

VICIOUS HEARTS

JAGGER COLE

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A DARK ENEMIES-TO-LOVERS MAFIA ROMANCE

DARK HEARTS

BOOK TWO

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Vicious Hearts
Jagger Cole © 2023

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Ain't No Grave - Johnny Cash
Possum Kingdom - Toadies
Come As You Are - Civil Twilight
Man or a Monster - Sam Tinnesz, Zayde Wolf
Psycho Killer - Madam Bandit
Black Flies - Ben Howard
Day by Day - Old Sea Brigade
Night Drive - Jimmy Eat World
Gouge Away - Pixies
Volcano - Damien Rice
Devil Side - Foxes
Need You Tonight - Welshly Arms
Mad World - Gary Jules, Michael Andrews
The Wolf - Manchester Orchestra
Monster - Paramore

Rollercoaster - Bleachers
Slow Show - The National

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TRIGGER WARNING

Dear Reader,

This book is *not* for the faint-hearted. The hero is a very morally gray, literal psychopath, and the story itself deals with some extremely dark themes, including CSA, self-harm, suicide, and addiction. Adult themes include CNC, sadomasochism, a praise kink, and breath-play.

Please (really) know your triggers before diving into this book, and I truly hope you enjoy.

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UNA

TO KILL MONSTERS, you have to know the darkness.

You have to be comfortable in it. You have to be able to look over that edge and feel no fear.

Knowing darkness? I've got that covered. And I've been looking over edges since I was born. But it's the feeling no fear part I'm currently trying to pull out of my ass.

Because right now, it's taking everything I have—everything I am—not to run from this place of hedonism and sin, where the rich and the monstrous come to play.

To indulge.

To feed their darkest needs.

Around me, sultry trance music thuds at just the right volume from hidden speakers. Low, sensual lighting and occasional flickering candelabra cast deep, undulating shadows against the elegant, matte-black walls accented with gold and blood red.

Waitstaff dressed in all black with ornate if emotionally blank black masks covering their faces slip effortlessly from room to room of the club with trays

of champagne, elegant cocktails, even narcotics. Similarly black-clad security personnel, bigger and more imposing than the waitstaff but wearing the same blank, expressionless black masks, hover discreetly just out of sight.

I shiver as I step from one room to the next, moving right by the impassive gaze of two of these guards. You'd never know if they were even looking at you, given the utter blackness of the eyeholes. Still, I can feel eyes on me as I keep my head held high and slip through the doorway.

They don't know you're a fraud. They don't know you snuck in.

They don't know I'm here to kill.

If they did, I'd already be dead, or whatever happens to mere mortals who manage to sneak their way into Club Venom—the hedonistic playground for New York City's richest, most dangerous, and most deviant gods.

But they're not looking at me out of suspicion. They're looking at me because they're men, and I'm wearing a dress that would be considered lewd if not pornographic in most settings. Not here, though.

Black, somewhat see-through, and tiny. A thin gold chain around the nape of my neck, beneath my pinned-up blonde hair, keeps two absurdly flimsy wisps of fabric over my breasts. Over *part* of my breasts. The two strips of lacy fabric delve down to meet just south of my navel, where the completely backless dress wraps around like a 60's-style miniskirt that barely covers my ass.

The guards are looking at me from behind those blank masks with their all-black eyes because even in the low light, it's obvious I'm not wearing a bra. They're looking at me because I picked this dress specifically for the way the hem dances high on my bare thighs and leaves the bottoms of my ass cheeks exposed. Because of the black silk choker around my neck. Because of the sky-high fuck me strappy gold heels I'm wearing that still barely push me

past five-foot-two.

Even for Club Venom, I'm dressed to kill.

Or rather, I just walked into a wolf's den dressed as *bait*.

All part of the plan.

The room I step into has two clusters of deep red velvet sofas artfully arranged on either side of it. To my left, three older men with silver hair and monied, aristocratic jawlines chuckle and drink champagne. With them, two much younger women in dresses barely covering more than my own giggle and snort lines of cocaine off a silver tray.

Like myself, and like all the guests at Club Venom, they wear masks over the top parts of their faces—gold, all slightly differently shaped and ornamented. Some are accented with blood red, others with black.

At the couches, one of the girls lifts her head from the tray of coke and turns, brushing her nose before she crawls into the lap of one of the men and starts to kiss him voraciously. He growls, and when his hand slides to her ass and lifts the hem of her silvery, shimmering mini dress, my pulse thuds. He fists a handful of her hair, and suddenly, the hand at her ass winds back and comes crashing down with a sharp smack on her bare cheek.

She moans.

I almost do too.

Heat pools in my core, and my breath hitches. It's impossible not to feel the sultry, depraved power of this place teasing over your skin and pulling at your darkest fantasies.

Even if—*especially if*—the ones you keep locked inside are darker than anyone could ever imagine.

So dark they might even make the regulars of Club Venom go pale.

Movement drags my gaze past the first couple, and my core clenches and my eyes go wide as heat floods my cheeks beneath my mask.

The second girl is now sandwiched between the two other older men, her dress slipping from her shoulders and revealing her full breasts and pink-tipped nipples. Her head lolls languidly back against the sofa, a soft moan on her lips as the two men kiss her neck and run their hands up her thighs and over her breasts. Her hands drop to their laps, rubbing as my pulse thunders in my ears.

I mean, I knew what Club Venom *was* before I ever stepped foot in here tonight. But knowing and seeing for yourself are two very different things.

I feel eyes on me again and my gaze rips away from the threesome to the couple. My face darkens with heat as I realize they're both looking at me hungrily. The girl grins, raising a hand and beckoning.

Yeah, that's a hard no for me.

Shivering, and embarrassed to realize just now I've been standing here just staring at them for a full minute or two, I quickly pull my gaze away and hurry from the room into the next. My face still throbs with heat, and I quickly pluck a flute of champagne off a passing tray. I slug it back, taking a shaky breath before I survey the bigger room I've walked into.

And instantly *freeze*.

Holy fuck.

The first room was mere foreplay.

I've just walked into a full-scale orgy.

Not everyone's participating. In fact, a lot of the guests in the spacious, lavish

room done up with couches, sitting areas, and a full bar are still fully dressed, and just watch.

It's just that it's *slightly* hard to miss the writhing mass of naked, sweaty bodies moaning and gasping and fucking in the middle of the room.

My wide eyes drink in the scene before me, something straight out of *Eyes Wide Shut*. My gaze slides from two blondes writhing on top of a muscled man with what look like Russian prison tattoos to a stunning brunette gasping between two Asian men with long hair tied up in knots and full-body Yakuza ink.

My throat tightens, my mouth pursing tight as the heat floods my face once more. Again, knowing what this place is and *seeing* what this place is are two extremely different things. I can tell myself I've prepared for this, or that none of this fazes me.

But I know damn well I just jumped into the deep end.

Club Venom is no regular sex club. It's not even exclusive in the same vein of the myriad of other so-called "exclusive" clubs in New York, the ones that cater to rich Wall Street types or tech-bros. You don't just have to be rich to get into this place.

You have to be twisted and dangerous.

You have to be a little on the edge.

And you have to be hungry for the forbidden.

Three things that describe the very monster I'm here to kill tonight.

Unless he kills me first, that is.

My eyes scan the writhing exhibitionists on display in the middle of the room, searching for him. Even though everyone's wearing masks, I've

studied him for weeks. I know the shape of his face, and I know exactly what tattoos he's got under his clothes.

I don't spot him taking part in the orgy. Which is good, because if he was it would make what I need to do here tonight exponentially more difficult.

I need him alone.

A hunter is patient, little bird. A hunter does not rush. Take your time. Wait, watch. Learn the prey better than he knows himself. It is then and only then, when you are more him than he is himself, that you strike.

I shiver, swallowing back the words echoing in my head from years and years ago, when another monster sought to mold Finn and me in his image.

Stay the fuck out of my head, Dad.

Shuddering, I yank my eyes away from the performance. Finishing the champagne in my hand, I exchange the empty glass for a full flute from a passing waiter. Then I begin to wander the perimeter of the room, forcing myself to walk slowly. To move with ease. To smile casually.

Like I belong here.

Like I have any business at *all* being anywhere near this fucking place.

Ignoring the nagging little voice in the back of my mind whispering to me that however dark my own depravities, and however twisted the fantasies in my head, that's all they are and what should always remain: fantasies.

Fever dreams.

Forbidden desires, meant for me and me alone, never to be acted upon.

Because some dark fantasies are too dark to ever really explore, even here.

As if I even could.

I'm leaning against the bar sipping my champagne when I stiffen at a presence that slips in close to me. I turn, swallowing as I look up at a handsome man whose jawline and dark goatee suggest he is perhaps Middle Eastern.

He smirks, his darkeyes beneath his golden mask dropping down over my plunging cleavage and slightly visible nipples before landing on my wrist.

Specifically, the red band with the three gold lines wrapped around it.

I stiffen, my chest constricting as my gaze slips to *his* wrist, and a similar band—his red with three *black* lines.

Fuck.

“I was watching you taking in the fun,” he murmurs in an accented voice. He lifts a glass of what smells like scotch, sipping it as his eyes pierce mine. “Were you enjoying yourself?”

Maybe. But good luck getting me to admit that, even to myself.

Instead, I lift a dismissive shoulder.

“It’s not why I come here.”

He grins hungrily, his gaze dropping to my wrist again.

“Then why *do* you come here?”

I swallow uneasily. “I’m meeting someone.”

His face darkens.

“You’re not owned, though.”

What?

When my brow furrows, his eyes narrow.

“You aren’t owned. You don’t belong to anyone.”

I’m still trying to figure out what the hell he’s talking about when he nods his chin at my neck.

“You wear a collar, but it’s unadorned. It has no one’s mark on it. So, little girl,” he growls with an edge to his voice. “All I see is good little pain slut with no Master.”

I gasp as he suddenly moves right into my personal space, sneering down into my suddenly terrified face. I jolt as he grabs my wrist roughly.

“Now, you’ll come with—”

“Take your hands off of me.”

His eyes flash with the anger of a man who is unaccustomed to hearing the word no.

“Let me explain something to you, cunt,” he growls. “You’re in Club Venom, dressed like *that*, wearing *this* on your wrist,” he hisses, nodding at the red and gold bracelet. “So stop playing the brat role and come with me so I can mete out a lesson on your ass—”

“Remove your hand from her, or I’ll remove it from your arm.”

A cold chill jumps up my spine like a blade. Because I know that voice, after studying him for so long. I know the harsh edge to it, the Irish accent. I know the swirling dark power that comes with that voice, just like I can feel it radiating against the bare skin of my exposed back, like a cold, dark wind swirling from the mouth of a black cave.

The man in front of me, still gripping my wrist, scowls.

“We’re in the middle of a conversat—”

Only then do his eyes lift from me to the man behind me. And suddenly, his face pales. The sneer drops from his lips as pure, unadulterated fear bleeds across his eyes.

“My sincere—”

“I don’t want your apologies. I want you fucking *gone*.”

The man in front of me nods so vigorously it almost makes me wince. Then, without another word, his hand is gone from my wrist as he spins and hurries across the room and out another door.

Then, we’re alone.

Just me.

And the monster I’m here to kill.

One second ticks by, then another. My skin tingles from the malevolent energy humming off him against my bare back. Slowly, I swallow the lump knotted in my throat, steel myself, and turn to face him.

The second I do, every nerve in my body jangles. Every inch of my skin prickles and shivers. Every ounce of my willpower forces me not to shake as my gaze drags up over his black suit with the black shirt beneath it—no tie.

Over the immaculately trimmed scruff on his razor-sharp jaw and angular cheekbones.

Over the sinfully dangerous lips.

Over the mask, half gold and half matte black, with gilded roses and Irish knots adorning the edges.

Up to the piercing, venomously *lethal* green eyes cutting into me like two blades.

Cillian Kildare: head of the Kildare Irish crime family, literal psychopath, infamous devil.

And tonight, my prey.

I swallow again, raking my teeth over my bottom lip as I give him my best seductive look. Or at least, as seductive a look as I can manage, given the unblinking, slightly unhinged, psycho way those sharp green eyes are stabbing into me.

And it's then, staring up into his strikingly gorgeous face and those dangerously sociopathic eyes, that it suddenly hits me exactly how unready I am for this. Despite all my preparation. Despite all the brutality and training hammered into me as a child.

It all comes crashing down as I lock eyes with the second most dangerous man I've ever stood before.

But I have to do this.

I have to do this.

So I smile again, batting my eyes at him from under the mask as I reach up to toy with my blonde locks.

“Thank you, for—”

“Don't,” he growls quietly, his eyes still leveled right into mine.

I shiver. It's like being stared down by a fucking tiger in the middle of the jungle at night.

“Really, I want to say thank you for rescuing me from that—”

“I didn't *rescue* you, little girl,” he murmurs darkly, his eyes glinting right into my fucking soul and instantly turning me to molten lead. “I simply saw

something I wanted, and I came to *take it*.”

My lips clamp shut, my body tensing up to try to stop the shuddering as the heat throbs in my core.

Stop it. Just keep talking. Keep him interested, so that you can get him alone.

“So, I’m what you want—”

“*You don’t belong here.*”

I flinch before I stop myself.

“I’m sorry?”

“I said, you don’t belong here,” Cillian growls, moving closer to me. But unlike the man just now who made my skin crawl when he moved close, when Cillian pulls closer to me, it’s as if something heated and sensual slides deliciously over my skin.

Raw power.

A black wave.

Fuck, I need to get my shit together.

I could try to lie or bullshit my way out of this. But that isn’t going to work. Not with him. So instead, I lean into it. I blush, biting my lip again in an exaggerated way.

“Yeah, it’s actually my first time here. Is it really that obvious?”

“Yes.”

No smile. No charm. No flirtation. He’s not looking at me like he wants to seduce me.

He’s looking at me like he wants to *devour* me. To swallow me down whole.

And when I realize how dangerously excited that makes me, my core floods with shame.

I can't feel that. Not with him. Not with what will happen next.

“Do you understand how this particular club's wristbands even work?” he rasps quietly. “Or did you pick red with gold because it looked *pretty*?” He sneers out the last word, sending a chill up my spine.

I shake my head. “No, I know what they mean.”

“And you *meant* to pick red with gold.”

My eyes drop to his: red with black.

At Club Venom, red signifies a pain and control kink. Sadomasochism. The black lines signify a dominant.

My gold ones signify a submissive. And the lies I've been telling myself, that I only picked this particular band because I knew he'd be wearing red with black, quickly scatter like dust with how...*right* this band feels on me.

I lift a shoulder, locking my eyes with his piercing green gaze. This time the seductive gaze comes completely naturally.

“I did.”

His jaw clenches. His eyes flare with a devilish green power.

“You *do not* belong here, little rabbit,” he growls thickly.

“If you're not interested, I'm sure I can find someone who is—”

I gasp, terror and excitement exploding through my entire body as his hand suddenly jerks up and roughly cups my jaw, making my eyes bulge in fear.

“Do you have *any* idea what the fuck you're doing?”

No.

I smile coquettishly at him.

“Why don’t you come and find out?”

I gasp quietly, shuddering as he suddenly moves into me, lowering his towering, muscular frame so that his lips brush my ears, turning my knees weak.

“I play very rough, little girl.”

I shiver.

“You never know,” I gasp back. “Maybe I do, too.”

Lies. All lies. Because the truth is, I don’t “play” *at all*. Not like this. Not once. Ever.

But there’s a first time for everything.

My pulse skips when his powerful hand takes mine, pulling me quickly after him as he storms from the room and down a hallway toward the private rooms.

This is happening.

There’s no going back.

You have to know the darkness. You have to look over the edge.

To kill monsters, you have to *be one too*.

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UNA

THE WORLD IS full of pain and sin, Una. And it is the job of the righteous to send the wicked to Hell, so the rest may go to Heaven.

His grip on my hand is firm. The hum of his pulse against mine, the feel of his skin on my own, and the raw power that emanates off this man has my core tying into knots and my heart beating double time.

Or maybe that's just because a terrifying yet gorgeous beast of a man, built like a god with the heart of a devil, is dragging me away from a literal orgy to a more private room.

Where we can be alone.

Where he can do with me what he wants—which is clearly marked on the band around his wrist.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

At the end of the dark, black hallway, golden doors open to a small, dimly lit elevator. Cillian pulls me in, and I shiver when the doors slide closed again, boxing us inside.

Away from the rest of the world.

The rabbit alone with the wolf.

The elevator begins to rise to the higher floors of Club Venom, reserved for patrons who want more privacy. The seconds tick by, and my pulse begins to thud even harder. I can feel my skin tingling, and even though the elevator is at a normal temperature, a sheen of sweat begins to glisten on my back.

“You’re nervous.”

Fuck.

His hand is still holding mine. He can fucking *tell*. He knows I’m a fraud. He knows—

I close my eyes, taking a slow breath and shoving all of that down.

He doesn’t suspect anything or he’d have never gotten into this elevator with you.

With me, and with the instrument of his impending death, which is currently pinning up my long, blonde, and *fake* hair in a knot on top of my head.

This is happening.

I’m doing this. Now. Here. Tonight.

I’d do anything to save Finn. Even if it means sneaking into a notoriously dangerous and edge-pushing sex club, and deliberately putting myself alone in a room with a psychopathic sadist.

Even if it means letting that psychopath—and however gorgeous he may be, Cillian Kildare is a *monstrous* psychopath—do whatever he pleases to me to get us to the part where I get to watch him bleed out.

It’s nothing personal, even if he did once put my father behind bars, and then later was instrumental in killing him.

My father Seamus O’Conor was a true monster. One even more dangerous than Cillian. He was brutal, and cruel, and insane. I haven’t shed a single tear or spent a single second mourning his passing.

This isn’t revenge.

It’s payment.

A life for a life.

If I kill Cillian Kildare, then the devil currently holding a blade to my brother’s throat lets him live. So no, this isn’t actually about my father at all. This is about doing whatever—*whatever*—it takes to save Finn, who did everything when we were younger to keep me safe and guard me from monsters.

