.

"Least of his worries, love."

Cillian begins to scream. The sound resonates through his microphone and into our headphones.

“Aww.” I glance at Cassidy. “He sounds scared.” I pull a face.

He snorts. “You are vicious. Let me get this going again, and we can play.” The engine roars back to life, and Cillian renews his screaming. “Now, now, Cillian, let’s not embarrass ourselves, shall we?”

“Who’s there? Who’s that?”

“Don’t recognize me? You did earlier when I was chasing you. I’m just the brother of the lads you killed, that’s all.”

“What? I did no such—”

The cables dip and spin, sending Cillian twirling in a macabre dance that edges his head frighteningly close to the edges of the concrete walls. Cillian squeals.

“Not the answer I was looking for. Love? Want to have a go at it?”

“Oh, definitely.” I settle myself on Cassidy’s lap and place my palm over the rounded gearshift. He cups his hand over mine and pulls back, and together, we push forward, dropping Cillian approximately ten feet. The wires run out a bit faster than I intend, and I pull the gear back sharply, jerking him upward.

His shriek of terror through my headphones is music.

Cassidy tuts. “Cillian, my man. That’s not what I need from you.”

“What do you want? I’ll give it to you. I’ll give you anything. Just get me down, I swear—”

Cassidy sighs and looks at me. “What do you think, love?”

I nod and drop Cillian again.

Cillian screams. “I said I’ll talk!”

We wait until his screams subside. Cassidy slides a hand beneath my shirt and strokes my back, sending pleasurable shivers along my spine. I’m depraved, but I’m okay with that. There’s something oddly comforting about the night. The closed confines of the cab, the dark, abandoned construction site, Cassidy’s fingers on my skin. The screaming, tortured man is incidental. He deserves everything he has coming to him.

“Okay, then,” Cassidy says. “I want to know who on the O’Rourke crew had anything to do with the car bombing a few days ago.”

“No one! We wouldn’t do anything like that, boss!”

“Don’t lie to me.”

I lift him in slow, jerky increments, then drop him again. Cillian wails.

“I swear the O’Rourkes didn’t do it. It was all that Evie O’Hanlon’s doing.”

I gasp in mock outrage. “Darling, do you hear what he is saying about me?”

Behind me, Cassidy's chest shakes with suppressed laughter. "You mean the Evie O'Hanlon sitting on my lap with her hand on the gearshift?" He reaches forward, covers my hand, and sends him falling once again.

Cillian moans.

I wince. "That one's gonna hurt."

"I mean, it was the O'Hanlons," Cillian says.

"I'm getting tired of fucking around, Cillian. Tell me the names of those in the O'Rourke clan who want me out of power."

"No one, boss. I swear it."

"Give 'em to me now, or I'm going to drop you, and I'm not going to stop."

*Silence.*

"Five. Four. Three—"

"Okay, okay! It was Burke. And Foley."

"And?"

"I swear no official plans were ever made—"

"And?"

"It was Burke and Foley who suggested the thing."

"The *thing* being the bomb that took my brothers' lives."

"They weren't supposed to die—not yet, anyway. It was meant for you. Then Rowan disappeared, and you disappeared, and everything went to shit—"

*Not yet, anyway.* Meaning there had been a plan in place to take out the twins, as well. They weren't solely collateral damage. I glance back at Cassidy and find his features cold and expressionless. They could be carved from rock.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Cillian. I appreciate your honesty."

"Are you going to get me off this thing now? Pull me back up, please, boss—"

"Oh, no."

"No? But I thought..."

"No, you're going to die."

"But I..."

His voice trails off as perhaps he recalls what, exactly, he did. Not content with that, though, Cassidy prompts him. "You what, Cillian?"

The voice in our ears is quiet.

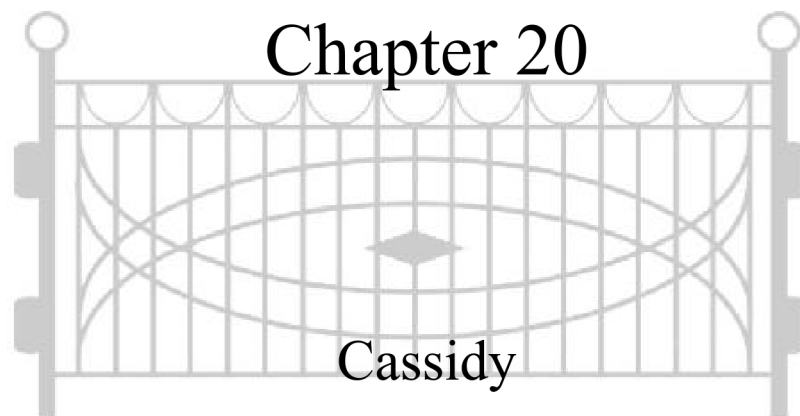
"Ohh...that's right. You fucking killed my brothers."

Cillian whimpers, and Cassidy cuts him off without mercy. "Whether you lit the fuse or punched the trigger or set the bomb beneath the car, you are every bit as responsible as Burke and Foley. You failed to come to me, failed to warn me, failed on every level." Cassidy wraps his hand around my throat and strokes lightly, lovingly. "My love? Would you like to do this part, or shall I?"

"It would be my honor."

Drawing in a deep breath, I let it out and then press the mechanism that releases the hook. With a scream that echoes, Cillian plummets the remainder of the distance to the concrete pad of the basement's midnight depths.

There, the screaming stops.



---

*DEREK AND MARK.*

*Mark and Derek.*

I squeeze my fists into the sockets of my eyes. My parents would be rolling in their graves. I should have kept them at arm's length, out of the business, like I always had. They were too young yet. I should never have gotten them involved.

I pace the emerald-green carpet of the motel, my bare feet curling into the tightly-wound fibers with each step. I'm still yearning for blood, another kill. How many bodies will have to pile up before I start to feel like there isn't a storm raging inside me?

I reach the far wall and throw a few jabs, my knuckles never making contact. The power I put behind each strike should have my fist smashing through the wall, but I pull back at the last second. That's how I taught myself control. To give it all and take it away in a split second. I pace back toward the far



wall, adorned with a cheap rendition of Irish countryside in a gold frame lit by garish overhanging lights.

The image of Mark and Derek getting into my car again plays out like an old film reel, over and over again. I smack my fists into my thighs a few times, and the scene fades, but I feel the fury rise again inside me.

I spin and pause.

Evie steps out of the bathroom. She's towel drying her hair, and her gaze takes me in, like she can see the burn along my thighs, the ache in my jaw from clenching it, the pain in my chest, and so much deeper to all the scars that crisscross what I call a soul. I don't know what the fuck it really is, but it's an ache inside me that expands rapidly with rage or dissipates with a tender touch.

Like now, when Evie walks toward me and reaches up, placing her hand on my cheek. The ball of anger bursts, flaming into nothing, and I lean into her touch, closing my eyes. A new ache starts burning in my veins for her. Her scent tantalizes me, and I open my eyes. She still cups my cheek.

"You're not alone, Cassidy." She drops the towel and cups my other cheek. "You never were. No fence divides us now."

I had no idea she would see me so clearly. The fence that separated us as kids held more power than mere steel deserved. It was a reminder that I was a warrior, and she was a princess. She wasn't made for the likes of me.

But for some reason, she's chosen me.

I reach up to cover her hands with mine and feel the tensile strength beneath her soft skin. It strikes me then: despite the protective cage she was housed in all her life, Evie O'Hanlon's a *warrior* princess. I just never saw it before. I lean my forehead against hers.

"Talk to me," she begs.

I want to, but I'm not ready yet. I straighten. "I've heard from my family. Burke and Foley have gathered that Cillian's fate awaits them. They are begging for forgiveness." My smile is twisted and without humor. Like that would ever happen.

Evie sighs and releases my face. I don't understand her reaction.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

She sits on one of the single beds. "You asked me once if I was still human. If there was more to me than a monster."

I kneel down at her feet, but she continues to speak. The gleam of determination in her gaze keeps me quiet.

"We are like fire and gasoline," she whispers. "Explosive."

"That's not a bad thing. I mean, it's pretty fucking hot."

She gives a short laugh, and her blue eyes sparkle before they dim again with worry.

"We can't burn so hot that we destroy ourselves, Cassidy. That's all I'm saying." Evie bites her lip, hesitating.

I grip her knee. "What exactly are you saying?" My voice sounds like gravel to my ears.

“We can accomplish great things. I think we are actually pretty perfect together.” She tilts her head, and I tap her knee, waiting for the other shoe to drop. “Killing Burke and Foley won’t bring your brothers back; you know that, right?” Her gaze is tender. I snort a laugh in disbelief, but Evie looks at her hands. Her brows drag together. “You can choose.”

I shake my head and stand, releasing her knee with the movement. “No, I don’t have a fucking choice. They slaughtered my brothers.”

Anger propels me away from Evie.

She rises and nods. “I’m just saying, killing them won’t bring your brothers back.”

I move in close, wanting for some reason to intimidate her. Make her understand. She flinches slightly but holds her ground. “No, but it will give me the satisfaction of watching those bastards die. I want to watch the life bleed out of their eyes. I want to destroy them.”

“You don’t have to burn the world to ashes, Cassidy. Remember, we are still here.”

Her words freeze the blood in my veins. My heart races in a funny way. She isn’t a poetic type of girl, so what the fuck is this? Why is she looking at me like she wants more than blood and war and vengeance? Isn’t that what we’re made of?

*Blood.*

*War.*

*Vengeance.*

I run my hands across my face. “They were two gobshites.” My eyes burn, and I tilt my head back and stare at the hanging fixture, trying to fight back the pain that is consuming me. I’m shaking my head, and I want to smash something.

Evie gets up and walks toward me. She doesn’t touch me. “They were so lovely.” She smiles up at me with tears burning in her eyes.

I cup her face and drag her into my chest. “They were gobshites,” I say again and laugh through my pain, but it twists in my chest. “I shouldn’t have had them on the job.” I grip the back of Evie’s head and dip my nose into her hair. Inhaling her silences the beast in me, and I stay like that for a while.

“I’ll think about it,” I finally answer. Thinking about not killing Foley and Burke isn’t what I mean, but not burning the world to ashes is something I’ll give thought to for Evie.

“Good.”

The no-nonsense answer makes me smile. She’s breaking apart and acts like I agreed to get a puppy or paint the walls pink. I release Evie, and she nods.

“I do agree with you. I was being nice earlier, saying Mark and Derek were lovely. They were two jackasses.”

I burst out laughing, and it comes with a wave of pain. I nod.

“But I can see how they could grow on you,” she says.

*Like a fungus.*

That's what either of them would come back with. I swallow the words and nod, instead.

"So, we now know the attack on your brothers came from your side, but what about your parents? It was a similar attack, wasn't it?"

Evie's all business again, and I can work with that.

"I have my theories," I say.

"No one challenged you for your position?" Evie asks.

"No. There seemed to be no reason for it."

"So these theories...care to share?" Evie asks.

"I mean, the only family we ever had beef with over territory was the O'Hanlons." I have no idea why I don't just say Evie's family. It's like I don't like the association.

"My mother did come to mind. If it came from the O'Hanlons, it would have been arranged by my mother. She was in charge of things until she was killed around six years ago." Evie states it like a fact, and as I gaze into her eyes, it reminds me they're the same deep blue as her mother's. It's almost like looking into the eyes of my parents' murderer.

Logic tells me that she isn't responsible. That she isn't her mother. My fingers tighten into fists, and I try to unclench them because, for the first time in my life, I don't want to hurt someone. I don't want to hurt Evie.