I force another sultry smile as I turn toward the demon standing next to me. I slink close to him, brushing my other hand across his abdomen and trembling with surprise when I feel rock-hard, chiseled muscles beneath his black shirt.

According to my research, Cillian’s forty. Apparently, his abs still think he’s twenty-two.

“Not nervous,” I purr, standing up as high as I can on my tiptoes to nuzzle his neck. “*Just excited.*”

Play the part. Be the temptress.

My eyes close as my lips brush the skin of his neck—first kissing, then sucking slightly against the throb of his jugular.

“Did I fucking say you could touch me?”

I flinch, taken aback. Shivering, I pull back, quailing under the intensity of those supernaturally green eyes.

“W—what?”

“Did. I. Fucking. Say. You. Could. Fucking. Touch. Me,” he rasps thickly, his jaw clenched.

I shake my head. “I’m sorry.”

He tilts his head.

“No,” I murmur. “No, you didn’t.”

“No you didn’t...*what?*”

Heat floods my face.

“No, you didn’t...” I swallow thickly. “*Sir.*”

“Good girl.”

An outrageously inappropriate throb pulses deep within my core, clenching my thighs the second he says those two words together.

Jesus, keep your shit together, Una.

Mercifully, just then the elevator doors silently slide open. His hand tightens around mine, making my pulse jump as he pulls me from the elevator into a sinfully dark hallway. We turn to the left, moving until he comes to a stop at a door with a capital L—the Roman numeral for fifty—in metallic red against the matte black door. He holds his wristband to a sensor, and the door unlocks with a weighty click.

My heart climbs into my throat.

We step into a dark and sultry room: the walls are a deep blood red, the floor and ceiling the same matte black as the door, and the furniture is all in matching tones of matte black, blood red, and gold.

There's no windows.

My pulse skips when my eyes land on the huge four-poster bed against one wall, covered by a deep red duvet with the golden Club Venom emblem of the viper emblazoned on it. Surprisingly, after he shuts the door behind us with an equally weighty click, Cillian doesn't move to the bed. Instead, he strides easily and confidently across the room to a bar cart next to a gas fireplace.

He pushes a button on the mantel, bringing the fireplace to life and casting flickering shadows across the dark and sensual room. I stand motionless, still by the door, using every ounce of my willpower not to fidget or pick at my nails.

Or turn and *run*.

Cillian pours himself a glass of what looks like whiskey. He turns, his green eyes cutting through the dim light of the room.

“Drink?”

I nod.

“Yes, please.”

He lifts a brow.

“Yes, please, *Sir*,” I whisper, my face heating.

He beckons me with two fingers. Shivering, I teeter across the room in my heels until I'm standing in front of the fireplace, between two richly-black leather sofas. He hands me a crystal tumbler—whiskey, like his—which I take and quickly bring to my lips.

“*Sláinte*,” he murmurs, lifting his glass in a toast before taking a sip.

I down mine in one gulp. Cillian lifts a brow behind his gold and black mask.

“You’re still nervous.”

“No, just exci—”

“Stop *lying* to me.”

My pulse skips, sweat sheening across my back again.

“This is your first time here.”

It isn’t a question, and there’s no reason to lie when he obviously already knows the answer. It can be my first time here. That changes nothing in this little game.

“Yes,” I murmur. “Yes, Sir,” I quickly amend, trying to ignore the thrill that rushes through my core when I say it.

This is not a fantasy. This is not one of those videos you watch late at night online. This is real, and you need to get your fucking head in the game right now.

“And you’re *perfectly* fucking clear on what the band you wear on your wrist means.”

I nod quickly.

“Yes, Sir.”

His eyes narrow as he sips his drink, slowly walking around me, his appraising gaze leaving burning, tingling trails in its wake.

“Rules,” he growls. “First, once we begin, we don’t stop—for anything—unless you say the safe word. Tonight, that will be the word blue. You say *blue*, and we stop. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Second. I don’t do humiliation.”

“Me either.”

Wait, what? It just tumbles out, and I don’t know why. This isn’t *real*. The kinks inside of me are, yes. The darkness that I explore alone, with the help of the internet—as testified by my questionable search history—is real. But all of this?

Not real. So why the hell did I just spill that?

Cillian’s brow arches, and I tremble at the sadistic way the corners of his lips curl before he continues his slow, methodical walk around me.

“I *will* hurt you, though.”

My thighs clench traitorously.

“I *will* control you.”

My nipples harden.

Fuck you, subconscious.

“And, should I decide to...”

I shiver as I feel him come to a stop behind me. And when his lips brush near my ear, I bite down on my lip hard to stop from gasping.

“I *will chase you*, and pin you down, and *savage you*.”

There’s a chance I’ve bitten off way more than I can chew.

Oh, you fucking THINK?

Cillian continues to prowl around me, finishing his drink and setting the

empty glass on the mantel. He shrugs his jacket off, methodically folding it and draping it over an arm of one of the sofas. He plucks my empty glass from my fingers and sets it next to his before he continues his slow walk around me.

“Strip.”

I tense, my pulse thudding as every nerve in my body screams that I should run. I can feel the heavy clasp pinning my hair up in a knot—a golden, ornate thing that Apostle gave to me for tonight.

Very pretty, very expensive-looking....and very lethal, given that concealed within it is a razor-sharp five-inch blade that flicks out butterfly-knife style with a simple twist of the wrist.

For a second, I imagine myself exploding into action—reaching up, grabbing the clasp from my hair, and whirling to plunge it into his heart.

Not yet. Not now.

Patience. Have pat—

My entire body jolts, my eyes bugging out of their sockets and my mouth falling open in shock as a powerful hand wraps around my throat from behind, squeezing. Cillian growls, pressing hard against my back and making my legs shake. I feel his breath and smell the heady scent of him—a mix of leather, whiskey, and tobacco—swirling through my senses.

“I will not fucking ask again.”

Heat explodes through my core—raw, sensual, illicit. But it’s not from fear. It’s worse. It’s from *excitement*. It’s the combination of his grip on my throat, the harsh, demanding tone in my ear, and the pure power of him swirling around me like black magic.

It's the beginning of countless of my filthy fantasies. But now is *really* not the time nor the place to play them out, however ironic that may be.

Shivering, I bring a hand up to the nape of my neck. My fingers unclip the clasp on the delicate gold chain there, and suddenly the entire flimsy dress tumbles away from me. The silky material slips from my nipples, slides off my hips, and pools on the floor around my ankles.

I stand there, doing everything I can to keep my hands at my sides—to keep my posture casual and calm, like I've done this hundreds of times instead of *never*—and to refrain from wrapping my arms around myself to hide my nakedness.

“I'm sorry, did you misunderstand the fucking order?”

I flush deeply, shaking my head.

“No, Sir.”

My entire face turns red as my fingers slip into the waistband of my black thong. Burning hotly, I bend at the knees, my ears ringing as I slip the panties down my legs, then kick them off.

And then, except for my shoes, I'm completely naked.

With *him*.

When I hear footsteps moving away from me, I frown, puzzled. I turn slightly to glance over my shoulder at what he's doing. And when I see, my core throbs with deviant desire.

Cillian walks to a table against the far wall covered with...*tools*. Not tools for building, like hammers or saws.

Tools for *destroying*.

Leather wrist and ankle restraints. Ball gags. A riding crop. A—fuck me—a *whip*.

Strap-ons, butt plugs of various sizes, butterfly nipple clamps, paddles, floggers, blindfolds, hoods, and a dozen other leather and gleaming gold implements of pleasure and pain.

Tools that I'm ashamed to admit I'm *far* too well-versed in.

Thanks, internet.

I stare, my heart racing with—well, with what I want to say is fear, but is actually more like forbidden excitement—as Cillian traces a finger thoughtfully over each object on the table. He lingers on a paddle—the size of a ping-pong paddle, but covered in raised metal studs—and my heart skips. But then he keeps moving down the line.

Finally, his hand stops again, this time on the riding crop. When I watch his lips curl, I shiver as he picks it up and turns back to me, his eyes glinting wickedly.

“Eyes forward.”

I tremble, my entire body thrumming with anticipation and nerves as I hear him walk back to me.

“Remember the word, little rabbit.”

Before I can even try to remember what it is, fire explodes across my skin. I yelp, gulping and—shamefully—*whimpering*, as I feel the sting of the crop against my bare ass.

He does it again—not hard, but hard enough to make me gasp as the slim leather bit at the end stings my tender skin. The fire ignites a third time, and my whole face goes red when I realize the sound that tumbles from my lips

this time is a very obvious and very needy *moan*.

Behind me, Cillian chuckles darkly as I shiver in the aftershocks of the assault on my flesh.

“*Such a greedy little girl,*” he growls, tracing the tip of the crop over my skin.

I whimper deep in my chest, my whole world slowly turning to fire and need. Everything else begins to fade away, until all I know is the feel of the leather crop teasing slowly over my hip, and then up my ribs as he circles me, like a shark smelling blood in the water.

A quick *thwack* against my ribs has me mewling. The tip of the crop tracing up the underside of my breast and flicking over my aching nipple brings a shiver and a gasp of anticipation to my lips.

Thwack.

I yelp, moaning, my brain short-fucking-circuiting as he flicks the end of the crop against my other nipple. It hurts—I mean, it *really* fucking hurts. But the rush that immediately follows—the pure ecstasy that floods into the space pain made—is euphoric.

And it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before with just myself.

He knows it, too. Because suddenly, he’s doing it again. And again. And *again*, punishing my nipples with the end of the crop until my legs are shaking. Until my pulse roars in my ears.

Until I’m so wet, I swear to God, it’s going to drip right down my legs.

He circles me again and again, teasing and then hurting, teasing and then hurting, leaving stings and explosions of raw pleasure across my breasts, my inner thighs, and my ass. Until finally, I’m so delirious with forbidden pleasure that the room is spinning.

That's when he's suddenly on me.

I gasp as his hands come at me from behind—one wrapping around my throat, the other dragging over my hip as he pulls me back against him. My pulse roars and my eyes go wide as I feel the thick, heavy bulge in his pants pressing hard against the small of my back.

His lower hand keeps moving, and my mouth falls open in desire when it suddenly plunges between my thighs. Two of the thick fingers on his veined, muscular hand delve between my folds, and I can't help but cry out desperately when he begins to rub my clit.

“*Such* a messy little girl for me,” Cillian rasps darkly into my ear. I whimper, choking as his hand tightens on my throat, sending my body into orbit. His fingers push lower, and my eyes bulge as he suddenly sinks not one, but both of them deep into me in one rapid, brutal thrust.

Oh my God he's going to make me come.

If he keeps this up, he really will. Maybe it's the two glasses of champagne followed by a whiskey. Maybe it's my jangling nerves.

Maybe it's the fact that despite all the reasons I'm *supposed* to be here, the fact that I'm truly exploring the dark kinks in my head for the first time ever has me clawing at the edges of my sanity already.

Cillian growls low against my neck as his fingers pound into my soaking pussy—the wet, sloppy sound lewdly filling the room as my legs buckle. He rakes his teeth across my neck, and when he suddenly bites down hard, my entire world throbs, and I teeter on the brink.

“I was going to take my fucking time with you,” he hisses darkly. “But I don't think you or your greedy little wet pussy can wait, can you?”

In one motion, everything shifts. His hand slips from between my legs. He

whirls me around, and I'm gasping as I'm suddenly lifted, my legs wrapping around his waist before he slams me against a wall.

One of his big hands grabs both my wrists, shoving and then pinning them above my head. And when I hear the jangle of his belt and the tug of his zipper, my eyes start from my head.

Oh my fucking God...

I whimper when I feel the thick, hot, pulsing weight of his cock against my bare thigh. I gasp as he rocks his hips, pushing the huge, swollen head over my skin until it bumps right up against my clit.

My world blurs. My breath chokes.

This is really happening. He's going to fuck me like this. Oh God.

Cillian growls savagely. The hand not pinning my wrists slides up my body. His fingers find a nipple, and I cry out, shuddering and whimpering as he brutally pinches it. He does the same to the other nipple, then moves back again, alternating between the two until I'm delirious with pain and pleasure. Until I'm so wet, I know I've got to be dripping all over him as he rubs my clit with his head.

He's right there.

He's so close.

One thrust...just one move of his hips, and he'll be inside me.

Except he's not. Not yet, at least. He just keeps brutalizing my nipples and dragging the head of his cock back and forth over my clit, and lowering his mouth to bite and suck at my neck savagely as my reality blurs.

"Is this what you came here for..."

He bites one of my nipples, making me scream in pleasure.

“To be fucking *used*?”

He bites the other as his hand wraps around my throat.

“To prance into the fucking wolf’s lair like a little rabbit, begging to be fucking devoured?”

“I...”

I’m going to come.

I’m going to fucking come.

And that’s exactly when he rolls his hips and sinks the head of his cock *right* between my lips, against my opening.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

His teeth clamp down on a nipple so hard I think he’s going to bite it off. His hand tightens around my neck until black spots swim in the corners of my vision.

Don’t forget what you came here for.

Above my head, my hands clench and unclench, twisting under his merciless grasp, trying to reach for the blade hidden in my hair.

I came here prepared to do anything—*anything*—for Finn. But am I really ready to—

Cillian thrusts.

Hard.

And suddenly, his cock rams inside me to the hilt.

Every. Single. Fucking. Huge. Inch of him.

It hurts. Badly. Brutally. Except, that's not all it does.

It also makes me come.

Instantly.

All the anticipation. All the anxiety preparing for this and coming here tonight. All the build-up, the atmosphere, the hedonism downstairs, and finally—*finally*—meeting my fantasies and my depraved kinks in the flesh, and seeing if they still make me weak in the knees when they're happening for real and not just in my fantasies.

It all hits at once, just as the beautiful and sadistic psychopath I'm supposed to kill drives every inch of his hard, thick, huge cock deep inside of me.

I scream as I come harder than I've ever come before by a *mile*. The waves keep coming, over and over and over, until they threaten to pull me under. My back arches off the wall, my hips grinding into him through the pain and the pleasure and the whirlwind of it all.

My heart is still racing. Every inch of my body is still on fire, electrified. Slowly, I open my eyes, only to shiver as they're instantly swallowed by his venomous green ones.

“*Good girl,*” he growls quietly. His cock flexes powerfully inside of me, making me whimper as a fresh wave of pleasure ripples through my core.

Under the black and gold mask, his brow suddenly furrows.

“What were you reaching for?”

I blink. “What?”

Do it.

“You were reaching for something.”

My pulse skips. He’s still all the way inside of me, but he’s fully dressed, and I can see the glint of a switchblade at his hip.

Do it now. NOW.

His green eyes slowly narrow viciously. His hand drops from my wrists, moving to grip my hip tightly. The other hand stays wrapped around my throat, and when it starts to tighten slightly, I have a moment of clarity.

This isn’t about facing your deep, depraved darkness.

This is about Finn.

Do what you have to do. Now.

Cillian’s eyes thin to slits. “I asked you a fucking question.”

Go. Do it.

Fucking DO IT.

“What the fuck were you reaching f—”

“This.”

I’ve practiced pulling the clasp from my hair and flicking my wrist out a hundred times. Even so, doing it now, with the rush of all the endorphins still roaring through my system, it’s like I’m moving underwater or through molasses.

But I do it just the same.

My hand drops to the knot at the top of my head. My thumb flicks the clasp open, rolling it into my palm as my arm snaps out, flicking open the five-inch blade.

In one motion, with his hands still on my throat and gripping my ass—and with his cock still hard and buried balls-deep inside of me—I swing my arm down and bury the knife deep in his left side, right by his heart.

Cillian's green eyes widen, and his teeth flash fiercely.

“What the *fuck*...”

His hand drops from my throat. And my hips. And suddenly, we're both crashing to the ground. I hit the floor with a gasp, rolling away from him, wincing at the pain when his enormous cock slips from between my legs.

I scramble to my feet, backing away from him as if he might lunge up and strike me down.

No. He's not going anywhere.

The brutal, vicious, gorgeous Irish crime boss lies on the ground, wincing and gritting his teeth. My knife is still buried to the hilt in his side. Blood—a *lot* of blood—pools beneath him. His devilish green eyes roll, but then snap to mine as they start to fog.

“*What the fuck...*”

“*The blood of the innocent washes away the sins of the wicked.*”

I don't know why I say it. I don't know why in this moment I feel the need to repeat the words the monster who was my father used to say. They just slip out.

No matter.

I'm shaking all over as I grab my dress and quickly yank it back on and clasp it at the back. My fake blonde wig tumbles down over my shoulders as I straighten up, tuck my breasts back into the dress, and whirl around.

I don't look back.

I just leave.

When the elevator doors shut, I suddenly fall back against the wall, clutching my chest. My heart is racing so hard it feels like I'm going to go into cardiac arrest.

Breathe.

Breathe, Una.

I let out a soft sob, shaking as I hug myself and suck in a lungful of air, then blow it out. I do it twice more, then twice more again, and finally, the shudders leave me. I stand, taking another deep breath and exhaling slowly.

It's done.

For Finn. It's done.

The elevator doors slide open. I step out, swallowing and letting calmness settle over me.

It's done. It's over.

Hell of a way to lose your virginity, though.

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CILLIAN

MURDER.

Murder would have been fucking *easier*.

I wince, gritting my teeth as Castle yanks the wheel around hard, taking a corner.

“Easy on the fucking gas there, Steve McQueen,” I grunt.

My six-and-a-half-foot tall de facto second in command shoots me a sideways glance before the car lurches violently again as he overtakes another car. My vision blurs as I slam against the passenger side door, and I shoot him a venomous glare.

“You fucker. That was on purpose.”

He shakes his head, his huge hands gripping the wheel as he focuses on his Formula One approach to the West Side Highway.

“*That* was making sure I get you to Dr. Blythe before you bleed the fuck out in my car.”

My jaw grinds as I glance down at the blood-soaked towel I’m pressing to my side, where the girl’s goddam knife is still embedded between my

intercostals.

I wince as Castle takes an exit and my torso muscles contract again around the blade between my ribs. He makes a face as he glances at me.

“So, a girl...”

“Just drive.”

“A single—”

“*Drive* the damn car.”

“Like, are we talking a *Viking-sized*—”

“*Stop fucking talking and drive.*”

Castle is one of the very few people in my life I would allow to push me like this, especially given the situation. But even with him, there are limits.

Fuck Club Venom. And fuck their bullshit pathetic excuse for security that allowed that little psycho through the front door wearing a motherfucking knife as a hair barrette.

Yeah, murder.

Murder would have been *far* fucking easier.

And yeah, fuck hindsight, too, while we’re at it.

With a groan, I allow myself to sink back into the seat. My head lolls against the window, my eyes dragging east to drink in the sight of the city whizzing past us. The towering buildings of light and steel. The millions of people, quietly going about their daily mundane tasks.

The whole world silently agreeing to not tear itself and each other apart piece by bloody piece.

Rules. Society. Law. Order. Most people see it all as a framework. A foundation. A security blanket.

I just see it for the flimsy, whitewashed lie it is.

A sandbox to play in.

A system of lines and walls it's probably best to stay at least partially inside.

Venom is just one of the several...*outlets* I utilize. One of the avenues by which the violence inside of me can be let out in a controlled, guided way, rather than exploding out monstrously. By doing so, by using those steam vents, I remain human. Within the bounds of civilized society.

Well, more or less.

Virtually anyone who's ever met me understands I'm...different.

Dark.

A little broken. A little twisted.

A whole *lot* of fucking crazy.

And they don't even fucking know the half of it.

Ironically, the thing that's been the biggest help keeping me within those boundaries laid down by society is taking over and now running the entire Kildare empire. In another life, in a parallel universe, maybe I'd have been a cutthroat CEO of a Fortune 500 company, or a Wall Street hedge fund manager.

Or Napoleon, or Genghis fucking Khan, if we're really talking alternate realities here. A destructive, driven, and unwavering force of nature.

But leading and guiding the Kildare empire is only one such avenue; just one of the several ways I keep the savagery inside of me in check. There are other

methods I use—chemicals, like alcohol or nicotine. Channeled brutality, like the underground fights I sometimes indulge in.

Or, like tonight, giving in to my more depraved, carnal needs. Hence, Club Venom. And the blonde with the fucking knife.

And yet, all of these are merely stopgaps. They're all...*lesser* alternatives to the one true avenue by which I can control the devil within.

Blood.

True violence.

Killing.

The rumors that surround me claiming I'm a crazy, unhinged psycho aren't overblown. If anything, they pale next to the reality.

I am fully *twice* the monster they all say I am.

But the problem with being an abso-fucking-lutely confirmed psychopath is that life for me has become a delicate balancing act between giving into the base desires that at times almost overwhelm me, and understanding with blazing clarity that giving in to those base desires will almost certainly—eventually—mean prison. Or death.

Because giving in is a slippery slope.

So there are rules. And that's how I've survived to the age of forty-one. By letting that violence out in channeled, controlled ways.

Or, if I'm going to kill—and believe me, I *do*—it's not wanton mayhem. It's not like I go out and throttle coeds like I'm in some low budget 90s teen horror movie, or walk down a sidewalk spraying bullets like a maniac.

When I kill, it's precise.

Warranted.

Needed.

Necessary.

My vision blurs as the pain intensifies. I needed the release tonight worse than usual. I needed to bleed out the darkness within me. One, because I always eventually need to, and *will* always eventually need to. But more importantly two, because Rome is fucking burning.

My empire is cracking and might collapse entirely.

Two months ago, a man—the *devil incarnate*—that I'd once helped to put in a hole for life, escaped that hole. He came after one of my nieces, Neve, seeking retribution.

Seamus fucking O'Connor.

A true monster—and coming from me, that's saying something. A former top hitman for the Irish mob who crossed too many lines with his barbaric brutality and wound up in prison.

The short version is, my late half-brother Declan—Neve's father—cut a deal with the FBI to put Seamus away in exchange for the Bureau essentially turning a blind eye to Kildare family criminal activity in New York City.

Technically speaking, this made Declan a rat, even if the whole thing was sanctioned by the Irish Council of Clans. So to keep things smooth within the other major families, not to mention the Kildare tributary and vassal families, this little tidbit was buried.

Except two months ago, after he managed to escape prison, Seamus was put down by Neve's husband, Ares Drakos, head of the Drakos Greek Mafia family.

Officially, of course, Ares wasn't there at all, with credit for the kill going to our contact within the FBI. But needless to say, Seamus O'Connor—The Executioner, as he was known—escaping prison and then being killed has been top of the news cycle loop for *months*. And with that much limelight shining on the whole thing, dirty little family secrets have gotten out.

Specifically, the one where my late and perhaps not so lamented half-brother colluded with the fucking FBI.

Suffice to say, this isn't going over well with some of the Kildare vassal families.

At all.

So, yes, damn straight I needed to fucking get rid of some steam, or blow up, or do fucking *something* tonight. And in hindsight, given the fucking blade between my ribs currently causing an alarming amount of my blood to seep into the passenger seat of Castle's Range Rover...

Murder would have been *far* simpler than attempting to subdue my demons carnally tonight.

With *her*.

The girl with the full, fuckable lips, and the innocent baby blues that made me want to destroy something beautiful.

To feel the gift of her submission. To taste the whimper from her lips as I meted out her punishment.

My mind glitches, flashes of the private room in the club coming back in manic staccato. The curves of her body. The creaminess of her skin. The gasp from her delicate throat. The incorruptible defiance in her eyes, mixed with fragility.

That was the most fucking intoxicating of all.

It's what pulled me in at the bar, as I watched that motherfucker with the goatee put his filthy hands on her.

The car jerks to the side, and my brow furrows deeply at the memory of that unexpected *feeling* I had, watching him near her. Talking to her. Touching her.

Snarling rage.

Fierce possessiveness.

Vicious jealousy, as if he was trying to take what was already *mine*.

My vision clouds as the memories swirl in and out of focus. As the world blurs.

“*Cillian.*”

Everything darkens and fades.

“*CILLIAN!*”

“GLAD TO HAVE you back with us, Mr. Kildare.”

Groggily, I blink. Slowly, the stark back room of the veterinary clinic comes into focus. So do the peering, anxious faces of Castle, Dr. Blythe, and Hades—younger brother to Ares, and Neve's brother-in-law.

Hades and I butted heads at the beginning when the Irish and Greek families first came together to merge into one united front. Now that some months have passed, I have to admit, he's grown on me. I can appreciate his particular *viciousness* because it's not altogether dissimilar from my own.

But currently, and I can't state this enough...

“*What the fuck are you doing here?*”

Hades raises a brow, eyeing me. He shoves his fingers through his longish dark hair, his blue eyes incredulous and narrowed slightly as he turns to Castle, then back to me.

“Are you fucking serious? Do you really not remember me helping you out the back door of the club and into Castle's car?”

Truth be told, there's not a whole fucking lot I remember between getting shanked in the side by that little bitch and waking up in a surgical room usually reserved for cats, dogs, and the occasional hamster.

“Not exactly.”

“Well...” Hades frowns. “You're welcome.”

“You were at the club?”

He shrugs. “Yes. And?”

“Why?”

Hades smirks, raking his fingers up and down his chiseled jaw.

“I go for the wings and two-for-one beer specials. The fuck do you *think* I was there for?”

I glance at Castle, who shrugs. “I guess you managed to get yourself into the elevator and downstairs. But the kid *did* help you out the back door and called me to come help. You were pretty sliced up, Cill.”

I frown, lowering my gaze to where a giant white bandage is wrapped around my bare torso.

My eyes raise to Hades. “Well. Thank you.”

He shrugs. “You want to tell me who knifed you?”

“No—”

“A woman.”

I turn to level a death stare at Castle.

Hades arches his brows. “Wait, seriously?”

“*Drop it,*” I seethe.

“Are we talking like a linebacker, or Xena the Warrior Pri—”

“*Hades,*” Castle grunts, seeing the flicker of violence flare in my eyes.

“Enough.”

I’m still glaring at Castle, but I finally relent. “Nice driving, by the way.”

He bows his head, shoving his fingers through his short blond hair and blowing air out slowly through his lips. “Yeah, that was *way* too touch and go for a bit.”

Dr. Blythe frowns as he peers into my eyes.

“How do you feel, Mr. Kildare?”

“Like I just got fucking stabbed. How do *you* feel?”

Castle smirks. “I’d say he’s fine, Doc.”

But Dr. Blythe’s brow is still furrowed as he peers at me.

“Yes?”

“If I could offer a professional opinion?”

I raise a brow. “By all means.”

“Mr. Kildare, I see a fair amount of knife wounds...”

“As a mob doctor who operates out of the back of a veterinary clinic? Well, color me shocked,” I mutter dryly, sliding my hand into my rear pants pocket. I pull out the silver case and slip a cigarette out of it, placing it between my lips as my hand delves back in for my Zippo.

Dr. Blythe stares at the unlit cigarette in my mouth.

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not a joking man, doctor.”

He frowns when I flick the Zippo and touch the flame to the end, letting the cherry glow as I inhale slowly, but doesn’t say anything. He knows better.

“You were giving your professional opinion on sharp pointy things.”

Dr. Blythe clears his throat.

“I was going to say, I’m not going to ask how this happened, or where—”

“Which is why I pay you large amounts of money when I need you, in cash.”

“*However,*” he continues. “This isn’t a chance wound. It’s not heat of the moment.”

I smile grimly, thinking of the girl who put it there.

While I was *still inside her*.

“I beg to differ.”

Dr. Blythe shrugs. “This was a practiced stab. It’s...surgically precise. And I dare say, if it wasn’t for the leather sheath of the knife you had strapped to your side under your shirt, there’s a good chance that little blade...”

He turns to nod his chin at the bloody knife lying in a little metal tub—a switchblade concealed in a gold hair clasp and adorned with pretty little roses.

“...Would have managed to pierce your heart. Or at least caused far more serious internal damage, rather than this simple stitch-up job.” He sighs. “What I’m saying, Mr. Kildare, is that this was no amateur. I think a professional tried to assassinate you tonight.”

The cherry at the end of my cigarette glows bright as I take a drag.

“Tell me something I don’t know, doctor.”

I go to swing my legs off the edge of the table. Castle immediately stops me.

“Cillian, what the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“My master plan involved *leaving*.” I turn to glance at Dr. Blythe. “I’m good to go?”

His face says otherwise, but he reluctantly nods. “I’m giving you some painkillers and some antibiotics. *Take them*. And try not to exert yourself.”

Part of me wants to let go—to go home and lose myself in the painkillers, washed down with whiskey.

But that’s not happening.

Not while she’s still out there.

“Oh, actually, Mr. Kildare...” Dr. Blythe frowns. “This is a bit more delicate, but, is...the *rest* of you feeling...okay?”

My brow raises as I take a drag of nicotine.

“Kindly elaborate?”

Dr. Blythe clears his throat, his eyes dropping significantly to the front of my pants.

“There was some, uh, blood, on your trous—”

“It’s not mine.”

Hazy, vague memories rise back up to the surface. Of lying in that room, feeling the blood pooling at my back. Of my vision swimming as I glanced down at the blade in my side, knowing pulling it out would be worse than leaving it in.

Knowing I had to get up. Knowing too that I should probably tuck my cock back in my pants before doing so.

Frowning at the streak of blood I saw there.

Sadist that I am, tearing someone’s fucking vagina with my dick isn’t exactly on my kinks list. But then, she *did* fucking stab me and leave me to die.

It’s sort of hard to feel any sympathy for her after that.

Her, *or* her pussy.

I grunt as I find my footing. Castle and Hades make a move to grab me, but I wave them off.

“I’m fine. Just get the car.”

Castle shakes his head. “Where to?”

“Home.”

I take a final drag of my smoke before stubbing it out in the metal dish next to the operating table. When my hand comes away, it’s holding her blade.

I *do* plan on going home, of course. I’ll spend at least a day sinking into

whiskey and painkillers. And the memory of her moans. Her submission. The taste of her lips.

And what I'll do to them when I catch her.

Because I *will* be catching her.

It's not just for revenge, and it's not just because of what happened tonight. It's because of the twelve words she breathed right before she left me to die.

"The blood of the innocent washes away the sins of the wicked."

It's not the first time I've heard those words. But I would very much like to know where *she* heard them.

So I'm going to find her.

And bind her.

And pull her secrets from her piece by fucking piece.

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UNA

THERE'S a monster in each of us.

At least, that's what my father used to tell us. Or should I say, what he used to *preach* to us. This went hand in hand with uplifting remarks like “we are all already in purgatory, and the job of the righteous is to send the wicked to Hell so the rest may go to Heaven.”

Seamus fancied himself a man of God. A redeemer. A prophet. And for a long time—so, so much longer than I should have—I believed that. For years, I chose to overlook the reality that was staring me, and usually screaming at me, right in the face.

My father wasn't a man of God. He wasn't a prophet, or great savior.

He *was*, however, the monster he claimed was inside each of us.

And tonight, you took one giant step closer to becoming him.

I wince as I climb the last flight of stairs to the top-floor landing of the crumbling Hell's Kitchen apartment building I've called home for the last year.

I hurt.

A lot.

All over.

Gritting my teeth, I open the three locks on my door and slink into the apartment. When it's safely locked and dead-bolted behind me, I groan as I sink against it, my heart racing.

My mind whirling.

My entire body still—oh God—throbbing and tingling.

And aching.

With an effort, I push myself away from the door and drag myself through the tiny studio apartment. I shed my coat and my flimsy porno-dress, letting both drape across my bed against the wall as I gratefully kick off my heels. I slip my underwear partway down, and grimace as I examine the black lace, spotted darker in places.

That part wasn't supposed to happen. *That* wasn't in the plan.

Turning, I let my eyes drift over the collage of pictures, newspaper clippings, and notes tacked up on the wall. Photos of people, all labeled with their names—Ares Drakos, Castle James, Neve Kildare...

My pulse skips when my eyes land on the pictures in the middle of the group. The photos of the lethally attractive man with the sharp jaw and the venomous green eyes.

The beast who took my virginity...

...about ninety seconds before I put a knife in his heart.

I shudder, hugging myself and wincing again at the pain I feel everywhere. My neck, from his hands and teeth. My breasts, which are spotted with the

early dark spots of bruises and more teeth marks. My hips and ass, sporting welts from the riding crop.

Between my legs.

It all hurts. And yet...it's not necessarily a bad hurt.

Thank you, fucked up kinks.

I chew on my lip, my hands tracing down my bruised body. Yeah, *that* wasn't supposed to happen. Yes, the plan tonight involved seducing Cillian and getting him alone. It's why I spent the last month watching the patrons of Club Venom come and go, narrowing it down to a handful of potentials, then shadowing each of them in turn to find an opening.

I got lucky with Jenny.

Blonde, but the wig fixed that, roughly my size and complexion, and a relative newcomer to Club Venom—thanks to the older guy she was seeing from a sugar daddy website who bought her a membership. Jenny was a little careless with her wallet one night while stumbling into a cab outside the club. Jenny also recently took a new job in San Francisco, and won't really be using her Club Venom membership much.

That was the plan. Get through security using Jenny Miller's membership ID, find and seduce Cillian Kildare, get him alone, and kill him.

Not as payback for his involvement in my father's incarceration and then death.

But to free the one person on earth I care about, or who cares about me.

My twin brother, Finn.

Finn's the reason I came to New York City a year ago. He's the reason I've spent any free moment I have between my odd jobs combing the seedier parts

of the city, asking around shelters, halfway houses, and methadone clinics.

A dull but firm knock at my apartment door sends a ripple of something cold and fierce down my spine. I tense, grabbing my robe off the hook on the bathroom door and pulling it on hastily before I glance at the door.

I know there won't be anyone there when I open it.

There never is.

Swallowing, I walk quietly across the floor. I glance through the peephole anyway. But of course, there's nobody. I slowly creak the door open a crack, and my gaze drops to the floor of the landing.

At the little black box.

With a shiver I feel in my very soul, I pick it up, slip back inside, and triple lock the door again. Sitting on the edge of my bed, I open the box and stare at the black throwaway flip-phone inside. I wait for it to ring. Keep waiting. Seconds and then minutes tick by before I finally set it down.

My eyes slide back to the wall of photos and notes.

All *targets*, all picked by *him*.

He goes by the name Apostle. We've never met in person. Only via heavily encrypted emails and burner phones, where he sounds as if he's talking through a voice scrambler.

He claims he worked for my father. He says he's still "carrying out his holy mission". Two months ago, when he first reached out, he told me he had my brother.

Then he threatened to kill Finn unless I used the training and brutality that our father beat into us when we were children to hunt down and eliminate a list of targets—all associated with my father's capture and incarceration

fifteen years ago, and his death a few months ago.

I didn't kill Cillian Kildare tonight because I harbor any grudge against him. I don't even know what his involvement with my father's death was, nor do I care.

I killed him because I will do *anything* for Finn.

Anything.

Even stalking the members and peripheral members of an Irish crime family. Even murdering its leader in cold blood.

Even fucking him.

A knot forms in my stomach as I feel my face grow hot. Again, *that* wasn't ever supposed to be part of what happened earlier tonight.

I didn't go to a kink club with the intention of losing my virginity to the man I was about to kill.

A man with lethally hypnotic green eyes. A man with a positively palpable darkness swirling around him—a darkness that latched onto and hooked itself into that secret, hidden part of me, and refused to let go.

A darkness that sparked something wicked in me.

I didn't *have* to let any of that happen. I could have killed him in the elevator. Or when we first walked into the room. Or when he was telling me to strip, or first touching me.

Pushing me to the edge.

Shattering my inhibitions and allowing the darkest parts of me I've never once explored with another person to come flooding out.

I *know* I could have done it before his cock rammed between my legs.

Before he drove into me, claiming me like no one ever has before.

Before I felt every *enormous* inch of his thickness filling me, stretching me, even tearing me—a pain that immediately triggered a pleasure response, because that’s how fucked up I am.

That sudden and vicious first penetration, after being wound up by him so tightly, was like pulling a trigger, making me come instantly, harder than I’ve ever come before.

No. I didn’t have to let all of that happen. At least, I don’t think I did. Though, now that I’m thinking about it, maybe it’s better to say I was powerless to stop any of it.