She seems unaware of my turmoil as she paces. "But why?" she questions. "Why would she have ordered such a hit? She

was in Italy; she only barely cared about things here from what I understand.”

She glances at me, and I notice the stiffness of her shoulders. I wonder what I look like standing in front of her, fighting with myself not to hurt her. She walks to me quickly, like there is some sort of urgency, and grabs my fists. My fingers uncurl, and she links hers in mine.

“We will figure this out,” she promises and pulls my hand to her lips. Lips that I know will quench the rage inside, the rage that has quieted but hasn’t entirely left.

I don’t want to hurt her.

I smash my lips hard against hers, startling a cry from her, but Evie matches me in seconds. Her teeth graze my lip, and I want her to break the fucking skin like it might let some of this darkness out of me. Her hand sinks into my trousers easily, and she grips my cock. I’m frozen for a moment, a mix of pleasure and uncertainty, and she tightens her hold.

“We will figure it all out,” she says again, with anger this time.

It’s like she knows she needs to reel me in. I spin her around, and her hand leaves my cock. She falls heavily on the bed. Standing over her, I spread her legs.

“Fine, but I don’t work well on an empty stomach,” I state and yank the band of her jeans, pulling her a few inches off the bed. The button pops with the pressure, and she tugs the zipper down as I yank the jeans off her long legs.

“Dessert,” I state before I bend down and push my nose to her sweet wet pussy and inhale deeply a few times.

“Are you just going to smell it?” Evie asks, but lust coats each word, weighing them down.

“No, I’m going to eat it,” I say, raising my head slightly, and her eyes widen before I do just that.

I suck her clit into my mouth, and Evie gasps. She bucks under me, her orgasm not far away, but I want to taste her. I release her clit and plunge my tongue as deeply into her pussy as I can. I press my face against her, gorging myself on her and she rocks restlessly against me before I come up for air, her wetness smeared across my face.

“You taste fucking divine.”

She reaches out, grips my shoulder, and drags my mouth to hers. Her kiss is wide and messy, heedless that my mouth has just been in her cunt. Her tongue makes fast movements inside my mouth, and I’m aching to fuck her.

I break the kiss and push down my own trousers before kicking them off. Grabbing her hips, I yank her closer and place my cock at her opening. Evie accepts my cock as I drive it into her warm pussy. We both call out, and I plow her just the way I want to. I fuck her until she comes all over my cock, and I don’t stop until I spill my seed inside her.

Afterward, I collapse on her chest, both of us still gasping for breath. Her hair smells like strawberries and is still damp from the shower.

Her hands move in slow, circular motions across my back. It's soothing, but it also runs deeper. As I lie on top of Evie, I know I would die to keep her safe. I lean up on my elbows so I can look down at her. My cock is still in her pussy, and for the first time I'm in no rush to pull out and get cleaned up.

I want to stay where I am.

"I don't want to destroy this," I say, pushing the hair away from her temple.

Her cheeks are flushed, and she's still breathing heavily. "Then don't," she answers.

"I won't kill Foley and Burke."

Evie holds her breath for a moment, and I think she's as shocked as I am.

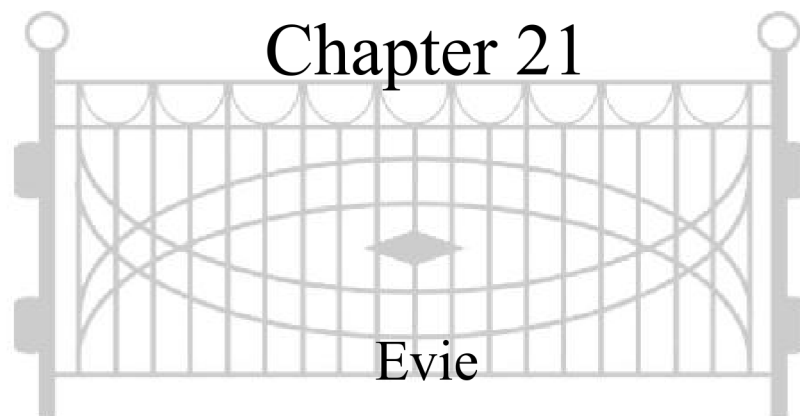
I won't kill them because she asked me not to, because she's right. If I start killing, I won't be able to stop, and I can't hurt her.

"As long as they fall in line," I add. The war between us and the O'Hanlons will kill them, not me.

Evie nods. "So what's next?"

"It's time to smoke some O'Hanlons out of their holes."





---

THE MANSE HAS BEEN abandoned. I kick at a rock in the driveway and glare up at the brick house. I guess I shouldn't be surprised to find it empty. Part of me expected my traitorous captains to take over the estate, but the other part of me—the more rational side—knew they wouldn't dare hang around after starting a war in my home.

No, they'll be running now.

Cassidy stands next to his car, talking to his men. Foley and Burke are there, two men who have been serving since Cassidy's parents ran things. I can't tell them apart. They both have dark hair, pale eyes, and stout middles. The only difference is that one of them is a half foot taller than the other. I can't remember which one that is, but I don't suppose it makes much difference.

Taking a deep breath, I force myself toward the entrance of the manse, stopping when I reach the door. It hangs open on its

hinges, as if someone thrust it open and was in too much of a hurry to pull it closed behind them.

I think that someone was Tadgh, trying to get me out.

The thought makes me nauseous. I put my palms on either side of the door, bending my head to the ground and sucking in great mouthfuls of air. Cassidy looks up, catches sight of me, and closes the distance between us in a few long strides.

“Do you need me to come in with you?”

“I’ll be all right. I just need a moment alone.”

Taking my face in both his hands, he studies me intently for a moment. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

He’s talking about the bodies. They haven’t been removed yet. I nod, pressing my lips firmly together.

Seemingly satisfied with what he reads in my eyes, he drops a light kiss on my forehead and pushes me forward over the threshold, pressing a folded square of cloth into my hand. “Take your moment, love. I’ll be here when you need me.”

I enter the house, hesitating on the threshold. It stinks in here, and the cloth Cassidy gave me makes sense. I shake it out and press it over my mouth and nose, breathing shallowly before continuing to move forward.

Tadgh’s body is the first thing I see in the foyer. My heart gives a hard pang, and I pause, looking for something to cover him with. I knew there was a little chance of him having survived, but when I hadn’t seen his body in the driveway, I had dared to hope...but I saw him take those shots, one right

after another, each one making his body jerk as he shoved me out toward the car.

He must've come back in the house to check on his mother. Cassidy said his men hadn't found her body. Where had she gone? This was her home as much as it was mine. More so, really.

She hasn't been seen since that night. I have to assume that she's dead.

I find a throw blanket in the sitting room. After bringing it back, I drape it over Tadgh's still form. He at least looked like he had lived long enough to close his eyes before dying, or maybe someone had closed them for him in a gesture of respect.

I'm surprised when a tear drips down on the blanket. I hadn't known him long. Still, there had been a mutual respect between us. He was willing to die for me.

I did not deserve that, and he would never know what it meant to me.

Stepping past him, I make my way toward the inner part of the first floor, a knot forming in my stomach to accompany the pain in my chest. My breath deepens as I mentally prepare myself for what I'm about to see.

It all happened so fast the other night; it was a dizzying whirl of sound and chaos.

I remember, though.

I remember it as if it happened in slow motion.

Old Man lies in the dining room, sprawled at the foot of the chair I had been seated in. Judging by the dried blood sprayed across from him, he took at least one other person with him.

My lips twist.

My so-called captains took their mens' bodies with them but left my only two champions here to rot.

Deep beneath the sorrow, a flicker of anger flutters in my chest. Slowly, I walk over to John and kneel, studying his lined face.

Death makes him look different. I've seen dead bodies before, obviously. Ones I've killed and ones at funerals, sleeping in their silk-lined caskets. I hadn't realized, though, until right this moment, how much personality and soul makes a person look a certain way.

Without his spirit behind his features, lighting every nuance of expression, he seems like one of those wax statues. The ones meant to represent a real person but never quite manage to hit the mark. Unlike his son, John's eyes are open. He stares sightlessly out toward one of the front windows.

I follow his unseeing gaze, and realization is a quick, brutal stab. He would have been watching me speed away that night.

He made sure I was gone before he let himself die. I don't deserve that. I look around at the room, stained with blood, reeking of rotting flesh and betrayal.

I don't deserve any of this.

Out in the yard, the sound of quiet conversation drifts in on a breeze that lifts the drapes. A single tear drops on Old Man's face, followed swiftly by another. All at once, the dam breaks, and I'm sobbing. Open, heaving, gasping wails that burn my throat and make my chest ache. Leaning forward, I clutch Old Man's body, wishing there was some way to push life back into him.

I pushed him away so many times in his life, but he was a persistent old cuss. He never once rejected or abandoned me. He taught me instead. Nourished my curious spirit and fed my soul.

"Thank you," I whisper. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. I'm so sorry, Old Man. I'm so sorry they did this to you, but I promise you, I'll survive, and I'll make them pay. I—"

I break off, unable to continue. I continue in my head, though.

I will find everyone who did this.

I will make them pay.

After a while, I stand up and wipe my eyes. I turn to leave and walk into the hard body of a man.

*Cassidy.*

"I told you to stay out." I collapse into him, and his arms come around me. They're steady and warm and comforting, and I'm glad he didn't listen to me.

"No fences," he says.

I nod against his chest. "No fences."



I needed to get out of that oppressive environment, away from the scent of dried blood and death. Behind the house, I walk toward the stables, the house at my back. From the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Cassidy's men as they step out of the rear door, Tadgh's rug-wrapped body cradled between them. Old Man lies on the flagstone pavers already, the sun warming his cold flesh.

Cassidy is talking to one of them as I pass. "—and let's just cut out the blood-stained parts of the carpet for now and then replace the whole thing later." He pauses, his gaze following me with concern. "Suit you, love?"

I shrug and tip my chin, all the affirmation he needs. I don't care if it never gets fixed. Maybe I need that reminder of what was sacrificed here, present each time I return to this place.

My step falters.

*If I ever come back.*

My reasons for coming here suddenly seem foolish. What the hell did I think I was doing? Trying to make myself stronger in New York by building on bonds my family had all but forgotten over the years? There was no way something like that was ever going to work out. No way any of the O'Hanlon men would ever willingly subjugate themselves to a mere woman.

“To hell with them, then.”

As I walk past the old stable, the litter of puppies runs out, all wagging tails scampering hindquarters overhead with their tired momma coming more slowly behind. The runt I was nursing, the same one Meredith had been watching in the house the day of the attack, straggles just behind them, a bit separate but still a part of the group.

My head jerks up, and I stare at the barn’s entrance.

*Meredith?*

Could it be possible? I lower myself to my knees and let the pups attack me, let their sheer, unmitigated joy wash over me in whines and yips and tiny wriggling bodies.

“Look at you all,” I croon. “You’re all getting so big and beautiful.”

Rising to my feet, I enter the stable, casting my gaze around. I don’t see her, but I feel her. She’s here, somewhere. Terrified, no doubt. Grieving.

“Meredith.” I keep my voice low. “It’s okay, love.”

There’s no response.

I fix the dogs’ water and food buckets. They’re fine without them—dogs are natural scavengers—but I feel better knowing they are taken care of. I’ll have to arrange with Cassidy for someone to come by on a regular basis to make sure they’re cared for or maybe even take them to a different location.