Because the version where I *let* a vicious monster brutally take my virginity against the bedroom wall of a sex club seconds before I put a knife in his heart doesn’t exactly paint me in a very positive light.

I close my eyes, shuddering as I remember the savagery of his touch. The viciousness of his kiss. The sheer brutality of his pleasure.

When I shift on the bed, I wince at the pain that cramps between my thighs. I put my hand down there, and my fingers come away smudged with red.

And my face burns with shame.

I wish I could say blood is the only wetness I felt there in this moment. But that would be a lie.

With a groan, I stand and pad into the bathroom, shedding my robe. In the mirror, my eyes drag over the many bruises and marks scattered across my skin—my tenderized nipples, my bitten neck.

The puffiness between my thighs.

From there, as always, my gaze shifts to the other marks that dot my body.

Older scars. Older wounds, that run far deeper than my skin. Some are from the brutal monster who was my father—the faded scar on my wrist, the lines across my back.

Others are from my own hand.

Little secret white lines across my thighs.

Places where I could let the pain bleed out. Places where the horrors from my childhood and adolescence could escape. Places I cut to feel anything other than the shadows of the past.

But not all of them come from a place of misery and darkness. Others come from a place of...

Depravity.

They're the reminders of times I've pushed the deviant and fucked-up kinks inside of me to places I shouldn't go—to cliff edges I shouldn't look over.

To places where pain and pleasure blend in heady, intoxicating ways.

Shuddering, I turn my gaze from the mirror and the marks across my body. I drag open the shower curtain to turn on the water, only to be greeted by my roommate and committed life partner, Bones.

Bones cocks his head to the side, his eyes flitting over me as if he's drinking in each bruise, each bite mark. Each pink, red, or rapidly-turning-purple mark on my flesh, and judging me for every single one.

“Don't look at me like that, dude. You lick your own asshole.”

Bones meows, licking his lips.

“Oh, let me guess. Wonder of wonders, you're *hungry*. There's a shock.”

Bones hops up onto the edge of the tub. He's probably been drinking from

the leaky faucet. He jumps down onto the floor and rubs his head against my shin.

“My my, amazing how that judgey attitude drops when you need your tummy filled, isn’t it?” I smirk, wincing when I bend down to pick him up. “Okay, c’mon.”

The tiny refrigerator with the plug-in electric stove sitting on top of it is shoved into the corner of my cramped, crummy apartment, right near the door. I make a face when I open the fridge, smelling something rotten coming from God-only-knows-where, considering it’s empty. The cupboard above isn’t much better. I’m down to two slices of bread, one can of tomato soup, and a tin of tuna fish.

When I first arrived in the city, I worked multiple odd jobs—waitressing, mainly—to try and rustle up the enormous sum of money even a shithole like this costs to rent in this city. Because I *had* to be here. New York was the last clue I had about my addict twin brother’s whereabouts.

As of two months ago, though, when Apostle entered the picture, I haven’t had time to work. Not with trying to track the targets he gave me, and plan how the hell I was supposed to do what he wanted me to do. And I don’t exactly get to bill him for my time.

So mostly, for the last couple of months, I’ve kept Bones and I fed by shoplifting. I’ve only managed to keep the apartment itself because my elderly landlady on the first floor can’t remember that I haven’t paid her in two months, which, needless to say, makes me feel like complete shit.

But you do what you have to do to survive. And I will *always* do what I have to do for Finn.

He gave everything for me.

My stomach groans as I look over our meager provisions.

“You know what?” I shrug, putting Bones down and then grabbing the last precious can of tuna from the cupboard. “We’re celebrating—”

I stop.

What the fuck *am* I celebrating? Killing someone for the first time? Someone I didn’t even have any personal problem with? Or, what, losing my virginity...like *that*?

“You know what, forget celebrating. Let’s just eat.”

I open the can and use a plastic fork to shovel a quarter of the tin into Bones’ bowl. He happily digs in as I sit on the edge of the bed, chewing slowly and thoroughly to make each bite last.

I jolt as the burner phone rings on the bed next to me. Here we go. A coldness settles over me, as it always does when I have to interact with him.

“Hello, Una.”

The voice—this vaguely metallic, slightly filtered, almost inhuman sound—always makes me feel like a ghost is dragging its nails down my spine.

“Hi,” I mumble in a choked whisper.

“Can I assume it’s done?”

I nod, clearing my throat. “Ah... Yes.”

The phone is quiet.

“Hello?”

“*Good*. It is the job of the righteous to send the wicked to Hell.”

My heart clenches as a shiver tears right through me.

My father was a religious zealot. A monster, a psychopath, a killer, and a *horrible* father, too. But it was his religious fanaticism more than anything that attracted people to him. People just as insane, who saw him as this almost cult-like figure. They were women, mostly. That much I remember from before he went to prison—the legions of adoring, fawning women who always seemed to be hanging out around our house day and night.

But then there were others. Other zealots like Apostle. They were the true weirdos. Sometimes, I wonder if I met Apostle in that life I vaguely remember before my father was arrested.

But it doesn't really matter. Given that he has Finn, I'll do whatever he says now.

I clear my throat. "How's—"

"He'll be fine," Apostle barks. "So long as you do what must be done."

I shudder, hugging myself as my eyes slide to the wall of photos.

"Find the rest. Do what must be done."

The line goes dead.

I SLEEP LATER than usual the next morning. I'm still sore, too. But after a couple of Extra Strength Tylenols and a long soak in a hot bath, the pain slowly begins to ebb away.

The tingles and illicit ache that come with that pain, however, remain.

I'm sitting on my bed, butted right up against the wall to try and snag a single bar of my neighbor's WiFi. On my crappy, cracked, ten-year-old laptop, I'm reading about Ares Drakos, head of the Drakos Greek mafia family. As of a

few months ago, he's also husband to Neve Kildare.

That would be, for those keeping score, the niece of the man I killed last night.

I shudder, my stomach knotting as my eyes drop to my hands. As if I'm still expecting to find blood on them, even though I've showered twice and taken an hour-long bath since then.

Killing a person isn't what I thought it would be.

It's also lingering in my soul way more heavily than I thought it would.

I shake my head, trying to clear those thoughts away. I have to. I simply cannot dwell on my sins, or think too much about how this makes me just a little bit more like the father I wish I could forget.

How I've ended up running headlong down the very path he wanted us to follow, even though I never wanted to.

Focus on what's next. Focus on Finn.

A knock at the door jolts me, yanking my eyes up from the laptop.

It's him again.

Of course it's him again.

I wait a good thirty seconds before slowly sliding from the bed and walking quietly to the door. I don't want him to accidentally see me, and I'm sure he doesn't want me accidentally to see him. As expected, out on the landing, there's another black box.

Apostle never calls me on the same phone twice. The one from last night's brief conversation is already snapped in two with the battery removed, sitting in my bathroom trash can, as instructed.

On the edge of my bed, I take out the new burner. This time, it buzzes instantly.

“Yes—”

“Cillian Kildare is still alive.”

It hits me like a slap to the face.

Like a punch to the stomach.

Like a knife to the heart.

But there also a little glimmer of...*something*...inside of me that throws me for even more or a loop.

Happiness? Gratitude? Relief?

Excitement.

“Una.”

I shiver, dragging myself back to reality and the robotic voice on the other end of the phone.

“No, that’s impossible—”

“Don’t you ever lie to me again, Una, or there will be consequences.”

I stammer. “B-but I didn’t! I swear to God, I stabbed him in the—”

“For Finn. There will be consequences for *Finn*.”

I go cold, shaking my head.

“*Please...*”

“Finish what you started.” Apostle’s voice is tinny through the scrambler.
“You have work to do, little bird.”

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CILLIAN

AS MENTIONED, a dark, snarling savagery lurks beneath my skin, like a monster prowling the shadows. And most of the time, I keep him buried. But when he knows I'm going to let a little of that fury come out to play in one of my carefully controlled ways, he rises up, like a tiger pacing and snarling at the bars.

Looking for an opening.

Looking to break free and *hunt*.

Which is exactly what I'm currently doing.

From deep in the shadows next to the dilapidated garage, I watch the three men jostle each other, laughing as they stumble their way from the street to the front door of this place, not fifteen feet from where I'm blending into the night.

A jumpy, eager, exhilarated energy begins to hum through my veins. My finger strokes the handle of the switchblade in my pocket.

New York City likes to think it cleaned itself up in the late nineties. That all the grime and grit was washed away. But all they really did was paste over the filth with hipster bars and overpriced organic grocers. The darkness and

the evil are still there, they're just better hidden.

And fuck me, it's made the hunt more exciting.

The three men shuffle closer, laughing and red-faced as they crack jokes. They're drunk. And while part of me feels cheated that this tips the scales a bit more unfairly in my favor, I'm not—strictly speaking—on the hunt tonight as a means of escape, or to feed my monster.

I'm here tonight for fucking *answers*.

It's been two weeks since the tiny girl with the delicate throat, the incorruptible defiance in her eyes, and the intoxicating fragility emanating from her skin left me for dead. Since then, I've kept a low profile, staying mostly out of the public eye.

Although I recently bought a new place for myself across the river in Brooklyn—finally, after almost a year Stateside—I've been staying back at the Kildare family home on the Upper East Side these past two weeks.

Only Castle and Hades know what happened that night at Club Venom. And I'm keeping it that way. No one needs to know about the girl with the knife. And that's *not* my pride talking, or my ego.

It's because of what she said right before she left me to bleed out.

“The blood of the innocent washes away the sins of the wicked.”

I've heard those words before. From the devil himself.

From Seamus O'Connor.

An Seiceadóir.

The Executioner.

Seamus is dead, of course. Definitely so. Ares killed him after he'd

kidnapped Neve, exacting his vengeance. And that's something I saw with my own eyes: Seamus, his eyes staring wide and unblinkingly up at the sky, face white, surrounded by his blood, with a gaping hole in his chest.

But while The Executioner himself may be dead, what happened the other night, or more specifically what that little psycho who knifed me said after she did it, confirms a nagging, lingering feeling I've had for months.

That Seamus was only the tip of the iceberg. That he didn't work alone, as everyone assumed he did.

Years ago, when my half-brother Declan made the deal with the FBI, it was a last-ditch resort. For decades, Seamus had been the absolute top, most vicious and prolific hired killer the Irish mafia had ever known. I mean, this was a man who was literally kicked out of the Irish Republican Army during the Troubles for "cruel and barbaric conduct".

You have to be on a whole other level to be deemed too extreme by the fucking *IRA*. And eventually, the extremism Seamus brought with him to the States when he was working as a killer for hire became too much.

Seamus didn't just go after his targets. He, unsanctioned, went after their families as well—their wives, even their fucking *children*—in barbarous ways. A religious fanatic, Seamus had a mantra of "bleeding the innocent to wash away the sins of the wicked."

I mean that quite literally. Seamus' *modus operati* involved fucking *crucifying* the families of his targets, and literally bleeding them out.

For years, this habit was overlooked by the Council of Clans, due to his connection to the Kildare name by way of my half-brother Declan, who was a product of my father's improprieties with a woman named Sheila O'Conor.

As in, Seamus O'Conor's *sister*.

Translated: my half-brother was Seamus's nephew.

But at a certain point, even given the family connection, enough was enough. Add in the fact that Seamus was not even discreetly trying to build his own empire, and the Council finally put their foot down. That's when Declan made his deal, and Seamus was thrown into ADX Florence supermax prison.

And then a few months ago, he was killed.

But.

After hearing those words from the little psycho's lips the other night, I'm not positive his would-be empire died *with him*. And the stitches still in my side would like to know for sure.

I need to know what's out there in the shadows. I need to know if there's still danger lurking around the corner, waiting to try and hurt my family again. And the three men currently stumbling their way back to their garage-slash-chop-shop—or at least the one unlocking the door—are going to tell me that.

I mean, maybe they won't.

But that would be a *very* messy mistake on their part.

Because I already fucking *know* the knife she used on me came from Aaron, a small-time stolen car broker and arms seller. I know because he's a fucking egotistical dumbass and has a habit of etching this stupid symbol—an "A" for Aaron, with an overlaid upside-down second "A", for Armstrong, his last name—into the weapons he sometimes sells.

I mean the dumb fuck sells illegal arms, and literally *writes his name on them*.

Whatever happens to him tonight is fucking mercy.

I wait until all three of them have lurched inside before I surge out of the

shadows. My foot hits the door right by the knob, slamming it inward, sending it cracking into Aaron's face.

He squeals like a stuck pig, clutching his smashed, bleeding face as he topples backward onto the grimy floor. His two buddies stare at me with looks of panic, fear, and utter disbelief, instantly sobering. Then they're rushing me.

The monster in me flexes and rises up, grinning.

Smelling the blood in the water even before I strike.

The first one gets my fist to his throat, followed by an elbow across the face. He gurgles, going down hard as the blood streams beautifully from his nose. Idiot number two pulls a knife, and I smile icily.

I was hoping they'd be this stupid.

The snapping sound of his wrist echoes almost as loudly through the room as his scream when I yank his arm to the side. In one motion, I've knocked his legs out from under him, whipping him around to face his buddies, and brought the blade of his own knife up to his throat.

Aaron's eyes go wide as he tries to drag himself up from the ground.

"You don't have to do—"

The man in my hands gurgles, choking on his own blood as I slice the blade through his jugular and windpipe in one move, letting him fall to my feet like a gutted fish.

"I'm sorry, you were saying?"

Aaron stares at me in horror. The other guy looks like he's going to throw up as he holds his smashed nose.

I feel less than nothing about the man drowning in his own blood at my feet. For one, because, well, I'm me.

But I also feel less than nothing about this particular sack of shit because the world will not miss one George T. Guitanno, of Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. A man who mostly seemed to get his pleasure in life from drinking, being a collector for some two-bit no-name Italian gang, and beating the living shit out of his wife and kids.

I might be a monster. But I'm a specific *sort* of monster. And there are *other* sorts I have no tolerance for.

Plus, I mean...a man's got to have *some* standards.

"Mr. Kildare..." Aaron bleats, looking like he's just seen the grim reaper himself walk through his front door.

If he doesn't play his cards right in the next two minutes, that's exactly what I'll be to him.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the little gold-handled knife—the former occupant of my ribs. I hold it high, letting the overhead lights of the garage glint off it.

"I'd like to know who you sold this to."

Aaron swallows, his eyes darting side to side.

Please.

Please be fucking stupid.

Please lie to my fucking face so that I can feed the blood lust inside of me.

"I've never seen that before in my life!"

I smile widely.

Thank you, Aaron.

In a second, I'm storming over to his buddy and grabbing him by the wrist. The man squeals and writhes, kicking and screaming as he tries to get free of me.

Yeah, no. That's not going to work.

I drag him across the chop shop to one of the giant metal table drills. He screams as I slam his hand down across the drill hole with the giant bit, an inch in diameter, poised above it. He hollers and pulls and twists.

But my grip is strong.

He's not going anywhere.

"I won't ask again, Aaron."

"Mr. Kildare, *please*. That's my cousin!"

I kick on the machine. A horrendously loud metallic whirring sound fills the garage as the menacing drill spins to a blur above Dear Cousin's hand.

"I swear! I've never—"

Thank you again, Aaron.

I grab the drill handle with my free hand and yank it down.

The sound is very...*wet*.

The screams are all-consuming.

"OKAY! OKAY! STOP!"

I step on the floor switch, killing the drill with the bit still through the man's hand. Smiling and clearing my throat, I turn to a horrified-looking Aaron, ignoring the sobs of his cousin.

“Was there anything else you wanted to say, Aaron?”

He nods vigorously, his face white.

“Okay, *okay*. Look, Mr. Kildare, I’m sorry, okay?! But he threatened to—”

“Whatever it is, I *know* you know my punishment will be much, *much* worse.”

Aaron swallows thickly, nodding his head.

“*Who*.”

“I—I never saw his face. He wore a hood and like a...like a mask of some kind.”

My brow furrows.

“You keep saying ‘he’.”

“Well, yeah.”

“He’s a he.”

He nods.

“Not a hundred-pound blonde girl.”

Aaron gives me a puzzled look, but I ignore it.

“Name. What was his *name*.”

Aaron’s eyes dart nervously side to side before they center on me.

“He just called himself Apostle.”

My brow arches incredulously.

“You know,” Aaron blurts nervously. “Like Saint Paul—”

“I’m fucking Irish Catholic, you dumb twat. I know what a goddamn apostle is. Who the fuck *is* he?”

Aaron shakes his head. “I don’t know. Honestly, Mr. Kildare…” he glances pitifully at his bleeding, *bleeding* cousin pinned to the industrial drill. “I really, really don’t. Like I said, I never saw his face. Didn’t even hear his voice.”

I frown. “Excuse me? You just said—”

“Yeah, guy talks through one of those robot things. Like those guys in the anti-smoking ads talking outta a hole in their throats.”

Interesting.

“He paid cash every time.”

My eyes snap to Aaron’s. “Every time?”

He nods eagerly. “Yeah, he was a repeat customer.”

“What else did he buy?”

He swallows.

“What. Else.”

“A forty-five with a bunch of ammo, some remote detonators, and a Barrett M82.”

My mouth thins. “You sold him remote detonators and a fucking sniper rifle?”

He swallows again, nodding.

“Okay. Wears a mask, uses a voice changer, pays cash,” I growl. “You’re sure there’s nothing else you can give me?”

Aaron shakes his head. “No, Mr. Kildare, I’m sorry.”

“That’s really too bad.”

I turn, pulling the gun out of my jacket and leveling it at the man pinned to the drill. Aaron screams as I put a bullet through his cousin’s head. His grieving doesn’t last long. A second bullet turns his own face to mush about a half second later.

And that’s that.

Like before, I feel absolutely nothing. And like before, it’s for the same reasons as the first man I killed when I walked in here. One, because it’s me we’re talking about. And two, because the world will not miss, and does not even *need*, men like Aaron and his cousin Brian over there.

Brian also enjoyed beating up the women he was married to. Like the one that “ran away” five years ago and no one seems to be able to locate, or wife number two who’s perpetually sporting black eyes and busted lips.

And Aaron? Well, Aaron likes—*liked*—his internet pornography with a dash of particular heinousness.

Children.

Again, there are types of monsters I have no patience for and will give no quarter to.

Monsters like my father.

And they make *fantastic* sacrifices to my own bloodlust.

I make a quick pit stop at Aaron’s office computer to delete the security records of my mayhem.

Then I’m gone.

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CILLIAN

“MORNING, SUNSHINE.”

I turn to glance at my niece, Eilish, grinning at me from the breakfast table of the Upper East Side brownstone—the home she and her sister grew up in, and that I moved into almost a year ago, when I came to New York from London to take over after Declan was killed.

“More like good afternoon.”

Neve, Eilish’s older sister, grins an equally Cheshire Cat smile at me over the rim of her coffee mug. Beside her, Castle just shakes his head, giving nothing away.

Since getting married, Neve of course now lives with her husband Ares in their penthouse on the West Side. She and Eilish are thick as thieves, though. And when you add Castle into the mix, who’s basically been like a big brother to them ever since I hired him to be their bodyguard more than ten years ago, it’s like a little trio of siblings that can’t stay away from each other.

Neve and Eilish glance at each other, grinning impishly, before they turn back to me, wagging their brows.

“Yes?” I grunt.

“Oh, nothing, Cill,” Eilish giggles. “It’s just that...well, you sure were out late.”

My brow furrows. “And?”

“And so when are we going to meet her?!” Neve blurts with a grin.

I’m confused. But that confusion quickly fades when I catch Castle’s eye.

“I, uh, told them about the woman you’ve been seeing,” he says pointedly. “You know, the one keeping you away from us, away from family dinners, out late...”

There’s a reason Castle quickly moved from being a bodyguard and nanny to top lieutenant to basically my second in command after I moved here.

He’s one smart motherfucker.

As it stands now, only he, Hades, and I know what happened that night. And I have no fucking intention of that changing.

I do *not* need my nieces—Neve especially—to think there are any Seamus-related demons coming after them from the grave.

“Soooooo? What’s her name?” Eilish beams at me. Fan-fucking-tastic. I’m getting dragged into schoolgirl gossip at the breakfast table.

“Her name is none of your business.”

She giggles, seeing the playfulness in my eyes even with my grouchy, muttered tone.

I’ll never be “normal”. I’ll never function the way Neve, Eilish, Castle, or anyone else I know functions. Just as I’ll never have a family of my own, because there is *zero* scenario where me getting married and having children

is even remotely a good idea.

Not with my darkness.

Not with the violence inside of me.

And certainly not with the knowledge that I could very well pass my monstrous nature down to my offspring.

That's a hard pass. The world does *not* need more Cillian Kildares in it.

On the other hand, I'm okay with that. Romantic relationships are too complicated for me to keep up for very long—I've tried, and failed. And in a way, my nieces are like daughters to me—Neve and Eilish here in New York, even my slightly estranged third niece, my late sister's daughter Rose, in London.

And fuck, even Castle—he's somewhere between a step-son and a little brother.

“Well, we'd love to meet her sometime,” Neve shrugs. “And I'm happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey,” Neve grins at me. “We're about to go pick up Callie and take a look at how the renovations are coming along at the Banshee. Wanna come with?”

Neve, Eilish, and Calliope, Neve's sister-in-law and the youngest Drakos sibling, have recently gone in on buying and reopening an Irish bar together, God help us all.

I smile. “I'd love to. But I've got some business stuff to get through.”

“Are you *sure*?” she coaxes. “I'm driving my new wheels and everything.”

Another new development: my lifetime New Yorker of a niece actually got

her driver's license and a car—an admittedly gorgeous Aston Martin Vantage that Ares bought for her.

“Oh, well, in that case...” I smirk over the rim of my coffee. “It’s a definite no.”

Eilish cracks up. Neve sticks out her lower lip, rolling her eyes as she flips me off.

Yeah, I don’t need a romantic relationship or children to have a family.

I already have one, weird and wild as it may be.

NEVE AND EILISH eventually stop trying to pry the name of a woman who doesn’t exist from me when they leave to go meet up with Calliope.

Honestly, God have mercy on whoever tries to get in the path of *that* three-pronged tornado.

Not long after that, Hades shows up, and he, Castle and I disappear into my office. Make no mistake, the Drakos and Kildare families might be a united front now, since Ares and Neve have gotten married. But our family businesses are still our own. The blending of the families acts as a truce and presents a united front: it’s not a business merger.

Hades, however, isn’t here on family business. He’s here on the business of ghosts.

If any other members of either of our families have any suspicions that Seamus’ potential network of followers is still out there, they’ve kept it to themselves. But Hades, Castle, and I...we read the room with each other months ago. And keeping an eye out for any hints of Seamus’ people has

been something we've been meeting on with some regularity ever since.

"Got anything?"

Hades clears his throat as he drops his muscular frame onto the couch across from me. While Castle and I have been looking into connections on the street, Hades has been digging into Seamus' history. It helps that he's got a Homeland Security deputy on his speed dial who apparently owes him a fucking lifetime of favors.

"Seamus was a very popular man in prison."

Castle rolls his eyes. "Is this the beginning of a shower sex joke?"

The younger Drakos brother smirks, shaking his head. "I don't mean he was popular with the other dudes in prison. I mean he was popular with the women who came to fuck him."

I arch a brow. "Excuse me?"

He slaps a manilla envelope down on the table between us.

"Conjugals. Motherfucker had a whole fan club of groupies who wanted to bang him, same as Dahmer or Bundy. And let me tell you," he nods at the folder. "There was a fucking *lineup* to ride that sociopath's dick."

My jaw tightens. "Why is this the first time I'm hearing about any of this?"

"Because it was sealed." Hades arches a brow at me. "And if psycho-fuckers surprise you?" He glances at Castle, then back to me. "Then you're going to want to stay seated when I tell you about the off-site psych evaluations he had on a bi-weekly basis."

My eyes narrow lethally as an icy blade drags slowly up my spine.

"What?"

Seamus O’Conor is one of, if not *the*, most prolific killers the FBI has ever captured. Fifteen years ago, when I made sure he went into the fucking hole and stayed there, he was tossed into ADX Florence—aka the Alcatraz of the Rockies. It’s the highest-profile, highest security super maximum prison in the country, and O’Conor was hands down the most dangerous inmate they’d ever had, the one they least wanted to escape. I mean, the man put forty prisoners and seven guards into their graves during his time there.

So what the ever-living *fuck* was he doing being taken out of that place for “off-site psych evaluations”?

“There’s no fucking way that’s true,” Castle growls. “Who the hell would be dumb enough to let that piece of shit out of his cage?”

Especially since Seamus’ colorful history involved, aside from mass murder and torture, *breaking out* of just about every other prison he’d ever been in.

Hades lifts a shoulder, dropping a second envelope onto the table.

“A criminal psychiatrist who was writing a book on serial killers, that’s who.”

My jaw grinds as I reach for the two envelopes. The first has a list—a *lengthy* list—of women’s names and dates. Seamus’ in-prison booty calls, apparently.

“Dr. Gail Thompson,” Hades grunts. “That’s the criminal psychiatrist. She petitioned the DOJ and the FBI and got special, classified permission to study O’Conor, provided she used what she learned to *also* write a Bureau guide on sociopathic behavior, as well as her fucking bestseller.” He shrugs. “I didn’t get much, but some of it’s in there. Seems like your basic Hannibal Lecter Clarice Starling *Silence of the Lambs* type shit. Lots of poking into his relationship with his mom, that kind of thing.”

Hades frowns as I open the second folder.

“The kids, now that’s a weird one though. My guy didn’t really have any answers about that.”

Something ticks like a clock in my head. My eyes narrow as they raise to Hades.

“What fucking kids?”

“In there.”

He points to the folder, which I start to leaf through. There are pages of notes from this Dr. Thompson, various psych evaluations. When I shuffle to the bottom of the folder, suddenly, I stop cold.

What the fuck is this.

The picture is old and grainy, maybe taken with a disposable camera. In it, two children—a boy and a girl—who appear to be about ten stand side by side. They also look to be nearly identical. Both with dark hair and blue eyes. Same noses. Same chins. Same...faces.

Twins. They’re fucking *twins*.

But, striking as they are, it’s not the kids that really capture my attention. It’s the man standing behind them with the silvered, long hair, the silver beard. Looming over them. A hand on each of their shoulders, fingers clawed and cruel looking.

Fucking *smiling* for the camera.

It’s Seamus.

“Who the hell let him near two—”

And then I go still. The darkness inside of me begins to rage—quietly at first, then louder and louder as I lean closer to the image, my eyes piercing into it.

Into *her*.

The top half of her face may have been covered, but I'll die before I forget those eyes.

Those lips.

The delicate throat.

The incorruptible defiance, and sweet, intoxicating fragility.

Hades and Castle are saying something to me, but I don't hear a word. Slowly, I turn the photo over, and my eyes zero in on the words scrawled across the back.

"Wait, what's that?" Hades frowns. "I didn't notice that before."

Castle leans closer. "Yeah, what—" he goes still. As still as I am. "*What the actual fuck?*"

On the back of the photo is handwritten, "Daddy loves Una and Finn".

It says the little psycho who tried to kill me is Seamus' fucking *daughter*.

"Holy shit..." Hades growls, staring at the photo. He raises his gaze to Castle and I, his brow furrowing deeply. "Did you fucking know?"

"That that fucking sociopath had *kids*?" Castle hisses. "No. No fucking idea." He glances at me sideways, but I shake my head, mesmerized, still staring at the photo.

Of her.

My mysterious attacker—my lethally dangerous playmate—has a name.

Una.

"This is the first I've ever heard of it."

When I raise my eyes, Hades' are narrowed suspiciously.

“Something on your mind, God of Hell?” I hiss thinly.

He draws in a slow breath, his sharp blue eyes glinting fiercely in his olive-toned face. He shoves a hand through his dark hair as he sits back on the couch.

“You could say that,” he growls. “I’m just wondering when the skeletons in the Kildare closet will finally stop falling out all over the fucking living room floor. Because once *again*, I find myself caught off guard by some shit from *your* family’s fucking past that I have a sneaking suspicion is going to now involve *my* fucking family.”

Yeah. About that. It wasn’t until after the Drakos and Kildare families united through Ares and Neve’s marriage that it came to light that the infamous *An Seiceadóir* aka The Executioner aka Seamus O’Conor was in fact Neve’s great uncle.

In the wake of that revelation, there was some doubt on the part of the Drakos side—mainly on Hades’ part, actually—that perhaps all the shit that was going down right then with Seamus was far more than the Drakoses had bargained for when they agreed to unite the families.

Which, I’ll grant, is fair.

“This isn’t Kildare history, Hades,” Castle growls, a warning note in his voice. “If anything, considering it’s *your* brother who put that monster down —”

“Saving *Neve*, you fucking prick—”

“*Enough.*”

My voice cuts through the room like a blade, silencing them. My eyes stab

unblinking into Hades, which I'm well aware always unnerves the shit out of him.

"Castle is right. This isn't Kildare history. It's just buried history. No one—and I mean *no one*—knew Seamus had children."

Hades' eyes narrow as he nods slowly.

"That's who stabbed you the other night, isn't it?" He drops his gaze and leans over the table, tapping the photo. "Her."

In lieu of a response, I take out a cigarette and deftly light it.

"I want him found."

"The boy?" Castle nods slowly. "I'm on—"

"Not you." I shake my head. "I need you ultra-focused on Eilish. And even though Neve's got Ares and all of the Drakos muscle and eyes that come with that, I also want you overseeing her, too."

If that little psycho comes after my family, there's no limit to how much I'll make her suffer.

I turn to Hades, who shrugs. "Yeah, I can get on that. Finn O'Connor, yeah?"

"Probably at least a different last name. I've never heard of either of them, which means Seamus was keeping them well-hidden."

He nods, pulling out his phone out zooming in to take a picture of Una's twin brother. "I'll get on this today. I've got some good people I trust to keep their eyes open and their mouths shut."

"Perfect," I growl, looking him in the eye. "And this stays with just the three of us for now, is that clear?"

His jaw grinds. "I don't take orders from you, Irish."

My lips thin. “Let me put it this way. I don’t want Neve finding out that any of this is going on, because it’ll break her, considering what that motherfucker did to her. Understand?” I snap.

I know he’s as protective of his sister-in-law as he is of his own blood sister, Calliope. The second I say it, I watch Hades’ demeanor flip instantly.

“Okay. We’re on the same page.”

“Good. Maybe keep this away from Ares, too.”

Hades smirks grimly. “Yeah, that’s a wrath no one needs to see.”

No shit. Considering that Seamus also almost killed the eldest Drakos brother, *and* almost killed his wife Neve right in front of him...no, Ares does *not* need to know that Seamus O’Conor’s offspring are prowling the streets of Manhattan.

He’d burn the whole fucking city down just to find them.

“Find the boy.”

Hades nods as he stands. “On it. And the girl?”

I take a slow drag of my cigarette before stubbing it out on the ashtray in front of us.

“Leave her to me.”

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UNA

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND.”

I can feel the wrath of his glare on both of us even before his hand lands heavily on Finn’s shoulder.

“What do you not understand, boy?”

Finn’s eyes lift to mine. His are so like mine—the same bright blue. But of course they are. We’re twins, born on the same day nine years ago. But there’s one important difference between us: I’ve learned to turn my eyes into walls, blocking prying eyes from peeking into what I hide inside my head.

My twin brother hasn’t figured out how to do that yet. His eyes reflect his heart so openly to the world that it breaks mine.

“I asked you a question, boy. Have you gone deaf?”

My hand curls into a fist. I hate when Papa does this. He’s hard on both of us. Really, really hard. Monstrous, even, like when he’s taken his belt—or worse, an actual whip—to us. But he’s downright cruel to Finn sometimes. Because he sees the softness in him. The kindness. The heart.

All of these are things our father would surgically remove from the world at large with a hatchet, if he could. Which is probably why he’s in prison.

That's not where we visit him, though, of course. Twice a month, Dr. Thompson or one of her assistants picks us up from the group home in Denver and brings us here, to Coal Creek Hospital. It's not that kind of hospital. It's not for sick people. It's for people like our father. People who are...angry, like him.

We're not allowed to talk about coming here. Dr. Thompson says if we do, it will mess up her work and her book. Plus, she says it will mean we won't be able to come visit our father anymore.

I'm not sure that's really the horrible threat she thinks it is. But the thought of what he'd do if he knew we broke the rules is enough to keep us quiet.

Not that we have anyone else to tell, anyway.

The group home in Denver isn't the worst place we've been since our father went to jail. But just the same, we're outsiders there. Sometimes, I want to tell them all our real last name—that we're O'Conors, not Blakelys, and that if they keep teasing Finn, I'm going to tell our father, The Executioner, about it. That would get their attention.

But I won't. No one can know our real last name. They can't know who our father is. They can't know that we used to live in a big house in a really nice town in southern Connecticut, outside New York.

No one's ever really known our last name anyway. In Connecticut, we were Una and Finn Murphy. Papa always told us it was to protect us. That he worked for dangerous people doing dangerous things, and no one could ever know what our real last name was.

"But you, Una, you will always know what you are, that you have the heart and the drive of an O'Conor."

Our father never really lived in that big house. Eloise and Carla, our

housekeeper and nanny, did. We'd see our father maybe four or five times a year, and that was it. Until the night when men who worked for him came and told us we had to leave. That we had to pack right away, that no, we couldn't say goodbye to Eloise and Carla. And that our last name was now Blakely.

"Well?" Our father snaps coldly at my brother. "Are you deaf?"

"N-no, papa," Finn stammers, staring at the rabbit in his hands. "I just...Mr. Fluffy is my friend."

Please, no.

I know it's coming, but I'm helpless to warn my brother. The back of our father's hand cuffs his ear, sending him reeling down onto the grass. Mr. Fluffy—the speckled brown bunny, brother of the all-white rabbit in my hands, Snowball—starts to flee. But our father snatches him up quickly and shoves him back into Finn's shaking hands.

"Do it."

"Papa—"

I flinch when he whirls on me. "You're next, Una."

I go cold, my eyes widening.

"You want us to—"

"To kill them, yes."

I stare at him in horror. "But...they're our pets."

Mr. Fluffy and Snowball live here, at Coal Creek. But we've seen them every other week for the last ten months. They might as well be ours.

"They're pointless, inconvenient attachments, Una," he growls. "They are not pets. They're a lesson. Now..."

He pulls two small knives from the back of his pants. I watch in horror as he hands one to Finn, and the other to me.

“Do it. The neck will be fastest.”

Finn starts to cry. I glance around, looking for Dr. Thompson. But we’re alone out here in the grassy courtyard of the hospital. There’s not even any of Dr. Thompson’s assistants, or any orderlies. Nobody.

“Such a son I have,” Papa hisses viciously. “What a pussy.”

Finn continues to sob and I flinch as our father stoops down suddenly in front of him, grabbing the front of his t-shirt and shaking him roughly.

“You are WEAK, boy!” he roars. Finn starts to cry harder, hugging Mr. Fluffy tightly.

“Stop it!” I yell. “You’re scaring him!”

I gasp, flinching when our father whirls on me with those terrifying blue eyes.

“I’ll do far worse than scare him if that goddamn rabbit isn’t dead in less than one minute.” He whips his terrifying gaze back to Finn, his teeth flashing. “So help me God, boy. I will turn you into a fucking O’Conor if it kills me. And you. That is MY blood you are squandering!”

He winds his hand back, cuffing my sobbing brother again.

“Stop it!” I scream, clutching Snowball in one hand as I try and grab my father’s shirt with the other. “Please! Stop!”

“Thirty seconds, boy,” he snarls at Finn, ignoring me. “You have thirty seconds to do as I command. And if that fucking animal isn’t dead by then, I can promise you the full wrath of the Lord—”

He looks stunned as I shove past him, grab Mr. Fluffy from Finn’s arms, and

haul him back.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

The knife flashes. The rabbit jerks and flails in my hand. Quickly it goes still as its blood gushes onto the grass from the slash in its neck.

Finn starts to cry harder, turning away as he collapses onto the grass.