“I just need to know that you’re okay. We can take you to the O’Rourkes. There’s nothing left here.”

Nothing, except the gentlest whisper of hay against the stone foundation.

“They’re taking care of the house. You never have to step foot back in there if you don’t want to. They’re taking care of John, too. Tadgh.” I swallow past the lump in my throat. “They’ll see that they have a proper burial.”

Meredith slides out from one of the stalls then, a fragile-looking wisp of the woman she was a few days past. Her eyes are haunted. Bits of hay stand up in her hair.

“They’ll be buried on O’Hanlon land,” she says.

“Yes. They’ll have the finest of honors.”

“But not those others.” Her voice is hard.

“Those others can rot where they fall when we’re done with them,” I assure her.

She nods and glances around the stable, then takes a shuffling step in my direction. “I think I’d like to go with you, wherever you end up going.”

“That’ll likely be New York.”

She gives another nod, this one decisive. “That’ll do.” Coming abreast of me, she takes my arm. “Do you think I could get a spot of whiskey?”

I want to scream. I want to cry. “I think you could get an entire bottle if that’s what you want. Come with me, Meredith.”



The mother dog looks at us with longing eyes as we pass by on our way out of the stable. She wants bacon, but all we have for her today is a scratch behind the ears. I'll make sure she's taken care of, though.

Outside the stable, Cassidy and his crew are waiting, looking singularly unsurprised to see Meredith with me. They must have heard our conversation.

Cassidy kneels beside the group of puppies, running his hands with rough affection over their silky coats. "These guys need looking after," he says. "I'll have one of my men keep an eye on them while we're putting the house back to rights, and then we'll see about finding a caretaker for everything."

I release my breath in a soft sigh. "Thank you. That would be helpful."

"No worries, love." He looks at Meredith and nods his head solemnly. "My regrets for your losses, ma'am. I hope you'll accept my offer of hospitality?"

Meredith wipes a rogue tear that traces its way down her withered cheek. "I would be pleased to, O'Rourke."

Cassidy turns back to me. "Do you have any plans for us, love? Anything you want us to do?"

I look up from his hands on the puppies and glance from him to the other men. Their faces are expectant. They're watching me...much like the momma dog watched me when she wanted her bacon, with a curious mix of anticipation and wary affection.

And Cassidy...he's letting me call the shots, I realize. I don't know what kind of conversation he had to have had with his crew for this to happen, but everyone is silent. Waiting.

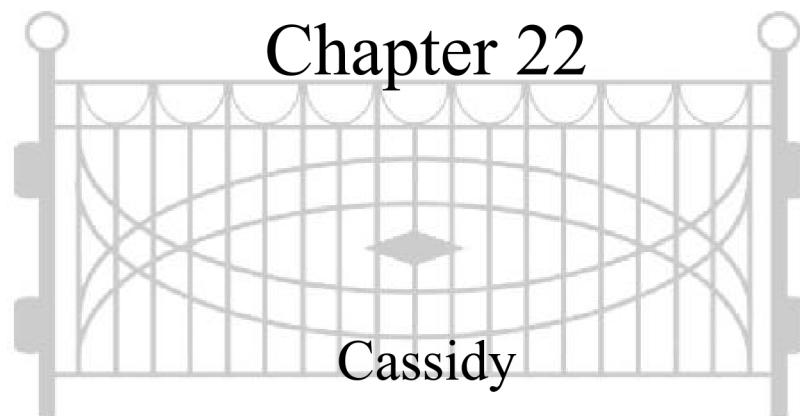
He understands that while I need his support—his men, his ideas, his hands on these puppies—I also need to be the one making the decisions right now. It's the only semblance of control I'll have out of this entire fucked-up mess.

The way he understands me...it breaks my heart and sews it back together, all in one brutal, beautiful slice of the blade.

I stand straighter and look at the men around me. *Our men*, if I understand what Cassidy isn't saying aloud. I look at Meredith, who is old, but unbroken.

Then I take a deep breath.

“We need a bottle of whiskey. And then I need to know everything there is to know about the men who did this.”



---

“TAKE YOUR TIME.” MY snide tone belies my words.

Ian tightens his fingers on the black permanent marker. His glasses sit on the bridge of his nose as he glares at me.

We’ve never gotten on, Ian and I. He’s an Englishman. We stand on opposite sides of a border that his people carved into the Irish landscape, ripping our country apart. It’s hard not to see him as a representation for what all his people have done.

The English and the Irish are at peace nowadays, but old habits, old ways of thinking die hard.

My father often reminded me that Ian was just a man, one who had no hand in the war and one who was a genius when it came to numbers and logic. He was a behind-the-desk kind of man who never got his hands dirty.

Typical fucking English. They make snowballs and get someone else to throw them.

“I will, Cassidy.”

His twang rubs me the wrong way. It's bad enough knowing he's from what used to be enemy territory but another to hear it in his accent. His grandfather fled England after getting into debt with the mob of London and landed on our shores. My father showed mercy by not gutting him. He saw a smart man, one who could work for us and oversee our logistics, just like Ian does now.

Ian goes back to his work and pauses when he has the entire hierarchy of the O'Hanlons sprawled across the whiteboard.

"So, what are your thoughts?" Evie asks, showing far more restraint. I'm wondering if she carries the same hatred for the English that I do. Likely not. She's too American, too far removed from her Irish roots. I look back at Ian, at his stomach straining against the buttons of the white cotton shirt.

"The O'Hanlons are in a far more vulnerable position than they realize. They want to cut the O'Rourkes out of the dock deal, but they fail to see the far-reaching implications of such a move."

Hearing those words doesn't ignite the level of rage I would normally feel at someone trying to double-cross me. I already know them for traitors. This just gives me an even greater drive to tear them apart.

"The fact they want the docks so much puts them in the right place to have the *Gardai* take them down and not the O'Rourkes."

I bristle at this. "We have rules, Ian."

“You also have a war on your hands, Cassidy. How you win it isn’t as important as if you win it. You have their men in the right place at the right time, with cargo that could take them off the streets for a long time.”

Evie looks at her computer, where her New York captains listen in.

“If the O’Hanlons get caught, would that not lead the *Gardaí* to the O’Rourkes?” one of them says.

The way the Yank says *Gardaí* isn’t lost on me. Once again, I’m surrounded by fuckers who tried to take us Irish down. The war for control of New York was battled out between the Italians and the Irish, and they devastated us.

I look at Ian for the answer.

“There isn’t enough evidence for Interpol or the *Gardaí* to come after the O’Rourkes.” Ian pushes the glasses back up his nose. “Until they have concrete evidence, it’s hearsay.”

We all glance back at the laptop that Evie is focused on.

“I’m not sure about getting the police involved,” the Italian man presses, pissing me off.

“I wouldn’t get them involved, either,” I state. All eyes land on me in confusion.

Ian takes a step toward me, and I hold up a finger for him to stay right where he is. He thinks I’m disagreeing with him. I might not like the bloodline that pumps through his veins, but I do trust his advice.

“So you disagree with your own man?” The Italian smirks.

“No. We don’t have police here. That’s English. We have *Gardaí*. So, I don’t know what you’re doing over in New York, but it’s obviously not your homework,” I say.

His features darken, but I’m not done. “Leaving your queen here to fend for herself. That, to me...” I shake my head.

“Cassidy,” Evie warns me, and I know I could push harder, but for her, I won’t.

“We are keeping everything running smoothly here for Evie.”

I study my knuckles, letting him know I don’t give a rat’s ass.

He must not like the dismissal, as he gets lippy again. “I wouldn’t involve the *Gardaí*, then, as a man settles his own business. That’s our code.”

I want to drag him through the fucking screen, but I know the code he is referring to. What would my father do? “I happen to agree with you,” I murmur.

“What is it that you propose instead?” Ian asks.

“The cartel is dangerous, more dangerous than we’ve given them credit for, even though they are an ocean away,” I say.

“We need to give the cartel a reason to no longer want to deal with the O’Hanlons.”

Evie gives a little jolt. “Clever.”

I’m looking at Ian now, waiting for him, and after a few seconds, he nods his head. Is that pride I see in his eyes?

I look back at Evie’s computer. “Are we in agreement?” I ask.

The Italian nods several times. “We are.”

Mumbles of agreement float around the table. We know what we have to do.



“YOU LOOK TOO GOOD,” I whisper to Evie.

Her eyes smile at me. She has her mouth covered with a scarf, like most workers out this morning. It’s freezing, and we are trying to blend in with the dock workers.

“You want me to keep it for tonight?” Evie whispers back.

My body becomes alive with the thoughts of having her again.

“Yes.”

A few of my crew are ready, and I face the docks.

“Remember, blend in.” I fix my scarf to make sure it’s covering my mouth. I don’t want to be recognized. We walk to the other men. The woolly hat I wear is pulled close to my eyes. I rub my gloved hands together.

“It’s Baltic,” one of the lads says beside me.

I grunt in answer.

Today, we have a simple enough job. The O’Hanlons pay a large portion of the money gained through the selling of the drugs to the cartel. So, if the cargo is destroyed, then the O’Hanlons will still have to pay full whack to the cartel,

placing them in debt. And if they don't pay, the cartel will hunt them down.

One of my crew will light the cargo on fire while the rest of us spread out and make sure no trouble is going his way. When the manager sends us off to do our jobs, I keep my head down and follow the men into the cargo ship. The inspector is here to check the cargo. So we are moving some of the cattle feed out onto the deck to be offloaded by crane and into containers. This is to make it all look legit. And the heavy bags are just cattle feed.

We move slowly, none of us rushing and calling attention to ourselves. I carry a bag with one of the other workers, the weight no joke on our backs.

We step back out into the harsh Irish morning, the wind blowing its vendetta against us. That's how it feels, anyway, when its sharp whip hits any skin that's not covered.

I've been at this for over an hour. Most of the bags have been placed on the crane's bucket and into large containers.

Evie is with the cleaning crew; she flings a pocket of hot water across the far deck. Steam rises, and she must sense me looking as she looks up and nods. That means our man is on the move.

*Good.*

I wait for the panic to hit. For cries to ring out for men to abandon ship or to get the fire hoses, which have been disconnected. Neither happens.



There is a bit of a racket, though, as one of my crew members is dragged onto the deck.

*Fuck.* He got caught.

Talk that I can't hear has me trying to inch closer. One of the men beside me lights up a smoke. "I don't know what that idiot was thinking, trying to burn the cargo."

I grunt, feigning surprise without words.

"Good job we moved all the good stuff off the ship," he continues. I look at him, and he winks. "We weren't taking any chances with the inspector."

I try to hide my surprise. We hadn't foreseen this. But it meant we could still make this work.

"Can I get a smoke?" I ask.

He hands me one and his lighter.

"Shit. Damn wind." Acting as though the wind is preventing me from lighting the cigarette, I slowly back away into the crowd and make my way to Evie. I stop beside her before walking off the ship; she follows me onto the docks.

"The cargo is down here," I say.

Her gaze holds the same level of surprise as mine did. I glance back at the ship. Court is still being held, and it's a perfect distraction.

"I'll get the stuff," Evie says.

I turn my back on the ship and slowly pull down my face covering to allow myself to light the cigarette. Smoke billows

into the air, and I'm hoping if anyone is watching me, I look like I've just gone for a quiet smoke. My father used to smoke only on his own. Most men like the feel of the cigarette while they chat. For my father, it was his time to think. His alone time. The smell of it now makes me smile. As a child, that smell gave me peace. As a man, it made me wonder what ideas my father was coming up with.

I have the cigarette half-smoked when Evie arrives back, the two glass bottles hidden under her jacket.

She hands me the bottle, and I offer her the cigarette. She shakes her head, so I dump it on the ground and stamp it out before covering my face again.

I take the lighter out of my pocket and light both rags.

Evie glances over her shoulder and curses.

I turn as we are rushed by some of the O'Hanlons. Evie manages to throw her bottles into the cargo. It ignites, setting the feed bags ablaze in moments.

I'm not so lucky. A body collides with me, and my bottle hits the pavement and smashes; the broken bottle rolls, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

I turn to the guy who pushed me; he doesn't look so sure anymore. I grin. "Now, you've pissed me off."

I swing for his face, but he dodges. He doesn't move far enough left, though. As my fist collides with his shoulder, he falls to the ground.

I don't give him a second to recover. My heavy boot connects with his stomach. He lifts off the ground before slamming back down and curling into a fetal position.

I turn as another O'Hanlon dances closer to me. I run both my hands through my hair. He takes the movement as his time to strike, predictably. I move quickly, bringing both my fists into the side of his head. Blood spurts from his mouth. His fall seems slow, and when he hits the ground, I notice we have attracted far more attention. A circle is around us, and Evie has pulled down her face mask. Her fists are at the ready, but no one dares to touch her.

The guy I kicked in the stomach groans and starts to rise. An alarm goes off at the dock, and it draws me to the bottle that's still burning not far from me. I ignore the men and dive for the bottle. The heat scorches my hands, but I fling it into the air, and it joins Evie's on the cargo.

Evie's scream has panic tearing through me, and I spin to see the man who was on the ground, his beefy hand wrapped around Evie's hair.

I race to him with a cry of pure rage. He releases her hair as I take him to the ground. I'm on top of him and grab his head, slamming it into the concrete. Each smash is satisfying; warmth seeps around my fingers, the crowd is wild, *and I can't stop*. He touched Evie. My thumbs dig into his eyes, and he roars and bucks under me, but I won't stop until he's dead.

The silence is what alerts me.

I look up into the barrel of the gun.

“Get the fuck off my brother,” he guy with the gun barks. My fingers still rest on the man’s eyes, and he shifts beneath me, but I can’t move. He can’t be allowed to live.

“Now, fucker,” he roars, and I understand the look in his eyes. He *will* pull the trigger.

A shift in the air sends the hairs rising on the back of my neck.

*Whoosh.*

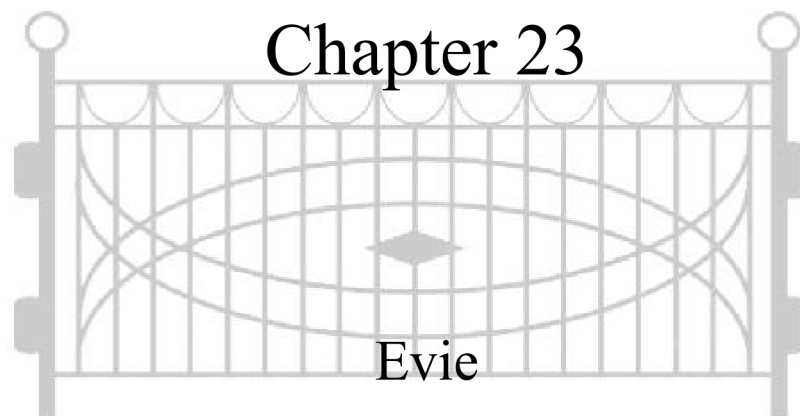
A knife embeds itself in the man’s neck. His expression mirrors my own disbelief as he staggers sideways and collapses to the ground. The gun slides from his grip as he tries to stop the blood that pours from his neck. When I look up, Evie is there. Of course, she is the knife thrower.

My men arrive and push through the crowd. Sirens blare in the distance, and I get off the man and pick up the gun.

“We have to leave, now,” Evie shouts.

With the gun in my hand, I empty the rounds without blinking into the man who touched Evie.

Only then do I leave with Evie and my crew. Our job here is done.



---

THERE ARE CANDLES EVERYWHERE—FAT, squatty candles lining the stairs, sitting in the windowsills, spread over the surface of every table. Their soft illumination lends a romantic glow to an otherwise ordinary space, making the large rambling home Cassidy was raised in seem special.

Magical, even.

It's important that this evening be special.

This is the night I finish winning over his captains and secure their loyalty.

It's the night Cassidy establishes me as his Queen.

In the pretty guest bedroom of the O'Rourke manse, I stand before a Queen Anne style freestanding mirror and eye myself critically from all angles. Pup lies in the middle of the bed with its head on its paws, watching me watch myself.

My body in the black strapless bra and panties is thin—thinner than it was when I arrived in Ireland. I frown, placing a hand

over the slight curve of my belly. I can't remember the last time I ate, come to think of it.

Things like food tend to diminish in importance when you're dealing with betrayal and murder.

Moving to the bed, I begin to sort through the pile of clothing tossed there.

Cassidy's men fetched my things, including more pretty high-end clothing Cassidy stole from the store for me, from the O'Hanlon manse. The pile of clothes on the bed makes the move seem more final, as though I've given up on my home. I haven't, though. I won't. Not ever. As much as I'd like to be there, I know I'm safer surrounded by Cassidy's army.

God. How did it even get to this point? I'm boss of two mafia families—the O'Hanlons and the Papparados—and here I am, stuck needing someone else's army.

Although my captains in New York seem to be heeding Cassidy's pointed words from earlier, they're making their way to Ireland now. It'll just take a little while for them to arrive.

I finally find something perfect for the evening—a simple little black dress that hugs my body in all the right places and has a slit in the side up to my hip. I pull it on and add some jewelry—nothing too flashy, but a hint of icy bling at the ears and throat.

Tonight, according to Cassidy, is for celebration. We managed to destroy the cargo. It served its purpose, pissing off the cartel

as expected. They contacted Cassidy and told him to arrange a hit on a few of the key players in the O'Hanlon crew—and that they would be sending their own people in to assist. Within the week, we'll have both the cartel and my New York people here to help me restore my seat.

We just have to be patient, a fact that grates, given the ever-present need for revenge that pulses low in my gut. It's there when I go to sleep at night, there when I wake in the morning. It sits next to me at every meal, begging to be unleashed.

*Kill them, the need whispers. Kill them all.*

I give my hair a final flick with the hairbrush and then place it down with a soft click against the dresser. Lifting my chin, I cross to the door and make my way to the staircase.

The sounds of conversation, music, and the clink of glassware rise from the first floor, growing clearer as I near the stairs. At the foot of the staircase, Meredith stands next to a table bearing a champagne fountain. Her eyes lift to mine and a small, proud smile lifts her lips. I place my hand over my heart, telling her without words that I love her, this second mother. She raises her chin slightly in acknowledgment, and I take the first step.

As I begin my descent, those closest begin to turn and then to stop and stare. One raises a glass. Another begins to applaud. Others follow suit.

My cheeks heat, but I continue serenely down, my gaze searching for Cassidy in the crush of people. For once in my life, I actually feel like what I am: a Mafia princess.

Or maybe even a Queen.

The ghosts of my heritage rise up to embrace me, welcoming me into their folds of death and danger, corruption and conspiracy. They're all around, in every clap of the hand, every shout of praise.

I smile and look for Cassidy.

I'm strong on my own, but I need him. I can do this by myself, navigate this world, be this person...but I don't want to do it by myself. I want Cassidy.

He stays distant, though, giving me this time to shine on my own.

Most of the people here are strangers, save for Ian, Cassidy, Rowan, and a few others. I try my best to charm and rule them equally until finally I find Cassidy leaning against a back wall. He lifts his glass in a lazy salute, and just like that, every anxious thought and feeling flickers away. I tip my chin at him, then turn back to the person in front of me, offering them a polite smile.

Whispers circulate in tandem with my circuit of the crowd.

*"They're together, didn't you hear?"*

*"Cowardly betrayal..."*

*"He took care of the problem—"*

Afterward, I feel his eyes tracking me as I move about the room. We may be drowning in an ocean of people, but Cassidy's gaze, warm and steady and unblinking, keeps me on



course. We move around the room and each other, ever close but never meeting, a pair of satellites blinking in the night sky.

I watch him over the rim of my glass of champagne—the champagne he had brought in especially for me—and arousal pools low in my belly. I know that I need to focus on ensuring everyone sees me as both a leader and as a person, but I can't help wishing we could go somewhere and be alone.

“Ma’am?” I turn at the light touch of one of his captains on my elbow. “I was wondering if you could tell me more about what happened at the docks.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

The man standing before me is young, and a flush of embarrassment stains his cheekbones. “I heard you killed a man with just the throw of a knife and saved The O’Rourke.”

“Oh...” It’s my turn to blush. “It was just a reaction. Anyone would’ve done the same.”

“Don’t let her fool you.” A hand settles, warm and firm, against the skin bared by the low back of my dress, and Cassidy leans forward to meet the startled gaze of the young man. “She threw that knife from at least ten yards away, and it was deadly accurate, landing in the center of the gunman’s throat. If she hadn’t had such skill, I might not be here right now.”

A ripple of approval goes up, and his hand presses lightly on my back. “I’m stealing you,” Cassidy murmurs, drawing me away without so much as a word of apology to his men. He

presses a kiss to the skin just above my ear, pulling me toward the door that opens into his office.

“What’s going on...?” My voice trails away as we enter, and I see his three most high-ranked captains grouped around his desk.

Cassidy closes the door behind us and moves to lean against the desk, pulling me close beside him. “We’ve received word that your former O’Hanlon captains have called a meeting over what happened at the docks.”

My gaze narrows, my suspicious nature immediately rousing itself. “What? How did you get this intelligence? And you can’t possibly mean—“

He takes hold of my upper arms, willing me to understand. To agree. “The information is good, don’t worry about that. The important thing is that this gives us an opportunity to end this war for good.”

“What do you mean? Do you mean to go tonight? Attack during the meeting?”

A chorus of agreement goes up, but I press my lips tightly together. “I understand you want blood. I do, too, believe me. But Cassidy...” He waits, and I hate to disagree with him publicly, but I can’t let this go unchallenged. “It’s too rash. We don’t do things without planning them out carefully. We can’t afford to. Reinforcements will be here soon. Hours. Days at the most. Surely, we can be patient?”

He shakes his head and turns to his captains. “The time for patience has passed.” He raises a glass, and the men follow suit. Reluctantly, I lift my champagne. “To war,” he finishes and drains the glass.

“To war,” I whisper.

*I don't like this.*

My lack of excitement is obvious. His eyes lock on mine, and he sets his glass down on the desk with a sharp click. I catch my breath at the sudden lust leaping off him in palpable waves.

“Clear out. Send everyone home whom we don't need, and start making preparations. We'll join you shortly.” The command is soft, but everyone hastens to obey, the last man out closing the door behind him.

As the sounds of people leaving filter in through the closed door, Cassidy walks around the desk and seats himself in his heavy wooden chair. “Come here.”

I join him on the other side of the desk, standing in the scant space he affords me between his spread legs and the bulk of the table. His hands go to my hip bones, gliding across the silky material of my dress as they travel first up my rib cage and then down, past my hips and further, until he catches the hem in his fingers.

With painstaking slowness, he begins to inch it up the length of my thighs, baring me inch by inch to his hungry gaze.

“You don’t agree with me,” he murmurs. The dress clears my hips and rises to my waist. He bends forward, buries his face between my legs, and inhales sharply.