I’m sorry.

I’m so sorry.

Our father says nothing. He looks at the dead rabbit in my hand with an arched brow, then glances at Snowball, who was already dead before I snatched Mr. Fluffy.

Slowly, our father smiles.

“Now there is the blood of the O’Conors. You’ve done well, Una.”

I wake with a gasp, heart pounding, reaching for a brother who isn’t there. Looking around for a grassy courtyard I haven’t been to in years, and two innocent rabbits I killed sixteen years ago.

I exhale, trying to calm my racing heart and glancing at the clock on the rickety little table next to my bed.

Two in the morning. And I’m wide awake now.

Great.

I know from experience that waking from dreams involving my fucked-up childhood means I’m not getting back to sleep anytime soon. So I slip out of bed and head to the bathroom to get some water.

Bones greets me with a dull, yowling meow from his throne on top of the

toilet tank. I've spent more time than I care to admit trying to get him to sleep in my bed. Like, at least on the end of it. But he has no interest.

After he yowls, he shimmies onto his back, showing me the white lines of his underside, contrasting sharply with his otherwise black coat. When I found him in an alley years ago, it was those stark white lines against the black, giving him the illusion of being a little skeleton, that inspired his name.

“Can't sleep either?”

Bones' only response is to close his eyes and immediately go back to sleep.

Dick.

Back in the other room, I sit on the edge of the bed for a moment before collapsing back across it. I glance at the trashcan, where the last burner phone I spoke with Apostle on is still lying in pieces.

I haven't received a replacement yet. Clearly, Apostle isn't pleased that I have not, in fact, managed to kill Cillian.

But his call letting me know I'd failed was two weeks ago. It's been quiet ever since. That's not like him.

For the hundredth time, I replay the way things went down at Club Venom that night. I critique my actions—maybe not quite as harshly as my father would have. But I don't go easy on myself either. I think of all the ways I could have, and *should* have, made sure he was dead. Then I try to figure out why my strike didn't actually kill him. It should have.

But eventually, just as I have the last few nights, I stop beating myself up about it.

What comes next? I *need* to figure out how the hell I'm going to get to him again.

Him.

The man who awoke something in me. Something dark and malevolent and...greedy. Something I've spent years trying to hide, even from myself.

Desires I shouldn't have. Urges no one should feel.

Pain shouldn't equal pleasure. It just shouldn't. The insidious urge to be taken—hard, and with or without my consent—shouldn't be the subject of every single fantasy I have.

“Such a messy little girl for me. I was going to take my fucking time with you. But I don't think you or your greedy little wet pussy can wait, can you?”

I shiver at the memory.

My thighs clench.

Traitorous heat floods my core.

Fuck.

I have to stop this. Not just the toxically depraved desires. But even worse, having them about a man I'm supposed to kill.

A psychopath. A monster.

My forbidden fantasy.

But slowly, like it's been for the past two weeks, the poison sinks in deep the second it gets a chance to.

I get up and close the bathroom door, making sure Bones stays there, away from my monstrosity. Back in my bedroom, I strip and lie back on the bed, shuddering in the dark as my fingers trace my skin.

The edge calls to me. The place I've told myself a thousand times never to go

back to. *Never glance down over into the abyss again.* But when the darkness inside of me needs sating, it's impossible to resist.

I shudder as my hand cups my breast, fingers pinching and twisting the nipple hard until a gasp jolts from my throat. My other hand delves lower, moving over my stomach and my hips before my fingers brush over my silken wetness.

The moan lodges in my chest, a deep humming sound as I start to roll my clit between my fingertips. I add more pressure, feeling the warmth begin to spread through my core. I pinch my nipples until they ache and cry out when I sink two fingers into myself. My hips rise, grinding my clit against my palm as the pleasure blooms.

It's not enough. Not tonight. Not with the edge calling to me like it is.

My pulse roars like a hungry demon as my hand leaves my breasts to reach over to the bedside table. My eyes are closed, but my fingers know exactly where to find the little metal box with the ballerina painted on it, and curl around it. It opens easily, and a shiver creeps up my spine when I touch the tiny little razor blade tucked inside.

This is so fucked.

You're fucking broken, Una.

But not even my own psyche or inner monologue will stop me now.

The metal slicing across my skin makes me inhale sharply. There's a sensualness to it—vicious and yet alluring, like standing on your tiptoes at the edge of cliff or tall building and closing your eyes.

Waiting to see if gravity pulls you over.

My fingers plunge deeper, harder. My palm grinds against my clit. And my

other hand brings the edge of the blade against the delicate, sensitive skin of my inner thigh.

Oh God, yes.

The first cut sends me reeling, my back arching as I twist my head to scream into the pillow. My muscles coil. My throat tightens. My entire sense of being reels.

The second cut sends me hurtling toward the edge. It's a lethal combination: my fingers bringing me to release, and the sharp, explosive, and dangerously erotic feeling of the blade opening my skin.

That, and the face of the man that enters my thoughts just as I start to fall.

Vicious. Lethal. Venomous green eyes...

My entire body twists and writhes, lifting from the bed as my thighs clamp tight together. I scream into the mattress, shaking and pressing my fingers against my clit as the waves crash over me.

I lie there panting, a sheen of sweat across my skin as my muscles spasm.

Fuck.

I *hate* how good this feels. I hate that I've flown so close to the sun, exploiting my pain kink in this way to take masturbation from "great" to "fucking incredible". It's turned that pain—and the blade I use—into a drug. One I keep craving, even though I know it's lethal.

My face flushes as I roll onto my back again. Not so much from the aftershocks, or the feeling of electricity still throbbing through my body.

But from the face I saw in my mind's eye of the man, snarling and psychotic, his green eyes lancing into mine just as I exploded.

Shivering, I groan and slip my legs over the edge of the bed. I stand, but then I frown and glance down.

Shit.

I sit again, reaching back into the metal box and pulling out a band-aid. I pour a bit of peroxide from the little bottle onto a tissue and clean the few drops of blood from the second cut. I went a bit deeper than I should have.

Then the band-aid covers it, and my sin.

I clean the blade with more peroxide, then tuck everything back into the case before putting it back in the drawer in my bedside table.

I stand again, walking over to the wall of photographs and chewing on my lip.

He's ready for me now. He knows I'm out here.

It'll be even harder next time.

I groan, hugging my nakedness in the darkness of my room. Suddenly I stiffen, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

It feels like I'm being *watched*.

I whirl, heart climbing into my throat. But of course, I'm alone. And when I check it, the door to my studio is still locked and bolted. So are the windows.

I shiver, pulling on some panties and a t-shirt. Then I walk back over to the windows and lean against the wall, staring out into the New York night.

There's no one here. Nobody was watching me.

Maybe I'm even more fucked up than I think I am.

CILLIAN

THIS. This is where she lives. Where she sleeps.

My eyes stab through the darkness, then close, my nose inhaling the lingering, intoxicating scent of her in the air.

Relishing it. Luxuriating in it.

Turning, I creep silently across the floor to stand before the picture of myself on the wall. Me, as well as a myriad of other people I know and call family. Neve, Eilish, Castle, Ares. Christ, she's even got the Drakos matriarch, Ares' grandmother Dimitra. Though to be fair, that tiny little old Greek grandma might be one of the most fearsome individuals I know.

It's not the first time I've seen this "wall of targets". Just as it's not the first time I've been inside of Una's shit-hole of an apartment.

Actually, it's becoming a problem. I've been coming here *far* too often over the last two weeks.

At first, Club Venom was tight-lipped, even to *me*, when I made my request. After all, I'm hardly the only gangster who pays good money to be a member there, and their policy on tracking guests once they leave the club is crystal clear.

But then I took off my mask of humanity and gave the operating manager a small taste of the blackness swirling in my soul.

No, he's not dead. There wasn't even any blood. There very much was *about to be*. But the spineless little shit caved the second I locked his office door and pulled out my knife with the promise of separating him from one or two of his fingers.

That, or he finally realized *exactly* who I was. Either way, he was quickly able to confirm that, yes, a certain Jenny Miller had in fact left Club Venom the other night without turning in her red and gold bracelet at the front door on the way out.

And yes, *certainly* he could track its whereabouts via its chip, which is what led me here, to this shit-hole in Hell's Kitchen, which is particularly shitty even by Hell's Kitchen standards.

Where she—*not* Jenny Miller—lives.

The first time I saw her “wall of targets”, my first instinct was to put my entire family on immediate lockdown and suggest to Ares he do the same with his. But then I realized the significance of the circle around my picture, that it's me in the middle of it all.

I'm first. And the more I look at this wall, the more I'm convinced there's a hierarchy here.

Mine is the only picture on the wall that has a detailed list of my schedule, the places I go, the model of the car I drive and more listed next to it. The rest are just names and pictures.

She's being methodical. Or maybe there's some mental issue at play here. But whatever it is, I'm first, and she doesn't appear to want, or even be able, to move down her list until I'm taken care of. Which is oddly comforting.

Because I'm a hard fucker to kill.

So. The rest are safe so long as she doesn't get me. And that's the only reason I haven't struck first and killed her. I need to trap her and see who she's working with, or for.

Or at least...that's what I keep *telling* myself is the reason I haven't simply eliminated her already when I easily could have.

I step back from the wall, frowning.

Yeah, it's becoming a problem that I'm here so often.

As if I need any more convincing of that, a fuzzy head rubs against my shin. I glance down, arching a brow at the black and white cat.

"Me again," I growl quietly.

The cat meows, looking up at me hungrily. He's also getting far too used to this.

I pull a can of wet cat food from my pocket. The cat licks his lips as I peel the lid back and pour the sloppy contents into his little bowl next to the tiny refrigerator. He immediately digs in like a ravenous beast as I step back, slipping the can into a ziplock bag and putting it back in my jacket pocket.

"Make sure to eat all the evidence."

As if he needs to be told twice. I scowl when I open the cupboard and glare at the meager contents.

She doesn't eat nearly enough.

In the bathroom, I poke through the trash, my scowl deepening when I find them: the two snapped burner phones from days ago, still in there. Which means her handler, or whoever is calling the shots here, hasn't reached out

since.

Interesting.

Back in the bedroom slash kitchen slash living room slash closet, I sit on the edge of her bed. I open the drawer of the bedside table, pulling out the little metal tin with a design of a ballerina on it. I open it, glaring at the blade sitting inside, neatly arranged next to a stack of band-aids, a little roll of gauze, and a small bottle of peroxide.

I don't like that she does this. At. Fucking. *All.*

I haven't watched her do it to escape yet—just as a dangerously arousing means of pushing herself over the edge when she makes herself come on this very bed. I've watched her do that twice in the past week—both times utilizing the little razor blade to push herself harder and deeper.

It's intoxicating to watch her bring herself such pleasure from my perch on the roof across the street. Even if it makes me furious to see her mar herself.

It explains the little white lines on her thighs I noticed that night at Club Venom.

It doesn't account for the crisscrossed pink ones on her back, though.

Frowning at the memory of those particularly brutal-looking scars, I tuck the case away and reach for her laptop. I quickly scroll through her recent search history and smile a dark, hungry smile.

Bad girl.

It's all the same stuff she was watching on the porn site last week. Ultra hardcore, very realistic “consensual non-consent” porn. A smattering of BDSM. A few minutes of a young woman bound on bench on her hands and knees while a man in a black mask roughly—and I do mean *roughly*—fucks

the complete shit out of her in...multiple holes.

My dick turns to steel in my pants as I picture Una lying in this bed, watching this.

Growing wetter.

Thinking perhaps of *me*, and the rough, punishing way I manhandled her that night at Club Venom.

It's been illuminating to see that her interest in sadomasochism wasn't just an act to get in the door that night. The band on her arm wasn't a lie. She really *does* get off on this. What I did to her in that room really is what she craves.

And that's something I probably shouldn't know, considering Una is my enemy.

But I can't stop thinking about it. Just like I can't stop fucking coming here. Because even when she's not here, this place has the same effect on me that she did. It's as if her scent and the aura she has left behind calms me and soothes the demons inside as much as playing with her in the flesh did.

She's got a delicious darkness in her. Maybe that's it. Perhaps that's what calls out to my own fucked-up-ness and assuages the roaring.

She's a beautiful, broken doll. One that I want to possess. One I'm determined to claim and *keep* all to myself. But first I need her to bring me to whoever is pulling her strings.

I just don't know how much longer I can stop myself from taking her.

I get up. Before I leave, I open one of her dresser drawers and run my fingers over the lace I find inside. My finger hooks through the gusset of a tiny little thong—blue, with black palm trees on it.

It gets tucked into my pocket.

I nod to the cat, pleased to see that he's finished his meal. When he looks up at me, I drag a finger across my lips.

"Not a word."

Then I'm gone.

Back on the streets of Hell's Kitchen, I head toward the black GTO I left parked in the alley behind Una's building. Two random fuckers are standing in the opening of the alley, smoking and talking shit to each other. I pay them no attention as I pass, heading toward the car.

That is, until I hear it.

"She told me she lives with her boyfriend when I asked."

"Nah, man. That's fucking bullshit. It's just her and this stupid black and white cat up there."

I tense, slowing to a stop as I fade into the shadows against the alley wall.

"So, no guy?"

"No guy. No roommate. Just the cat. I'm just saying, bro, it'd be so fuckin' *easy*. She cuts through this alley a lot, too."

The first guy chuckles darkly. "What a fucking stupid cunt."

"Her stupidity's our fucking gain, though, right?"

My eyes turn to slits, watching the first guy rub his hands together.

"Or else we just go up to her apartment and pretend to be with the landlord or something. Bet she'd open up, no problem."

"Oh, she'd open up all right," the second guy snickers. "For my fuckin' dick."

Rage boils inside of me.

“Dude!” The first guy laughs, taking a swig from a bottle in his hand. “Who says you get first dibs?”

“Fuck off, man. That bitch’s fuckin’ ass is *mine*—”

“Tell me.”

They both start at the sound of my voice. Slowly, I step out of the shadows as they nervously glance at one another, then at me.

My darkness flexes, throbbing just beneath my skin.

“Excuse me? Tell you what—”

“Tell me that you promise to stay away from her. Tell me that you swear you’ll never even look at her, or *think* of her again, so long as I spare your pathetic, worthless lives.”

The two dipshits glance again at each other, scoff, and then turn back to me.

“Who the fuck are you, her boyfriend?” the second guy snickers.

“Nah, bro,” douchebag number one drawls. “Too old. He looks more like her sugar daddy.”

I roll my shoulders, cracking my neck as I slip my cigarette case out and place one between my lips. I light it with my Zippo without saying a word.

The second guy stares fixedly at me, shaking his head. “If you’re looking for promises like that, you can fuck right off and get your ass out of—”

“You misunderstand.” I drag slowly on my smoke. “I’m not looking to hear your promises. I’m looking to hear your *lies*. It makes it so much more fun, considering how easy this will be.”

They stare at me.

“Makes what more fun?”

“Yeah, what do you think is going to be easy, pal?”

“*Killing you.*”

They blink at my blunt words. I drag on my cigarette calmly, my green eyes stabbing through the darkness into them.

“I do so love it when they beg and plead and lie through their teeth.”

The first guy swallows. The second glances at his buddy, then at me. “Get outta here, you fuckin’ weirdo.”

My hand slides from my pocket. The blade glints in the dim light of a laundromat across the street.

The smirks drop from their faces.

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?” guy number one mutters coldly, lifting his coat slightly to show me the butt of the gun tucked into his pants.

“This is your last chance to walk away, man,” the second guy adds, glaring at me.

I smile thinly. “No... It’s not.”

“The fuck it—”

“It’s *yours.*”

They glance at each other.

“Man, *fuck* this guy.”

Problem is, douchebro number one is the kind of idiot who buys a gun for

street cred, not because he actually knows how to use it. Or, for that matter, how to even remove it from his fucking *pants* with any sort of urgency.

Such a shame.

I'm on them in a millisecond, and the eyes of the guy with the gun go wide, his mouth sputtering open as my blade sinks into his stomach. Then again, and again. My knife flashes across his throat, turning his gasp into a wet gurgle as he falls to the ground.

His gun still isn't out of his pants. Guess it won't ever be, now.

I whirl on the second guy, easily dodging his wild punch before I grab him around the neck from behind. My blade presses to his throat as he sputters and chokes.

"Please! Please, man! I swear, we were just talking shit about that girl! Just bullshit! I swear to fucking God—"

"God isn't here right now."

The blade presses to his jugular.

"*Please!* I swear I'll do anything you say! I'll never look at her! I'll never even think about her!"

Lies. Desperate, desperate *lies*.

They always taste so sweet.

"I'll never come to this fucking neighborhood again, I promise!"

Well, he's not wrong there.

My arm yanks. Blood spurts against the brick wall beside us. Then I let the sack of shit drop to the ground next to the first.

My cigarette fell out of my mouth somewhere in the last ninety seconds of mayhem. So I pull another out of my case and slip it between my lips. I spark it and inhale slowly, looking down thoughtfully at the two fuckers dead on the ground.

I drag them to the dumpster at the back of Una's building and cover them with trash. *How fitting.* I use a half-empty bottle of soda from the same dumpster to wash the blood from the bricks and the ground by the end of the alley. But it doesn't matter too much. Not in this neighborhood.

I use the sanitizer and wipes I keep in the trunk of my GTO for exactly this purpose to clean up. Then I get behind the wheel and start the engine.

My monster is still growling.

My darkness is still surging and ravenous.

The *need* is still there, and apparently, simple bloodletting doesn't do it anymore. It won't satisfy me.

Not when I've tasted *her*.

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UNA

YOU'RE FUCKING KIDDING ME.

Across the street from the Ritz-Carlton, I stop dead in my tracks, my jaw hanging open as I stare up at the banner welcoming the gala event.

He's bat fucking shit crazy.

I mean, obviously he is. Historically, empirically, Cillian Kildare is—above almost all else—known for being a categorical psychopath. I just didn't think he was *this* crazy.

For two weeks now, I've been trying to track down the target I was supposed to kill at Club Venom. For two weeks, I've also been trying to force myself to think of him as just that: a target. A monster. The enemy.