“No, I don’t. But we don’t have time for this, Cassidy. If we’re attacking tonight, there are things that need to be done.”

He nips my clit through my panties, sending a shockwave of pleasure through me. “Right now, the only thing I need is this pussy.”

With no further preliminary, he whips the dress over my head and hitches me up and onto the desk, then uses one big palm to push me flat against it. Something digs into my back, and I jerk against it, only to have him lift me up and sweep the surface of the desk clean before laying me back down. A flick of his fingers at the front closure and the strapless bra is gone, followed swiftly by the panties as he shimmies them down my legs, over my heels, and into the pocket of his pants.

“I’m going to need those back,” I murmur, moving restlessly against the desk as he stares down at me. His fingers dip between my legs, testing and teasing the slickness he finds there, and I moan, spreading my legs wider.

“Don’t bet on that.” His hands go to his fly. “You look so fucking hot spread across my desk. I’m going to need you back here when we have more time. But right now...” He pulls his cock free of his pants and gives it a rough stroke before sliding the head through my soaked folds. “Right now, I’m going to fuck you hard and fast. Are you in agreement with that, love?”

Without waiting on a response, he surges forward and into me. The movement makes me gasp and sends me sliding backward across the desk. Cassidy grabs my hips in both hands and yanks me back, anchoring me in place.

“I didn’t quite hear you,” he grunts, pulling almost all the way out before slamming back in.

I understand what this is. What he needs. He didn’t like that I disagreed with him publicly, and he needs this to reestablish his dominance, even though we’re partners.

And it’s fine. In this, at least, we are in perfect accord.

“Yes!” I pant through each powerful thrust, keenly aware of a sweet, coiling tension deep in my core, warning me that I’m close. “I’m in agreement, yes—“

Lifting my arms over my head, I hold on to the edge of the desk and give over completely as he pummels my body. Pleasure suffuses every sense, and my pussy begins to spasm around him, drawing him in deeper and trying desperately to hold him inside me with each stroke.

He doesn’t allow it. Over and over again, he pounds against me, relentless in his drive. He demands everything of me, complete capitulation, and with a keening moan, I give it to him.

I draw up tight as the release travels through me, making me shudder and tremble within his grasp. My inner walls quiver and contract around his cock, and suddenly, he’s right there with me. He gives one last, ruthless thrust and remains deep

within me as my pussy clamps down hard and spasms around him, greedily milking his cock as he empties his cum inside me. I savor his release as much as mine, my legs trembling around his hips as he grinds against me and then collapses over my body, moving his hands to bracket my face and hold me still for a deep, impossibly tender kiss.

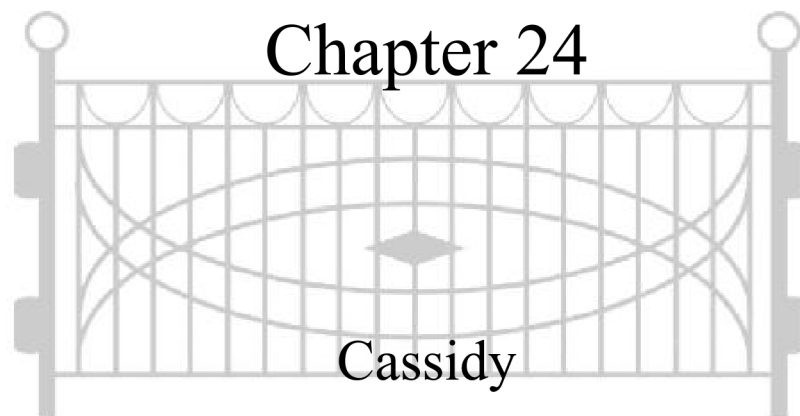
*I love you.*

The words are unspoken, and yet they hang between us, a palpable presence in the room as we stare at each other in the aftermath.

One of us has to go first.

Lifting my head, I press my forehead to his and then kiss his chin, his cheek, his jaw. “I love you, Cassidy O’Rourke. I may not agree, but I’d walk beside you into a burning building, knowing there’s no exit on the other side.” One more kiss, this one against his mouth. “I’d die for you.”

*I just hope you’ll never demand that of me.*



---

I CLICK BACK MY gun and check the barrel to make sure it's loaded. The sound of Evie and my men doing the same fills the space. I want Evie to stay in the car, but I know even mentioning the idea would be a very bad idea. "We end this tonight," I say instead, stuffing the gun into the band of my trousers.

Rob grins at me, his levity out of place. The rest wear serious expressions, but as one, they agree.

Evie approaches me and stops with only an inch between us. She reaches up and touches my neck with her fingers before placing her lips on the skin of my throat. It sets me on fire, and I close my eyes, everything around us disappearing. She's conversely a sedative and an upper, a drug that soothes even as it inflames me.

"You're sure about this?" Her words break the spell, and I open my eyes.

“This has to end. I won’t stand around and wait for them to attack first.” I touch her cheek, and her eyelids flutter closed for a brief moment before they open again. “We outnumber them. We have the element of surprise. We can end it tonight.”

Evie sighs and looks at the others. It’s clear she wants to continue the conversation, but I know she doesn’t want to question me in front of the others.

I press my palm heavier to her cheek, and she glances back at me with a nod. I release her and turn to the waiting men.

“There will be two teams. I will lead the first, and we will find the conference room where they’re meeting and storm it. Our goal is to surround them and make everyone surrender.”

Rob snorts. “Surrender? That won’t be likely.”

I ignore his smart-ass comment. He is right, but we have to try to end this with as little bloodshed as possible. But if it’s necessary, I’ll revel in spilling every last drop of their blood.

I glance at Evie. “The second team is going to be led by Evie. This team will stay on the warehouse floor and clear out any obstacles.” I run my gaze over everyone, waiting to hear any protests. I don’t hear one. They’ve accepted her, due in large part to her decisive action on the docks. “Let’s go.”

We walk slowly down the street, staying tight to the fence line. Nearly every second streetlight flickers like it’s trying to light up, but simply doesn’t have the strength for the task. The streetlights that are working cast small pools of light beneath them. We walk outside of the halos of light.



Under the hood of the night sky, we move quietly toward the warehouse that sits on the edge of Limerick. We aren't far from the docks. I can smell the river in the air. It's a smell I could identify anywhere, the scent a mix of cold steel and mist.

We pause, and I take a moment to take in the large warehouse. Half of it isn't standing, the roof half-stripped, and I remember several buildings in this area had asbestos in the roof tiles, which had to be removed with care. Here, there was no care given. Broken tiles fill a dumpster that's overflowed onto the ground.

The site has been abandoned, almost. I stare through a large fence that's decorated with signs warning trespassers to *STAY OUT: DANGER* at repeating intervals, but that hasn't stopped Evie's captains from parking their cars along the fence.

My informant said they were meeting here, and he was right. A dim light flickers through a second story window, one that would correspond to one of the old conference rooms.

The parking lot is littered with street lamps that once would have shined light down on its patrons' cars, but not one of them works, a detail which will work in our favor. I spot the main entrance and clock a side entrance, too. I turn to Evie.

"You have the bolt cutters," I whisper.

She nods. "See you on the other side." She smiles, but I can see an element of uncertainty in her blue eyes, darkened by the night. She turns, raises her hand in the air, and twirls two

fingers; her team falls in behind us. Rob moves to the fence line and, without being asked, starts to cut a hole in the fence.

“We go through the side entrance,” I say to my men. Everyone nods, and we slip through the large hole that Rob cut.

I take the lead and use the row of cars to move, half-hunched, across the darkened parking lot. I stop when the moon lights up shards of broken glass. I hold up a hand, turn, and point at the ground, telling my men to watch their footsteps. It takes a bit longer to cross the large lot, but we close in on the building. Along the side door is a steel bucket that’s filled with sand and cigarette butts, but someone gave up and started flinging them onto the ground. One of my men touches my shoulder, and I nod; he moves past me and touches some of the butts. He looks up and shakes his head, telling me they are cold and not recently smoked.

That doesn’t mean my informant is wrong. I point at the door and nod, giving him the cue to open it.

The door creaks open, and no light filters out. With two fingers, I point at the door, and my men file inside. Rob is the last and taps me on my shoulder. I move behind them and enter the warehouse, closing the door behind us.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. A ring of windows close to the top lets the moonlight filter in. It crisscrosses the expanse of the warehouse.

There isn’t any movement, only the dust mites that float in the light of the moon. Taped objects litter the floor; we need to move with caution. My gaze lands on the yellowed window

panels of what I believe to be the conference room. Gangplank stairs across the far wall lead up to it. The stairs are about ten yards to my right, and I step in front of my men and motion with my head toward it.

Rob, being Rob, steps in front of me as I withdraw my gun, and I follow him. We reach the stairs, and I pause. I hear the sound of another door opening. I move my gun in the direction of the noise, but I don't see anything. It's either Evie's group coming in or we have company.

If it was Evie, she wouldn't be so loud, and that door wasn't quiet. I stay still for a moment, but I can't see or hear anything now.

I touch Rob's shoulder; he glances at me, and I jut out my chin toward the gangplank. It's made of rusted metal, and climbing onto it seems like it would be too loud.

We have no other options. Gingerly, one by one, we begin to move across it.

We're fine at first. Halfway through, the metal starts to scream. I cringe and stop sharply at the first loud creak, everyone coming to a halt behind me.

*Too fucking loud.*

I glare behind me and glance beneath us at the tarped objects on the floor.

*Jesus and Mary, but it's a long way down.* On the other side of the warehouse, I see Evie and her team, creeping silently

forward. Holding my breath, I give the signal and we begin to inch forward once again.

Once again, the chains that support the gangplank start to squeak and sway from our combined weight.

The noise has me pausing again while gritting my teeth. We are almost at the conference door. I don't want to stop. There's a difference in how the gangway feels beneath my feet—maybe it's fanciful of me, but it feels anticipatory. Sensate. Alive.

Sweat breaks out on my forehead, and I want nothing so much as to get to the other side, suddenly. I grip the metal and, with a foot, reach across to the next steel rod. I look back to check on Rob and the others following behind me, my awareness of the pressure the frame is under rising with the movement.

“Do you feel that?” I whisper to Rob.

He nods. “It's like—“

The metal bends and a loud groan sounds, drowning out his response.

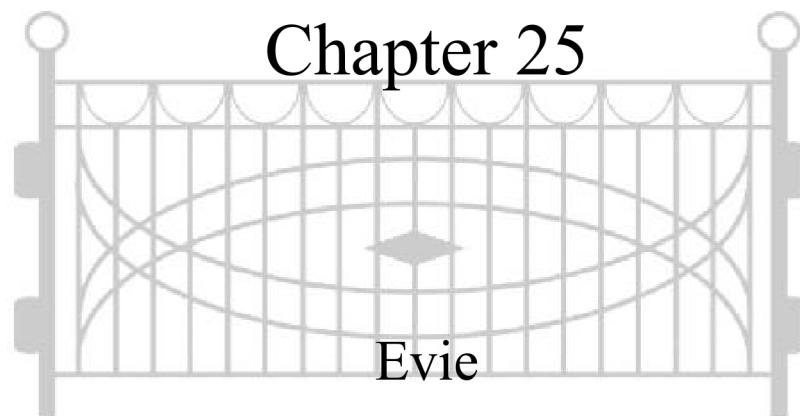
One of my men yells as he crashes to the ground below. The frame isn't done; it groans again, and I hold on tight as some of the chains break free and two more men tumble to the ground. The screams from one of them tell me he's seriously hurt, but I need him to shut the fuck up. No one runs out of the conference room, but there's no way in hell they couldn't have heard us.

Something isn't right. If someone were here, they would be responding to the noise. With that in mind, I swing on the chain in my grip and jump to the final bit of stable platform before crashing through the conference door.

I roll and rise with my gun in hand.

Light streams across empty leather seats.

Gunfire rings out behind me.



---

A FITFUL BREEZE RUFFLES my hair as we make our way stealthily across the parking lot toward the dockside warehouse where the O’Hanlons are supposedly meeting. It’s just me and a few of Cassidy’s men. Cassidy leads a second team, which will approach from the side entrance, ensuring both the element of surprise and no one gets out.

Our entrance isn’t even padlocked; it’s just a door with a normal locked doorknob. Nondescript, giving no hint of the corruption it conceals.

We came prepared for padlocks. Cassidy’s man puts aside his bolt cutters and retrieves a lockpicking kit from his pockets. I cast my glance around the parking lot as he works, striving for patience. My nerves are strung taut.

“Hey,” one of the captains whispers, gaining my attention.

“You all right?”

“Fine. We just need to hurry. I don’t like being out here in the open like this.”

“It’s a new lock,” the man says. “Old door, but new lock. They’re not meant to be easily picked.”

“Just hurry.” I return to watching the lot.

It’s mostly empty, except for a few vehicles here and there. One bothers me—a truck with an extended cargo area parked not too far away.

“Go check that truck.” I gesture to one of Cassidy’s men.

He does so without protest, returning before the lock is finally picked.

Inside, we walk along a short, narrow hallway before it opens up into a cavernous storage area. It’s filled with tarped objects. Crates, I assume, although they’re odd in size and shape—some rounded, some square, some considerably taller than others—and dropped at random intervals. We shimmy silently past them, guns raised and attention focused on an illuminated room on the second floor. That, according to Cassidy’s intel, is the conference room. That’s where they’ll all be.

Across the expanse of warehouse, I can see Cassidy’s team in progress. They’re already on the gangplank that stretches across the bottom floor and leads to the office area.

We’ll be even with his team in under a minute.

I motion with my head for my team to split, to spread out among the tarped objects and approach from different directions. I keep my gaze trained for the slightest movement other than that of our men but see nothing amiss.

There's a nagging worry, though, that won't leave me be. It's been with me ever since Cassidy concocted this plan to attack now without waiting. Everything feels just the slightest bit off, like when you're dreaming something very, very real, but you know it's a dream because there's something that rings slightly false.

That's the way I feel now. Something isn't right.

The sound of thunder ricochets off the walls of the warehouse, freezing us in place. While I watch in horror, a section of the gangplank Cassidy and his men are crossing plummets to the floor below, taking first one and then two more of Cassidy's men with it. One lands on one of the tarp-covered objects with a heavy, pained thud. The others fall all the way to the concrete floor, one letting loose an anguished scream.

I have only a second to take it in before a gunshot sounds, and the man standing behind me and to the right drops.

"Ambush!" I yell, realization dawning even as tarps erupt into the darkness of the warehouses and figures emerge. "It's an ambush!"

We're swiftly surrounded. O'Hanlon men—so many more from what I remember having—emerge from the shadows. They must have hired allies from somewhere, the bastards.

Gunfire blasts from automatic weapons, and I dive behind a crate, trying to force my brain to more rapidly process what is happening. Everyone is yelling. A quick peek around the corner of the crate reveals Cassidy on the gangplank, lowering himself to one of the tarped crates. He's exposed, and I cast



my gaze around, trying to cover him while he's in the open. An O'Hanlon takes aim, and without pausing to think, I shoot.

The O'Hanlon drops.

Clarity slips in, covering over the fog of surprise and fear. I can't panic. I can't just sit here. I have to act.

*That's it. Think. Cover. Shoot. Repeat.*

I jump to my feet and emerge from behind the crate, shutting off that part of myself that whispers, *These men are family*, and I fire. They ceased to be family when they betrayed me, killing Tadgh and Old Man.

Now, they're only enemies.

The moonlight streaming in through the narrow windows high in the walls is weak, providing scant illumination for me to identify who's who. I can only pray I don't accidentally take out any of Cassidy's men. I don't know them well, and it's not like any of us are wearing team colors.

*Think. Cover. Shoot. Repeat.*

I move from one tarped object to the next, firing in the open spaces as I make my way toward Cassidy. I can hear him yelling and see him moving closer in a pattern similar to mine.

Our goal is obvious. *Get to each other.*

Movement to my left has me spinning, just in time to witness a tarp descending over my head. It's thick and heavy, knocking my gun out of my hand and me to the ground. My mouth hits the floor, and I taste blood.

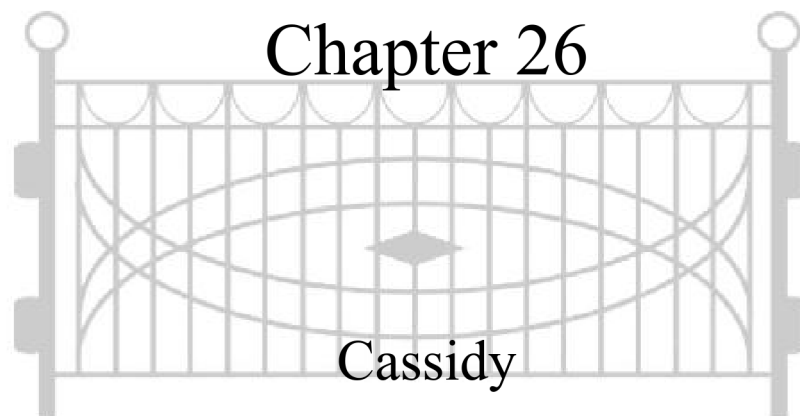
Yards away, Cassidy bellows, an angry, primal sound.

Hands descend on the tarp, rolling me more tightly into it. *He's not going to get to me...he won't get here in time—*

Two sets of hands. One at my feet, the other at my shoulders. I can't fight back, rolled as I am in the suffocating material of the tarp. They pick me up and drag me away with dizzying speed.

Cassidy's screams roar in the distance, and then there's a gunshot.

Then there's nothing except blackness, nausea-inducing movement, and fear.



---

CHAOS ERUPTS ALL AROUND. Chaos pours through my veins. I stare at the door Evie was taken through. My men fall like dominoes around me. A shoulder collides with mine, and without thought, I calmly turn and pull the trigger. I have no idea if it's one of my men or theirs. I just need blood. The man hits the ground, and when I don't recognize him, it doesn't ease the maelstrom and madness that has unleashed itself inside me.

"Follow them." I let out a roar that has a ripple effect. Men turn in midfight; two of my men get out the door before the fighting continues. I walk and fire my weapon, bullets seeming to move past me as though a player in the matrix. I duck at the last second and land beside a body. It's his shoulders, his height, that makes my hand still on his back. I duck my head again as more shots are fired. Each time a round goes off, it's fewer and fewer until the shooting ceases altogether.

Slowly, with bones that ache of age and ruin, I rise and look down at Rob's dead body.

*God, how many do I have to lose?*

Evie is gone; my men are dead. I step over the bodies that litter the floor, trying to process the bloodbath before me. Grasping my head with a gun in my hand, I want to smash my skull in to stop the spinning thoughts.

This is my fault. I wanted blood so badly—so badly that it cost me Evie. She didn't agree with this, yet she followed my orders.

“Cassidy.” A hand touches my shoulder. I spin and jam the pistol of my gun into his blood-streaked cheek. I'm ready to pull the trigger

“Cassidy!” he shouts. “Cassidy, it's Matty.”

I lower the gun, his face coming into focus. It's Matty, one of my men. “Are you the only survivor?” I ask.

He glances around. “Yeah, I've checked the bodies. Everyone is dead.”

There's no one to question or torture. No leads to help me find Evie. I get outside as two of my men jog toward me.

“They slashed all the tires. We couldn't catch up to them.”

It takes all my strength not to put a bullet between their eyes. I keep walking, ignoring them when they call out after me. Each step is heavier, and soon, it feels like lead fills my shoes, like the rage that fills my blood. Everything inside me is screaming for Evie. The air tastes bitter as I drag it into my lungs. I don't stop moving until I'm behind the wheel of my car.

There is no one here that I can question, but I still have one lead.

A knock on my window has me slowly looking up. I press the button, and the window rolls down.

“We will go with you.”

The gun sits on the passenger seat, and I’m glad it’s not in my hand. He’s just slowing me down.

“Fuck off, and let me hunt.” I let the window rise as I start the car and tear out of the parking lot. The car isn’t smooth, as the fuckers slashed my tires, too. I hit Ian’s number, and he answers on the second ring.

“Who was the informant that gave you the information about the meeting?” I ask. I flex my trembling fingers before clamping them onto the steering wheel.

“What’s going on—“

“Just give me the fucking name.” The car bumps along the road, but I don’t slow down.

“Seamus Gallagher. But Cassidy...”

I cut the call and press down on the accelerator. I’m not far from Seamus’s home. He lives in town. Sparks shoot out as the rims meet tarmac.

All I see in my mind is his face. I hold that tightly as I jam on the brakes; the car slides slightly but halts to a stop. I jump out, not closing the door, and march up to his door. My hand

touches the gun in the band of my trousers as my fist pounds on the front door.

A startled-looking Seamus opens the door; his brain is slow to catch up, and he tries to slam the door, but my foot stops it from closing.

“Didn’t think I would survive, did you?” I reach in and wrap a hand around his throat before slamming him into the hall wall while kicking the door closed. The mirror behind his head wobbles but doesn’t fall off the wall when I squish his face against it.

A half-naked woman darts out of the room. She comes to an abrupt stop as she takes us in and tightens the pink nightgown around her waist.

“Leave.” I meet her gaze in the mirror.

She runs, her feet pounding down the hall. I don’t speak until the back door slams. Once she’s gone, I shake Seamus and slam him into the mirror again; this time, a fine line traces across the glass.

“Where is Evie?” My calm voice doesn’t match the complete havoc that has taken over my system.

“I swear, Cassidy, I don’t know.”

I slam his head into the mirror again, the force shattering the glass this time. His cries as blood pours from a gash on his forehead are satisfying, but only for a moment.

I haul him into a room he has been working on, judging by the ladder and buckets of paint. A screwdriver has me flinging

him onto the floor, which is covered with a plastic tarp, and am about to pick it up when I see a hammer and change my mind.

*Even better.*

He tries to scurry away, and I plant my boot heavily on his chest.

“Where is Evie?” I ask again, taking my foot off his chest. I’ll give him a little hope. He tries to crawl away, but I reach out and grab his leg, dragging him back to me. With his calf held firmly in my hand, I bring the hammer down on his ankle; the crack of the bone making me grin.

He screams shrilly, and I release him, allowing him to scuttle forward a few inches.

“Where is Evie?”

His eyes won’t settle on anything; the pain making them roll in his head as he babbles incoherently. I bring the hammer down on his wrist as he reaches, pulling at the plastic tarp to tug himself away from me in a futile attempt to escape. It shatters with the force of the tool’s blunt head, and his body convulses as pain tears through him.

He rolls his head back and forth, and I place the hammer gently on his forehead. His gaze focuses on me.

“I’ll smash your fucking skull in this time.”

“I swear...I don’t know where Evie is. I was only told where the meeting would be.” He swallows and loses focus as he starts to cry again.

I tap the hammer softly against his forehead, directing his attention back to me. “Then you’re no use to me, are you?”