Not the man who touched me like I've secretly craved to be touched for years. Not the man that stirred and wakened a fierce darkness in me that simultaneously scares the shit out of me and turns me to a pillar of fire.

But finally, after two weeks—during which time Cillian apparently disappeared off the face of the freaking earth—I've got an opening.

He's a smart man. It's not as if everyone in this city is unaware of the Kildare family or is oblivious to their presence, power, and how they make their

money. It's just that if you dangle enough shiny, pretty things over "there", people don't pay much attention to the dark, dirty, illegal shit you're busy doing over "here."

I knew Cillian was going to a major fundraising gala in the ballroom of the Ritz-Carlton, where he was—unbelievably—presenting what is rumored to be a six-figure donation check.

I keep staring up at the gala banner over the main doors to the Ritz, my head slowly shaking side to side.

I just wouldn't have in my wildest fucking dreams imagined that the gala event that the head of one of the biggest criminal organizations in the city was speaking at, and was donating a hefty check to, was the goddamn *Policeman's Ball*.

And here I am, planning on waltzing in there to kill him.

Motherfucker.

Nervously, I open my clutch. I gently peel away the lining and glance at the plastic but still razor-sharp blade hidden within—something left on my doorstep by Apostle this morning, no doubt plastic to get by any metal detectors.

But getting through the front door seems like it's going to be the least of my fucking problems tonight.

I swallow, sucking on my teeth as I stare across the street at the *hordes* of police officers mulling around outside and filing into the hotel.

No. This is insane. It's impossible.

It's what you have to do.

I dodge taxis crossing the street, and then smile pleasantly at the three young

police officers who rush over to offer their arm to help me up the stairs in my towering heels into the main lobby.

“Notice you didn’t arrive with anyone,” the sergeant who helps me gingerly up the steps says with a hopeful grin.

“Oh, you’re just the *sweetest*,” I smile right back. “But I’m meeting someone inside.”

At the top of the stairs, he leaves my side with an appreciative sigh. “Well, he’s a lucky man.”

Not exactly.

My outfit for the evening isn’t x-rated like it was at Club Venom. But I’m still dressed to kill.

Pun totally intended.

Left to my own devices, there’s no way I would have been able to get my hands on the black cocktail-length de la Renta I’m currently wearing. Not with my negative income. And I’m good with sleight of hand when it comes to shoplifting, but not *that* good. Luckily, the dress was an Apostle drop-off at my front door this morning, along with the purse and the heavy pendant and chain around my neck.

Inside the hotel, I sling my small clutch over my shoulder on its little strap, feeling the slight weight from the plastic blade hidden within. Nope, the metal detector didn’t pick it up. I step into the soaring, gilded ballroom of the Ritz, trying to keep my nerves together as I survey the literally *hundreds* of smiling police officers milling around the room.

How the fuck am I going to do this.

One, because I’m in a fucking *sea* of law enforcement. And two, because

even if I tell myself I was wearing a mask before, even if I'm not wearing a blonde wig tonight, my naturally dark hair pinned up...

There's just no way he's not going to know it's me. We were rather close when I stabbed him.

My face burns.

Intimately close. As close as two humans can be, actually.

I shiver as my body remembers the brutality of his touch. The punishing kisses. The vicious thrust of his hips that tore through more than my virginity.

He cut open my inhibitions that night, too. He poured gasoline on my darkest, most depraved and hidden kinks and set a match to them—fantasies and desires I'd never admitted to another person.

I turn and pluck a glass of champagne from a passing tray as I scan the room, looking for *him*.

For his dark, malevolent energy. For those venomous green eyes that I'd know anywhere.

“Miss?”

I startle, almost spilling my champagne as I whirl, my hand flying to my clutch. But the ruddy-faced older man with a lieutenant's bar on his uniform grinning at me is very much *not* Cillian.

“Didn't notice a ring,” he smiles. “Think I could steal you for a dance?”

“Oh, I...” I smile, swallowing back my nerves—and half my champagne. “Sure!”

I mean I do still need to tour the room. But if Cillian sees me before I spot him, I might as well have an NYPD lieutenant twirling me around the dance

floor when he does.

The lieutenant beams as I set my glass on another passing tray and move to take his hands.

Which is the exact moment I feel it, like a cold breeze blowing in through an open door. Like black paint being dripped into clear water, swirling and darkening and spreading.

Like vicious energy sliding over my skin.

“Lieutenant O’Reilly.”

The older man’s gaze snaps past me, and a look halfway between abject fear and a sycophantic smile floods his face when he lays eyes on him.

Cillian.

“Ah! Mr. Kildare!”

I stiffen, not wanting to turn and face him, but understanding it would look weird *not* to. So I take a breath, and slowly, I swivel. The instant my eyes find his, I can see it plainly.

Yeah. He knows *exactly* who I am.

“Dan. I see you’ve met my date for the evening.”

I can feel the poor lieutenant stiffen behind me as he sputters.

“Your date! I—my humblest apologies, Mr. Kildare, I didn’t realize—”

Cillian laughs—not viscously or maliciously. It’s a warm, non-threatening, full-body, eye-twinkling belly laugh.

He’s good.

But it’s not perfect. It may be practiced to the point of near perfection in its

ability to mask the monster beneath. But, if you look closely—and, trust me, I do—you can see that blackness seeping out at the edges, like ink bleeding out from underneath a mask.

“Please, not at all. But I’m afraid I do need to steal her back now.”

His eyes snap so sharply to mine that the very blood in my veins chills.

He’s been waiting for me. That’s what the poisonous look in his eyes says.

Crap, I think I just walked into a trap. And the nerves jangling up my spine and the hairs standing up on the back of my neck tell me it’s time to get the hell out of here.

“Oh, Cillian,” I laugh, not quite as convincingly as him. “Surely a six-figure donation to heroes like Lieutenant O’Reilly can come with just one little dance?”

Cillian smirks. Lieutenant O’Reilly chuckles behind me.

“Six figures? You’re missing a couple of zeros there, my dear. I suppose Mr. Kildare was too modest to tell you the full extent of his generosity.”

Wait, what?

He reaches past me to clap a firm hand on Cillian’s shoulder.

“I have to thank you personally, Mr. Kildare. We’re going to put that thirty million to good use.”

What. The. Fuck.

“I have no doubt you will, Dan.” Cillian smiles coldly, his eyes lancing into me like venom-tipped knives. “You know, I hear violent crime is on the rise these days in our fair city. Stabbings and such.”

I swallow as his eyes captivate mine, unblinking.

“Bunch of fucking savages out there, I’ll tell you, Mr. Kildare,” Lieutenant O’Reilly sighs sympathetically. “Just the other night, actually, they found a couple of low-lives in a chop-shop garage. Seems to be gang related. Two shot, one with his throat cut. One poor bastard had his hand drilled clean through by a goddamn press drill, can you imagine? And a couple of other apparent low-lives got cut just the other night by the corner of 11th and West 44th.”

I go cold.

That’s my block...

“Terrible,” Cillian murmurs, shaking his head, but keeping his eyes glued to mine all the while. “You just never know who or what’s out there, waiting to stab you in the back.” His eyes narrow. “Or the side.”

I swallow thickly as he turns to flash a winning, practiced smile at Lieutenant O’Reilly.

“Well, lieutenant, if you don’t mind...”

“Oh, no, of course, Mr. Kildare. Enjoy your evening, and thank you again for your generosity.”

“Of course.”

“Pleasure to meet you, miss,” Lieutenant O’Reilly says politely before turning and hustling away.

I gasp as Cillian instantly grabs my hand and my waist. Before I know it, I’m whirling as he spins me out onto the dance floor. I try to pull away, but his grip is like iron, digging into my flesh and yanking me hard against his chest.

I tremble as my eyes lift to see him towering over me as he pins me to his rock-hard body.

“Please,” he smiles thinly. “I’m begging you. Try something stupid.”

I gasp again as he suddenly twirls me in time with the waltz music coming from the small orchestra across the room. Then I’m choking on my breath again as he yanks me back hard against his chest.

Suddenly, his hand leaves mine, darting to my hair.

“Ow!”

I wince as he grabs a handful of it before plucking the clasp from my dark locks and yanking it free. He gives it a quick flick, glaring at it when a blade doesn’t slip out.

“Happy?”

He says nothing as he slips it into his jacket pocket, turning to eye my hair as it tumbles around my bare shoulders.

“Were they out of blonde?” he says in a clipped, dark tone, the Irish lilt to it teasing over my skin.

My heart skips as he twirls me once more, bringing me back against his chest again afterward.

“Hiding behind cops, are you?”

He smiles and arches a brow.

“Does it look like I’m hiding, my dear?”

“It looks like you’re making sure I can’t put a knife in you again.”

“Generally speaking, getting a knife put in me is not high on my to-do list.”

We keep dancing, lurching to the side before he spins us both around.

“But,” he growls. “To the question of the hour: have you followed me here to

try and stab me again, or..." he smiles viciously, taking my breath away as he suddenly leans down and whispers low in my ear.

"...did you stalk me here because you're desperate to come all over my thick fucking cock again."

Sweet. Lord.

My face burns fiercely. I struggle to pull away, but his grip only tightens.

"Or maybe both? A nice little encore performance for old times' sake?"

I glare at him. "You think joking about this will save you?"

"I think you *don't fucking scare me*, little girl," he snarls coldly, turning my heart to ice as the chill rips up my skin. "I think I've looked *far* deeper into the darkness that you wear like you bought it at a cheap fucking outlet store. A halloween costume shop."

I bristle, his words pushing a trigger deep inside of me.

"You don't know anything about m—"

"Don't I...*Una*?"

The floor drops out from under me. My heart turns to ice.

Oh shit.

I assumed he'd know me tonight once he saw me. But I thought he'd only know me as the girl from Club Venom.

I didn't ever think he'd know who I was for real.

Cillian smiles. "I'm going to make this very easy for you, little girl."

"Stop calling me that."

“Would you prefer ‘the little bitch who tried to stab me’?” he snaps.

“I *did* stab you.”

“Ah, yes. Five inches deep inside. But then...” he smiles wickedly at me.

“You took *much more* than five inches yourself, didn’t you?”

My face burns hotly.

“Such a good girl.”

Fuck.

The second he says the words, my core clenches and heat pools between my thighs as I purse my lips tightly.

“Or, I know,” he muses. “Instead of little girl, how about we go with *my little fuck toy.*”

He smiles cruelly at the way I stiffen. At the way my face floods with ashamed heat. At the way my mouth falls open before I can stop it.

“Please,” he murmurs. “You can try to deny it if you like. But we both know you were.”

My throat’s making a swallowing motion, but it’s doing nothing to remove the lump caught there. I’m desperately trying to breathe the heat away from my face, too. But that’s not working either.

I wasn’t ready for this.

I wasn’t ready for *him*.

Cillian sighs, cracking his neck before those lethally venomous eyes stab into my soul again.

“I’m going to make this easy on you, Una.” I shiver as he leans close again.

“*Walk away,*” he growls thickly into my ear. “Whatever you think I am, however angry you are for what happened to your lunatic of a father—”

I struggle to yank my arms from him, but it’s like fighting a brick wall. Or the force of gravity.

“I can assure you, he deserved *everything* that came his way. So, for the very last time, little girl...” Cillian hisses, eyes narrowing to slits as they bore into mine. “*Walk. Away.* Or I promise you, this will *not* end well for you. Walking away is the easy way, by a long shot.”

Finally, I manage to swallow the lump in my throat.

“And the hard way?”

His lips curl at the corners. “I’d *very* much suggest not finding out.”

Suddenly, he’s gone. His grip drops from my wrist and my hip, he turns, and he vanishes into the crowd of police officers, leaving me shaking and numb standing there on the dance floor.

Feeling like I just ran a marathon.

Swam an ocean.

Went toe-to-toe with the devil himself.

But I’m still here. I’m still standing. And that’ll be the last mistake he ever makes.

Everything in me laser focuses as I shake off the tremors he’s left coursing through me. I think of Finn. I think of everything he did for me for all those years.

I’ve got you, Lunatic...

Well, this time, I’ve got *you*, Finn.

I slip through the crowd, eyes darting about wildly until I spot him. Cillian is moving away from the main ballroom and stepping into a side hallway.

I follow.

The hum of the crowd and the music from the orchestra fade as I walk quickly down the hallway after him. He pauses at the corner at the end, and my heart jumps into my throat as I quickly slip into an alcove. I count to five, then peek my face around the corner.

He's gone.

I slip off my heels, not wanting the click-clacking to give me away. I sprint down the hall, pause at the corner, and then cautiously peek around it...

...just in time to see Cillian glance left and right before slipping through a door at the end of the hallway and closing it behind him.

I smile to myself.

Should have stayed in your ballroom full of cops.

I unsling my bag and open it, peeling back the inner lining and pulling out the lightweight knife, still lethally sharp despite being made of plastic, with an edge and a point honed to surgical precision.

This is really happening this time. And after this, I'm just once step closer to saving my brother.

Barefoot, I pad down the hallway until I'm right in front of the door he went through. I have no idea what's on the other side, but I can see it's dark in there from the crack under the door. Taking a breath, I set my heels and bag down, curl my fingers tightly around the handle of the blade, and twist the doorknob.

The door opens silently. My eyes dart around, searching for him, or a trap, or

an ambush. Then I freeze.

He's standing by the window, his silhouette dark and unmoving against the city lights glinting in from outside. Smoke curls from the cigarette in his hand. My hand tightens around the blade, and I inhale deeply but quietly.

Then I move, *fast*.

I rush the distance between us without a sound, just like I was trained. In one swift motion, I rear back and plunge the blade into his back—once, twice, three times; a fourth. When he doesn't cry out, my brain short-circuits in confusion before I stab him again, and again, and again...

Until the mannequin I've just slashed to ribbons quietly tips over and rolls across the floor.

Oh fuc—

The scream doesn't even make it out of my mouth before a hand wraps hard across it. His other one yanks the knife from my hand, tossing it away to clatter across the floor, then wrenches my arms behind my back and holds them there tightly.

Fear floods my system. Panic has my brain glitching and shorting. A gasp hitches in my chest as I smell the dark leather and whiskey scent of him, and Cillian pins my back to his chest.

“Good girl. I was so *dearly* hoping you'd pick the hard way.”

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UNA

FEAR, as they say, is the mind killer.

That particular nugget's not from my father, though. That's Frank Herbert. My father's version was more "if you freeze up and get scared like a baby, I'll hurt you."

I think I was nine when he taught me that particular lesson.

But, bastard that he was, that lesson—all of his lessons—are still lodged in my brain.

Like cancer.

For a split second, I consider fighting Cillian off. But that plan flies out the window the second his grip tightens on my wrist. The hand on my mouth drops, curling around my throat and sending electric fire through my nerves.

I can't possibly fight back. He's way too big, and too strong. And even worse, I'm already pinned.

Trapped.

So I switch tactics: I start to fake cry.

"*Please!*" I sob, choking violently, my throat hitching. "Please! They forced

me!”

Cillian chuckles, his firm chest rumbling against my back. “Try again, little girl.”

“You don’t understand! *Please!* They were going to kill...” I gulp. “Me! They were going to kill me unless I came after you! I swear!”

He sighs, unmoved. “That’s a nice little fairytale.”

“*Please!*” I sob even louder, forcing real tears down my cheeks. “I’m just a girl! Please don’t kill me!”

There. There it is.

It’s not much, but suddenly, I realize I have the slightest opening. He pauses, his grip loosening. It’s just a fraction, for only a millisecond. But it’s my chance, and I’m not going to waste it.

In one motion, I raise my foot and then stomp down hard on the arch of his. Cillian grunts, and his hand on my throat loosens by a hair.

It’s all I need.

Hissing, I jam my elbows back, hard—first the right, square into his ribs, and then the left. That one, I aim higher, and when I feel my elbow connect with something soft beneath his clothes that sure as shit feels like gauze and bandages, I know I’ve hit my mark.

His agonized grunt of pain sort of gives it away, too.

I jam my elbow against his knife wound again, and then a third time for good measure before his grip loosens on me.

Then I’m *bolting*.

I rush across the room blindly in the dark, wincing in pain when my thigh

slams into a side table. But I lurch forward for the door, because if I can just get out there, I can run. Or call for the police. Or—

A scream bursts from my lips as he slams into me from behind, taking us both crashing to the floor. I choke, clawing and reaching for the door in front of me. With his weight still pinning me to the ground, Cillian's arm flies past mine, his fingers catching the edge of the door and sending it slamming firmly shut.

"That was a fucking mistake," he rasps harshly into my ear.

I jam my heel back and up. Cillian snarls, lunging to the side to avoid getting hit in the balls. I surge to my hands and knees, scrambling across the floor before I suddenly get slammed back down under his weight.

I cry out as my hip smacks the floor, and something harsh pinches my breasts. With horror, I look down and realize one of my fucking tits has slipped out of the top of the dress, and my nipple's just dragged painfully across the wooden floor.

I try to kick back again, but this time, he's ready for me.

And fucking *pissed*.

He catches my foot, twisting it just enough to make me choke in pain before dropping it to the floor. He pins me down, his hand grabbing a fist of my hair by the scalp and tugging. Hard.

I fucking *hate* myself for the way my body reacts to that.

I don't shut down. I don't cry.

I get fucking *wet*.

Because of course I do. Because I'm insane, and broken, and severely, *severely* fucked up inside.

I can feel Cillian's muscled body pinning me, his hips grinding into my ass—which somehow makes this whole mortifying experience even worse-by-which-I-mean-better, dammit. He leans over me, and my eyes bulge as his other hand suddenly slides under me to brutally cup and squeeze my exposed breast. His fingers roughly pinch the nipple.

And I *moan*.

Sweet Jesus kill me now, I fucking *moan*.

“You'd like this, wouldn't you?”

I tremble, biting back a whimper when his lips and voice brush my ear. His hand tightens in my hair, his fingers pinching roughly as his hips dig into my ass, letting me feel...*him*.

All of him.

Hard.

Oh God.

“You'd *like* for me to fuck you,” he rasps darkly into my ear. “Whether you wanted it or not.”

My eyes bulge again, my pulse roaring in my ears.