“I swear...” he sobs again.

“They took Evie,” I say. I turn the hammer to the forked end.

Before he can answer, I let out a roar of anger and raise the hammer, then bring it down mightily on his skull. His scream is cut off as it embeds in his forehead.

I pull it out, blood and pieces of flesh and brain landing on me. I slam it two more times into his head unnecessarily before I get up.

My chest rises and falls rapidly, and I roar toward the ceiling before tearing from the house and getting back into my car.

I don’t know much about the O’Hanlons, but I know where one of them lives.

The rims cut into the concrete, and sparks fly the entire drive. It’s hard to keep the wheel steady, but my hunger to find Evie is strong.

The captain’s house is modest, with large green gates that stand open, and I drive straight in. I glance in the rearview mirror but don’t see them close. Someone may have just left, or they aren’t electric gates.

Maybe he simply has no care for his safety.

*Stupid.*

I drive up to the house and jump out of the car. Once again, I don’t close the door but march up to the door. My fists collide



with the white door, leaving bloody smears down it. A woman in her late fifties opens the door and screeches, stumbling back as I push my way in.

“Where is Larry?”

Two young girls come out of a room and freeze. They don't run but seem frozen with terror as I approach them. I remember them from a picture.

“Where is your daddy?” I ask.

The mother races in front of her children and blocks them from me. “He isn't here. You stay away from my girls.” Her lip trembles, but she stands in front of her children. I have a sliver of admiration for her.

“Who else is in the house?” I ask.

“Just us.” She keeps her arms wide, with her two girls behind her.

“Get out of the house.”

The woman doesn't hesitate. Her daughters protest, but she practically pushes them out the front door.

I enter the kitchen and open the cabinet under the sink. I'm looking for something flammable and find paint thinner. I take the full bottle out and find a pack of matches in the third drawer. I'll find out soon enough if Larry is in the house. I douse the curtains and couch in the room the teenagers came out of before striking a match and tossing it onto the cushions.

Everything goes up in seconds.

I take a satisfied moment to linger and watch the world burn around me before the flames start to spread, then go back into the kitchen. I turn all the gas knobs on before taking the car keys off the hook and entering the garage.

He won't need his car any longer.

Getting in and putting the car in drive, I punch the button for the garage door and wait until it opens, then pull out onto the driveway. While leaving the engine running, I put the car into park and get out.

The woman and her daughters are standing on the lawn, and I remove the gun from my waistband. The mother screams but stands in front of her kids. I ignore them and turn toward the house, keeping the gun pointed on the front door. My gaze darts from one window to another, checking for signs of life. But no one leaves the house. I stay until the flames are visible in most windows.

When I leave, I don't feel anything. I just drive.

I drive down every road around the warehouse where Evie was snatched. I have no idea what I'm looking for, but I'm desperate for some small sign, something we overlooked earlier...

I swipe my arm over my eyes and pull into the parking lot of the warehouse, staring at the door we entered by until my eyes burn and my vision blurs.

*There has to be something. It can't just end like this.*

I hammer the steering wheel with my fist, cracking my knuckles open but unheeding of the pain. Let them bleed. If they've touched her...if they've hurt her...that's all I care about.

Sometime later, my phone dings several times in quick succession, and I pull over.

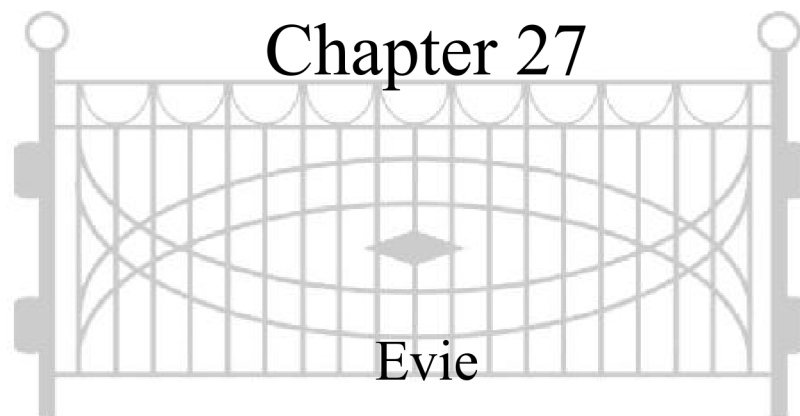
The first message is from Ian; he wants me to ring him.

The second message is from an unknown number.

*Request ceasefire. Meet at O'Hanlon manse, one hour.*

Hope can be a dangerous thing, but it flutters wildly in my chest as I text back a single word.

*Agreed.*



---

THE TASTE OF IRON in my mouth is strong, a reminder of the injury to my lip. I've been here, in a tiny black space too small for me to stretch my legs out, for what seems like forever.

In reality, I expect it's mere hours. They've brought me water and taken me to a bathroom once. I'm not tied up, like I would expect to be after having been kidnapped. But there's little I can do, all the same. There are multiple men here, many more than I could possibly take on my own. A quick check shows that they took my gun and my knives. The hands that searched me were rough, but not in the way I like.

Cassidy would be furious to know I was handled like that.

*Cassidy.*

I close my eyes and lean my head against the wall, chin tilted toward the ceiling. My fingers trace the floor restlessly beside my hips. I know that I'm in a house in the city, but I don't

know where exactly. I know that I'm in a closet, but I don't know whose.

I know that a lot of people died tonight, but I don't know the fates of everyone who came to the warehouse with us, or even if anyone is coming to save me.

Cassidy could be dead. He could be lying on the floor of that cold warehouse for all I know, his body riddled with bullet holes.

I don't like thinking that he could be dead. I'm not sure which is worse: the fear that he's gone or the possibility that nobody is coming for me. I think I always knew there was the chance we could die one day, but I never thought it would happen like this.

I anticipated a blaze of glory, not a quiet execution.

The closet door opens, and I raise my arm instinctively to hide from the light that slants in. A rough hand reaches in and grabs my arm. I recognize the man as one of those who sat at my dining table not too long ago.

"Come with me."

I stumble in his wake, tugging against his hold and smacking his hands away. "Where are you taking me? Where is Cassidy?"

"Shut your mouth. We're moving. That's all you need to worry about."

He bundles me into the back seat of a waiting vehicle, not bothering to blindfold me or tie my hands. I guess he figures

the man in the back seat will be an able enough deterrent should I decide to do anything.

He seats himself in the front passenger seat. A third man, the driver, meets my eyes in the rearview mirror before he punches the button for the automatic locks and pulls away from the curb.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I sit back against the seat and turn my gaze stubbornly out the window.

*Bide your time.*

*Be patient.*

I should be scared. The only thing that frightens me right now, though, is the possibility of Cassidy being dead. They can do whatever they want to me as long as he lives.

They don't know what I know. If Cassidy is alive, they're just dead men walking.

A brief, awkward ride later, we pull up in front of the O'Hanlon manse. The same man who put me in the car opens the door and gestures for me to step out.

Sandwiched between two of the men, I obediently follow them into the house. Light shines from the windows in a welcoming manner. As we reach the porch, rain begins to fall from the dark sky.

I can tell from the faint smudge of blue on the horizon that dawn is near. "Back to the scene of the crime, eh, gentlemen?"

One of them gives me a dirty look. The others ignore me. I keep going.

“I would think this would be the last place you would want to be. Because you’re going to die, you know. And the ghosts of the men you killed...they’ll be waiting for you.”

The backhanded slap takes me by surprise. I stumble into the wall, the same wall marred with a thick smear of what I think is Tadgh’s blood.

They shove me forward into the dining room and push me down into a chair. “You would be wise to keep your mouth shut.”

“Just making conversation,” I say. “You know it’s the truth.”

With one final disgusted look, the men retreat to the doorway, where they stand and speak in low tones I can’t quite make out. We remain thus until headlights flicker through the window sheers, and a vehicle pulls to a stop outside.

I wait, my heart in my throat, as a car door slams, and then heavy boots thunk across the floor of the hall.

And then he’s there, my beautiful, avenging angel. Cassidy stands in the doorway of the dining room, covered in blood and wearing a crazed look in his eyes.

“Hello, love,” he says, the calmness of his voice belying his appearance.

“Cassidy.” My voice only shakes a little. “I knew you’d come.”

Despite the danger we're obviously in, every nerve in my body sings with hope and exultation.

He's alive. It looks like he went through hell to get here, but he's alive.

One of the O'Hanlon captains straightens as Cassidy takes a step inside the dining room. "That's far enough."

Cassidy's gaze sweeps over me, pausing on my cheek. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay." I nod to give the words strength. "Better now that I know you're okay."

"I hear you've left quite a trail of destruction in your wake," O'Hanlon says. "You've killed many of my men."

"They had it coming. What am I doing here?" Cassidy diverts his attention from me and focuses on my captors, his voice rough.

"This has gone on long enough. We made our play. You've had your revenge. We're even. Now...we want to call a truce."

"A truce?" I can't believe what I'm hearing. "You kill my family, and now you want to wave the white flag? Say you're sorry? That's not happening."

"Evie." Cassidy's voice holds a warning. He meets my eyes for a long moment before looking at the O'Hanlons. "What are the terms?"

"Cassidy, no—"

"Simple. You get Miss O'Hanlon back, safe and sound."



“And if we refuse?”

The man’s grip tightens on the weapon he’s been holding at his hip for a solid hour. “Let’s just say we won’t be friends.”

Cassidy nods. “We have all the friends we require.”

The O’Hanlon turns his gun on me. “For what it’s worth, I am sorry—”

Realization comes to me in a blinding flash.

*We have all the friends we require.* They’re here...my people. The cartel. *Whoever.* Help has arrived to help us stomp out this rebellion.

I rise from my chair. “Wait,” I say, and he pauses. “I have something I want to say.”

“Last words. How sweet. Go ahead, but make it fast.”

“My whole life, everyone has always compared me to my mother. I look like her. I move like her. Sound like her. All the things. It’s funny to me, given that, how you’ve made it necessary for me to prove my Irishness to you ever since I got here.” I stop and swallow. “To prove I belong, that I deserve the O’Hanlon name.” I stop again, looking past him. “But you forgot one thing.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

“I’m also a fucking Papparado.” I feel a grin, unbidden but unrestrained, curl my lips. “And my Papparado side isn’t very happy with you.”

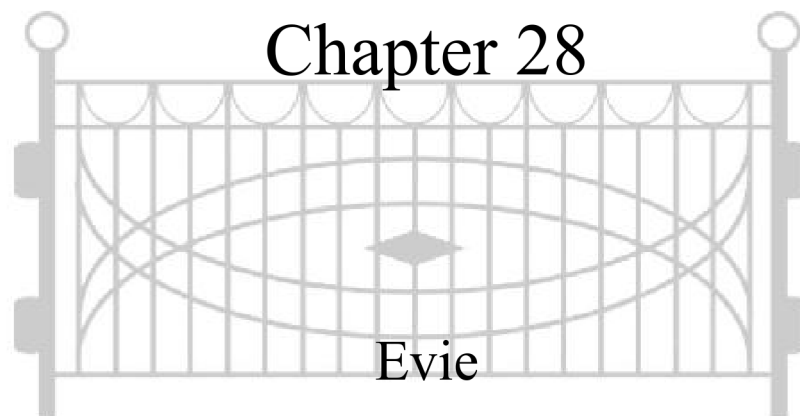
The lights go off with a sudden shift to darkness, and I hit the floor. Gunfire explodes around me, accompanied by the shrill screams of the O'Hanlons. When the lights blink back on, I lift my head and take stock.

Cassidy is on the floor, echoing my actions as he cautiously lifts his head. In the window, a shadow moves, and I see Tomas, one of my Papparado captains from New York. Slowly, I start to stand.

One last O'Hanlon lies dying on the floor.

Leaning over, I whisper in his ear as I take the gun from his lax grip. "Your service is no longer required."

I fire the gun until it's empty, let it fall to the floor, and walk into Cassidy's arms.



---

I LOOK OVER AT Cassidy when the gunshot’s resonance fades, swaying slightly on my feet. My grip on the gun is solid, though.

“You came.”

He reaches for me at the same time as I take a stumbling step forward, catching me up and drawing me against him with a muffled groan as he buries his face in my hair.

“I’ll always come.” Gripping my shoulders, he presses me away a few inches so he can meet my eyes with his own. “I can’t stay away from you, do you get that? I love you, Evie O’Hanlon, I love you so fucking much—”

I shut him up by pulling his mouth roughly down to meet mine. I knew he loved me, of course, but hearing the words is a different kind of solace.

It’s an affirmation of the best kind, a validation of everything I’ve been feeling. I’m not in this alone—I’m seen.

I'm chosen.

I'm saved.

"I love you back," I whisper against his mouth. "When I feared you were dead, I wanted to die." The words stick like glue in my throat, emerging thick and strained.

"Nobody's dying today." He straightens and lifts me so my legs wrap around his waist. I wind my arms around his neck and hold on as he starts moving toward the door. "Let's get out of here. This place will need a gutting."

I nod, agreeing, and turn my face into the crook formed by his neck and shoulder as we pass through the foyer. There's been too much bloodshed, too much damage done to this property. Everything I had from my past is tainted, stained with the blood of betrayal and loved ones lost. I have nothing left here.

"Just...take the pups to your place, please. I don't want them left."

I feel rather than see him tip his chin at someone. "It'll be done, love."

*Love.*

He's said it so many times before, an offhand and casual pet name. It's different, now. Better.

I'm not sure if I manage to tell him that I hear the difference. Exhaustion claims me in the next breath, and I close my eyes, sliding soundly into slumber.



SOMETIME MUCH LATER I awaken. The bed I lie in is soft, the percale sheets cool against my naked flesh.

Peeking beneath the sheet, I have the sense that I've been bathed, all the grime from the prior horrors washed away. The light creeping through the half-closed drapes hints at evening, telling me I slept the day through after Cassidy bore me away from my home.

Tentatively, I pull myself up to sit and then stand, tugging the sheet with me as a kind of wrap. I turn on the small lamp that sits on a table by the bed, then look around for some clue as to where I am.

A heavy wooden dresser stands opposite the bed, its surface littered with various items. I walk over and look, my fingers reaching out to lightly touch a heavy men's watch and wallet.

*Cassidy.* I'm in his room. His private sanctuary.

This is the first time I've seen it. The room I was in before, when I dressed for the celebration the other night—God, it feels like centuries ago—was a guest room. This feels intimate, as though he's giving me the chance to see fully who he is.

The space is spare, void of décor or anything that really marks it as his. The only exception is a photograph tucked in the frame of the dresser's mirror, printed in black and white and

faded with age. I lean forward, trying to discern its subject in the dim light.

It's the fence at the abbey school I attended as a girl. Past the fence, partially obscured by the prickly-berry bushes that line the iron grate and the foliage from the old tree that stood in the courtyard, a girl sits on a stone bench, head tucked as she doodles in a spiral notebook perched on her lap.

Emotion clogs my throat, and I pluck the photo from the mirror to study it more closely.

The fence is in focus, the girl soft and faintly blurry. He must have stood on the other side of the fence and snapped the picture, aware of both my obliviousness and the fact that I could glance up and catch him at any time. It wouldn't have mattered, I guess, if I had.

What would it have been like if I had known him then? If we had loved each other?

The door behind me opens with a faint click, and in the mirror's reflection, I see Cassidy standing in the doorway, gaze trained on what I hold in my hand. His mouth curls with a self-deprecating smile. "You found me out," he says.

Setting the photo down, I walk to him and into his arms. "Stalker. I found you," I answer and lift my lips for his kiss. "I didn't see you then, but I see you now. I love you."

He takes my cheeks in both hands and regards me solemnly. "The men are waiting downstairs—yours and mine. They're..."

mingling...but they could use the both of us to help solidify this union. If you're up to it."

"I'm up to it." Turning, I cast my gaze around the room. "Do I have clothes in here somewhere? Or are they still in the guest room?"

"I had them moved to my closet. Evie..."

I pause midstride.

"Evie, I'm sorry. You were right, and I should have listened to you."

I furrow my brow. "What are you talking about?"

Cassidy looks more uncertain than I've ever seen him. I don't like it.

"You told me we needed to wait. To be patient. I refused to listen to you, and it nearly cost us your life. It did cost us the lives of many, and I take full responsibility for that. I should have listened."

"Ah." Dropping the sheet, I stand before him naked. "Cassidy, look at me."

He does so, his gaze tortured.

"What do you see?" I ask.

A flash of confusion crosses his face. "A beautiful, naked-as-fuck woman."

I smile wryly. "Aside from that."

"I don't know what you mean."

“We’re the same creature, Cassidy. Similar monsters, driven by the pain of loss and the need for vengeance. It’s up to us to recognize that in each other and keep each other in check.” I cross to him and place my palm against his cheek, feeling him swallow at the touch. “We can’t lose each other, Cassidy, or the world around whoever’s left will burn.”

“I’m sorry.”

Standing on tiptoe, I press my mouth against his. “No more apologies. Now...if you could kindly take out your cock, this naked-as-fuck woman would like to make use of it before we join our families.”

His lips move against mine with boldness. “Your wish, love.”



WE ARRIVE IN NEW York three days later, armed with love for each other and a shared lust for making waves. Cassidy and I—represented by the American O’Hanlons, the Papparados, and the O’Rourkes—have decided that we are going to own this city. Our men will be arriving in staggered waves beginning tomorrow, and I plan to get the O’Rourkes established in one-to-one partnerships with my own men to learn the ins and outs of how we conduct business here in the States.

I engaged a limo to meet us at the airport, wanting to give Cassidy a special welcome to my home. Life here is rarely



glamorous, but on occasion, a bit of splash is called for. This is one such occasion.

The driver takes Pup's carrier with a lift of his eyebrow, peering in at the still-sleeping puppy.

"Cute little critter," he remarks.

"She is, isn't she? I'm going to teach her to be ferocious," I answer.

He shakes his head and settles her in the passenger seat beside him.

Cassidy and I take the back. As the limo pulls smoothly away from the curb, I pour us both a whiskey and settle back into the seat across from Cassidy, watching the play of emotion on his face as he watches the city go by outside the darkened windows.

"It's amazing, isn't it?"

He nods. "Different, for sure."

I uncross my legs, toeing my heels onto the plush floor. "You get used to it fast. I'll get you settled in at my place of business tomorrow and introduce you to the families we'll be dealing with in the coming days. We'll host a dinner, I think."

Our first step, though, will be to meet with Angelus Valachi and offer him our hand in friendship and business. Our families are linked by the marriage between my brother and Angel's sister, Lulu, even if they are gone. I mean to play upon that and forge an alliance of loyalty, if not of flesh.

But for now...I tip my drink in Cassidy's direction before setting it down in its spot next to my seat. Getting down on my knees, I crawl toward Cassidy as he turns from the window to watch me with heavy-lidded eyes. I take his drink from his hand and set it aside, as well, then reach over and press the button for the privacy screen.

I'm not interested in business right now, but in pleasure.

"What are you doing?" he murmurs as my hands go to his belt. He shifts to make room for me between his legs.

"What does it look like?" I unbutton his pants and tug the zipper down, then reach inside his boxer briefs to close my hand around his cock. He's hard and hot in my grasp, pulsing with aroused energy.

"It looks like I'm about to be a very lucky man." He groans as my fingers flex around him, and with a feline smile, I lean forward and close my mouth around him with no further delay.

"Dear God, Evie O'Hanlon—"

I lift away from him slightly, until my lips circle just the crown of his cock in a warm caress and try to convey everything I can't say in words with my mouth instead.

*This is for you, Cassidy.*

*Thank you for being mine.*

*Thank you for being here.*

*Thank you for loving me.*

I hum around his cock as I take him deeper in my mouth and run my tongue around his thickness. His hands go to my hair, gently holding me in place. Hollowing out my cheeks, I suck hard, and his hips jerk upward, sending him deep to the back of my throat. I swallow down the immediate gag reflex, relaxing my throat and letting him fuck my mouth the way he wants.

“Look at me.”

I obey his harsh request, casting my gaze upward to meet his eyes without moving my head from his lap.

“You’re so pretty, Evie, taking my dick like that.”

His words of praise wash over me, and I swirl my tongue around him, saliva pooling at the corners of my mouth. I don’t know if he understands why I’m on my knees before him, if he comprehends the gift of my choice—my submission—to him in this way, but there will be plenty of time to figure that out later. Right now, I work to make him come, to make him spill himself in my mouth and down my throat. I bob up and down on his length, reveling in the sounds he makes as he gets close, in every jerk of his hips and flex of his fingers in my hair.

He comes just as the limo brakes and comes to a hard stop, his cock slamming into the back of my throat with the motion. He pulses against my tongue, and I feel the thick, hot ropes of his cum coating my mouth and throat and hold him hard against me as I suck and swallow every drop.

When he finishes, he loosens his grip on my hair and subsides back against the seat, gasping. I run my finger around my

bottom lip, making sure nothing escaped, and smile at him before easing myself back into my own seat.

“Welcome home, love.”

# About the Authors

## VI

When Vi Carter isn't writing dark romance books that feature the mafia, are filled with suspense, and take you on a fast-paced ride, you can find her reading her favorite authors, baking, taking photos or enjoying long walks in the Irish countryside.

Vi's biggest selling series, Young Irish Rebels, is available in Audio, English and Dutch.

Married with three children, Vi divides her time between motherhood and all the other hats she wears as an author.

She has declared herself a coffee & chocolate addict! Do not judge.

## **ELLE**

E.R. Whyte is a multi-genre author, writing contemporary and new adult romance under E.R. Whyte, reverse harem romance under Evie Rae, and sweet romance under Elle Rae Whyte. Although it would no doubt make life easier to simply choose a genre, she loves romance in all its forms too much to ever do that.

She's a simple girl at heart, living in a teeny-tiny Virginia town and spending her time finding herself, catering to various fur babies, and indulging her reading, writing, and photography habits. She loves being alone, bananas foster, and Pepsi.

Whyte worked as a high school English teacher for around a decade before she decided she really wanted more time to devote to her family and other fun stuff. Now she thinks up new ways to make tacos on Tuesday, explores the Marvel universe with childish enthusiasm, and spends entirely too much time on the computer.

Life is good.

## Social Media Links



## **Website**

<https://www.authorvicarter.com/e-r-whyte-vi-carter-writing-duo>

# **Facebook Reading Group**

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/915570406128234/>

# **TikTok**

<https://www.tiktok.com/@erwhyte2>

# Our Thanks

Our sincere gratitude to ~~the army~~ the small tactical unit that reads with us and drives us from one page, one chapter, one book to the next. Our commas would be a mess and our plot holes vast without you. You know who you are: *Jennifer, Susan, Tami, Sherry, Lucy, Amanda, Shenan.*

We love and appreciate you.