“You'd like it if I just *took* this little pussy and fucked it raw.”

I whimper. Cillian chuckles darkly, and I cry out as his fingers pinch and twist my nipple just as his teeth bite down *hard* on the soft flesh of my neck.

“Well. Maybe later, if you ask me nicely.”

My pulse thunders.

“Let's go.”

He suddenly yanks me up. Something wraps around my head, sliding between my lips and teeth. A gag. He's fucking *gagged me*.

He roughly shoves me forward, out the door into the dark hallway. But any hopes I have of him being insane enough to drag me past a ballroom full of cops evaporates when we turn and head the other way down the hall.

By the time we've reached the stairwell, I've started to thrash and kick. Cillian stops that cold by lifting me like I weigh less than nothing and tossing me—the asshole fucking *tosses me*—over his goddamn shoulder. I squirm and yell and buck even harder...

...until his palm comes down with a blisteringly sharp smack against my ass.

My jaw goes slack. My blood turns to fire.

For a horrifying moment, I think I'm about to stain the shoulder of his jacket with my arousal. Especially when he does it again, this time lifting my skirt first so that his palm hits bare flesh. My face floods with heat as his hand lingers for a moment on the stinging skin of my ass cheek, rubbing briefly across it and the back of my thong before dropping away.

Down another hallway, Cillian kicks open a back service door. I shiver as the cool night air hits my bare thighs when we step out into the alley behind the Ritz.

Where there's a waiting black car.

"*PLEASE!*" I scream. But it's more like a "*PUHHEESH!*" around the gag stuffed in my mouth.

Cillian's only response is yet another smack on my ass.

Then he's suddenly yanking me off his shoulder. I gasp as he slams me into the side of the car and leans in close, sucking the air from my lungs. "I'm

through playing fucking games with you, Una.”

I whimper as he suddenly spins me, pins my arms behind my back, and wraps a strong, veined hand around my throat.

“And now you’re coming with me.”

Adrenaline roars through my veins. Terror floods my heart. Because for all my forbidden and horrible fantasies involving this man, this is still *Cillian Kildare*.

Certified psychopath.

Vicious killer.

And a man who’s looking at me like he’s deciding right here, on this very spot, whether to fuck me or kill me.

Or maybe even both, in who knows which order.

I’m not waiting around to let him figure it out. In one move, I stomp down hard on his foot and twist, using a bastardized version of jiu-jitsu to twist out of his grasp. My forearm slams out, catching him by surprise in the throat before I whirl and bolt.

I make it all of two steps before a hand grabs a vicious, painful fist of my hair. I cry out through the gag still in my mouth, choking and gasping as he yanks me back. A firm, muscled arm wraps around my neck, and I scream into the gag as I feel the cold metal of handcuffs securing my wrists behind my back.

“I do so enjoy it when you choose the *hard way*.”

I scream as a bag goes over my head. Then, all I know is being lifted and unceremoniously dumped into what is clearly the trunk, which then shuts before the car starts.

And then we're off, to God only knows where.

I *GASP*, wincing when the bag is yanked from my head. I shiver, and as my eyes adjust to the bright white light, they scan the room.

My heart crawls up into my throat.

Where the fuck am I?

It's a room that may very well have once *literally* been a slaughterhouse, or a meat locker. Or at least, I can only hope it "once" was and isn't "currently".

I'm in a metal chair in the center of the fluorescent-lit room. The walls and ceiling are clad in metal. The floor is concrete, with a drain in the middle.

And there are chains with fucking *hooks* on them dangling from the ceiling.

He's going to fucking kill me. He's actually going to fucking kill me, right here.

"Welcome to your new accommodations, *Ms. O'Connor*," he growls from behind me, startling me. I whirl, shivering as he smiles icily. I flinch when he reaches for me, sure he's going to strike. But he only uses a finger to snag the gag still in my mouth and yank it free.

I sputter, gasping for clean air as I tremble. When my eyes focus on his hand, I flush.

The gag is a pair of *my panties*—the blue ones, with the black palm trees. The pair I thought the dryer had eaten, or that Bones had hidden under the bed or something.

If they're in Cillian's hand, it can only mean one thing.

He's been in my apartment.

I swallow as my eyes drag up to his, and a shiver ripples down my spine.

“What do you want with me?”

Cillian laughs coldly. “What do I *want* with you? With the little psycho who tried to kill me not once but twice?”

I gasp as he lunges forward into my face, his smile dissolving into a harsh, vicious look of vengeance.

“*I. Fucking. Wonder.*”

Naked fear shivers through me.

“I...” I stammer. “I didn’t, I mean I wasn’t—”

“I know you’ve only been taking orders from someone on those burner phones. Someone who’s smart enough to use them only once, and to tell you to break them in half when you’re done with them.”

I can’t tear my eyes away from his.

“What I *want with you*, Una, is to know who that fucking person *is*.”

It’s an easy choice to make. If I tell Cillian about Apostle, Finn is as good as dead. If I don’t, Cillian may kill me, but it may save Finn. I mean what would be the point in killing Finn if I’m already dead?

My stomach knots.

Or maybe Apostle still *would* kill my brother. But that’s only a maybe. It’s a definite yes if I tell Cillian anything. It’s that simple. I stay silent as I stare right back at him.

His brow lifts, dark amusement creeping over his chiseled face and into his

piercing emerald eyes.

“Well?”

I purse my lips, staring right back at him, still saying nothing. Cillian’s brow furrows deeply and he sighs.

“We can help each other out, Una. Or do I really need to trot out the easy-way, hard-way pep talk again? Because I’m fairly sure you know which option I will *always* prefer in that scenario.”

“Why would I help you?” I spit.

He smiles grimly. “Because you know who I am. And you know what I’m capable of.” I shiver as he moves even closer to me. “And you might even know how much I *enjoy* doing what I’m capable of.”

I glare levelly at him.

“You’re a monster.”

I gasp as he surges into me, one hand wrapping around my throat. His mouth drops to my neck, and his teeth drag over my tender skin.

And my body traitorously and shamefully *reacts* to it.

“*Am I...?*” he rasps thickly into my ear. His hand tightens, and a throb of heat sizzles through my core.

Which is exactly when his hand drops *right between my legs*. My eyes bulge from my head as he boldly lifts my dress and cups my pussy through my panties. And before I can do or even *try* to do a thing, he suddenly drags a thick finger up my fucking seam.

I *melt*.

“Tell me, Una,” he growls quietly, so close that I shiver at the heat of his lips

against my ear. “If I’m such a monster, then *why do you get so fucking wet for me?*”

My whole world is spinning. My lungs feel like the air is too thick and heavy to breathe. Electricity spasms and jolts through my body, all coming from where he’s touching me.

“I—*no*—”

“You say that word quite a lot for a bad little girl whose pussy turns into a fucking *mess* whenever I touch you.”

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

“Now,” he growls, suddenly, pulling away.

God, do I hate how fucking disappointed I feel when he does that.

“I know who you are, and I really should kill you.”

I try my best to erase the heat and desire from my face as I drag my gaze to his. “Then why don’t—”

“Because you’re going to help me, Una.”

My lips purse. “If you think for one second—”

“I don’t recall asking a question that needed a response.”

My eyes narrow. Cillian’s are unblinking.

“Now, make yourself at home. There’s water, and a bucket here you can piss in.”

He kicks a metal pail out from under the chair with two bottles of water in it. And suddenly, it occurs to me that this room is my *prison*.

“Wait, you’re not going to leave me—”

“Clever girl. That is, in fact, *exactly* what I’m going to do.”

A chill creeps up my spine as I glance at the ominous hooks hanging from the ceiling.

“I’ll scream.”

“And you’re most welcome to. But I can guarantee not a fucking soul will hear you. This place is soundproofed.”

Of course it is.

I don’t want to know why.

“Enjoy your stay at Hotel Kildare, Ms. O’Conor. Try not to have too much fun while I’m gone.”

And without another word, he turns and strides to the door, locking it behind him.

I’m alone.

I shiver and make a move to stand. Then I wince when the chain connecting one of my wrists to the chair—which is, *of course*, bolted to the floor—stops me fast.

Bastard.

I can move off the chair just enough to use my free hand to grab the water. And I can reach the fucking bucket, should I need to...*use* it.

That’s it.

This is very much a prison.

But suddenly, I stiffen. I sit back in the chair, my hand trembling as it reaches up to my necklace.

Still there.

I take a shaky breath as I pull it off, setting it in my lap and twisting at the pendant. It slowly comes in two. My heart races as I quickly pull the Bluetooth earbud away and stick it in my ear. I push the little button engraved in the pendant, like Apostle told me to.

Then...I wait.

I have no idea if this will even work in here. Or how long it will take for Apostle to respond to—

“*Una.*”

I yelp when the voice immediately grates mechanically in my ear through the little earpiece. Then I catch my breath and clear my throat.

“Yes, it’s me.”

Silence for a moment.

“I can assume this means you’ve been caught?”

I swallow, nodding. “Yes.”

“By Cillian?”

“Yes.”

“You’re his prisoner?”

I shiver as I glance around the room. “I am.”

“Good.”

I’m sorry what?

“I’m not sure I can escape—”

“I don’t want you to.”

My teeth drag over my lip.

“Finn—”

“He’s fine,” Apostle raps out brusquely. “Stay the course, Una.”

“But how is my broth—”

“I said he’s *fine*. And he’ll *stay* fine, so long as you *stay the course*.”

Tears well up in the corners of my eyes. “I will.”

“I know you will.” Apostle sighs heavily. “Your father would be very proud of you, Una. Now, do what must be done.”

The line goes dead.

CILLIAN

“WAIT, YOU *FOUND* UNA O’CONOR?”

And then she found me, and walked right the fuck into my trap.

Through the chaos of both families arriving all at once into the spacious kitchen of the Upper East Side brownstone, I pull Castle aside and give him a quick nod. “It’s been handled. We’re fine.”

It’s not *fine*. I may have Una herself locked up in my basement kill room. But whoever is pulling her strings— the mastermind—is still out there.

But yes. For now, at least, I have *her*.

Castle whistles low, raking his finger over his sharp jaw. “Well, *fuck*. You’ve been busy.”

You have no idea, my friend.

“Dead?”

“Not yet.”

Even saying it brings a sour feeling to my gut.

Not yet.

Killing, I gather, *affects* most normal people. Heaps guilt upon them. Shame. Remorse. The feeling of being an outcast, having broken a cardinal rule of any functioning society, weighs heavy.

I've never been burdened by feeling any of that. Ever. It's part of who I am. Yes, I've killed and felt *inconvenienced*. Or mildly annoyed. But never any of those other things.

Maybe being born an outcast made me this way. Different. Twisted. Broken.

But even still, even with my emotional detachment when it comes to taking a life, the idea of killing *her*...sits badly with me. It raises emotions I'm unused to.

Which is beyond fucking confusing, and a little infuriating. Especially since it should be the exact opposite. I should have less than zero qualms about cutting her throat after she tried to kill me—twice.

So why, for the first time in my life, do I suddenly have reservations when it comes to taking a life? Why does the idea of killing Una O'Connor sit so very poorly with me?

I swallow my thoughts away with the whiskey in my glass as Neve catches my eye through the crowd piling into the kitchen. She gives me a wave as she heads our way with Ares in tow.

"Care to fill me in on the details later?" Castle murmurs under his breath.

I nod, and my mask goes back on. The facade I hide behind, trying to look normal. To appear human. To keep from terrifying those around me by letting them see the monster I really am. Even Castle, who sees much more of my darkness than most, doesn't know the true depth of it.

And that's just how it has to be.

I smile as Neve crashes into me, giving me a bear hug before turning to hug Castle equally hard. I can't help but smirk at the lethal shadow that crosses Ares' face when his wife embraces my number two.

Despite the occasional rumors, of which I am very aware, *no*, there's never been anything tawdry or untoward between either of my nieces and their—admittedly extremely handsome—bodyguard. I mean, Castle's been their protector and even a bit of nanny since they were fourteen and twelve. He's essentially a big brother to them.

But try telling that to the lethally overprotective man who married Neve. Even if he does know all that, there's still no hiding the murderous glint in Ares' eye whenever another man—family or not—even *looks* at his wife.

I have to say, I can appreciate it. In fact, that demonic possessiveness I saw in Ares—the way he was so fiercely protective and loyal to his family—is the main reason I ever agreed to allow my niece to marry the leader of one of our most bitter enemies.

Yes, from the way he yanks her back from Castle and wraps a possessive arm around her waist as he glares daggers at her one-time bodyguard, I'm more than sure I made the right call.

“God of War,” I murmur with a nod.

Ares shakes off the red mist and turns to grin at me. “Heard you have a lady friend, Cillian.”

I give Neve a look, raising a single brow.

“What, like I wasn't going to tell him?”

“So,” Ares grins. “Was it that happy-go-lucky personality of yours she fell for, or is this more like a prisoner chained up in your attic kind of thing?”

“Ares!” Neve shoots him a sideways look, elbowing him in the side.

“Oh, c’mon,” he chuckles. “Cillian knows I’m jok—”

“It’s the sub-basement, actually.”

Ares’ brows knit, a slightly concerned look washing over his face before he shakes it away—or, at least, decides he doesn’t want to *know* if I’m joking or not.

After that, it’s just the usual chaos of a Drakos-Kildare family dinner. And with all the personalities and characters in *these* two families?

It’s a constant whirlwind.

But oddly enough, given my own brutal and shattered childhood experience with families, it’s something I’ve grown to love.

It doesn’t “fix” me. It doesn’t stop the roaring in my head the way violence and sadism do. But...it’s not *nothing*, either. And there’s something about all of these people together giving me at least a brief respite from the chaos in my head—without even realizing they’re doing it—that brings a smile to my face.

I mean, not a visible smile. But it’s the thought that counts, right?

Dimitra Drakos, hawkish little elf that she is, comes over and gives me her usual peck on the cheek, clinking her glass of ouzo to my whiskey. Kratos—Ares and Hades’ younger brother and recent amateur chef that he is—arrives, massive arms bulging as he carries in the enormous amount of barbacoa and pulled pork he’s prepared for dinner, which is apparently Latin-themed tonight.

Eilish pulls me aside, gushing about the business school class schedule she’s just hammered out with Columbia University, and how excited she is about

some of the professors she's going to be studying with. Hades even gets a word in while I'm pouring myself another large drink to see when I'll be making another appearance at the underground fights we occasionally cross paths at.

And by the time we sit down to eat, the sheer magnitude of all this normal, family vibe actually has some of the darkness in me clearing, like fog.

Not all the way.

But still, I'll take it. I can't be out killing shitheads in the shadows *all* the time, now can I?

Here, I can look around at family—old and new—and lose myself in their humanity. They all make it look so easy to be “normal”.

And yet, as I look around this table of unlikely family—enemies that once not so long ago wanted to turn the streets red with each other's blood—I'm... distracted.

By the captive chained away in my basement.

By *Una*.

By her soft and yet defiant lips. By the thoughts of her gasped moans and whimpered eagerness when I goaded her with punishment and pain.

That was no act, that night in Club Venom. That wasn't just her trying to get to me. Or, maybe it was in the beginning, but there's no faking the way her body eventually responded. There was no lie in the way her cheeks flushed, her nipples puckered to hard, aching points as her thighs clenched. There was no deception in the way she moaned so eagerly, or the way her skin prickled with need and excitement when she breathed out a humbly submissive “Yes, Sir.”

There's no deceit in how fucking *wet* she got for me. So wet that as tiny and petite as she is, and as...*large* as I am, I was able to drive every damn inch of my thick cock deep into her in one thrust.

So wet that she literally came for me on that first, and only, thrust.

The memory of all of that has been taking up serious real estate in my head ever since that night. But right now, fueled by the knowledge that I have her bound as my prisoner, it's even more fierce. It's more powerful.

And it's setting the blackness inside of me ablaze till it becomes an inferno.

"Cillian. Cillian."

I blink, my brow clearing as I realize it's not the first time Castle's muttered my name close to my ear. I turn to see a grim look on his face.

"Dominic Farrell is outside."

The unspoken rule with all of us is no business at family dinners. But I'm not blind to the concern on Castle's face.

Tonight's going to be an exception. And Dimitra can choke on a baklava if she wants to say something about it.

"Back yard," I grunt before I set my napkin down and finish my drink. "And let's be quiet about it."

CILLIAN

“CILLIAN.”

Dominic Farrell is a big man—nearly as big as Kratos, and that’s saying a lot. Bearded and broad-shouldered, with the cauliflower ears of a man who came up through the ranks cracking skulls and spilling blood. I’ve known him since his uncle Kerry was in charge of the Kildare vassal family. Now, it’s Dominic who sits at the head of the Farrell table.

I nod at him in the darkness of the brownstone’s manicured back garden, slipping a cigarette between my lips and lighting it with a flick of fire.

“What can I do for you, Dom?”

“Look, I hate to disturb you while you’re having dinner with the family—”

“It’s fine. Speak.”

His brow troubles. “Seen the news?”

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

He clears his throat, glancing unhappily at Castle as he pulls out his phone. “This hit the press about an hour ago. It’s all over the fucking internet already.”

He brings up his phone, open to a news website, and plays the sound file embedded on the page.

Instantly, my mood darkens. Considerably.

Well, shit.

“Look, I’ll get you Seamus O’Conor. A deal is a deal. But what’s the Bureau prepared to do for me?”

Fuck. Major fucking *fuckity-fuck-fuck*.

It’s a recording of Declan making his deal with the FBI. And it just gets worse from there.

Mercifully, whoever leaked this audio has had the good grace to edit out my half-brother’s name, any mention of the Kildare family name, and Agent Shane Dorsey’s name. Given that Dorsey, the guy who brokered the O’Conor deal, is no longer a mere Agent but is now Regional New York City Director of Operations, not to mention my highly-ranked “friend” within the Bureau, that’s a nice break for both of us.

But that’s where the proverbial luck of the Irish runs the fuck out.

Because while the recording doesn’t explicitly say the man talking is Declan, it’s *abundantly clear* to anyone who ever met him that it is.

This is bad.

This is *really* fucking bad.

When the recording runs its course, a grim-faced Dominic puts the phone away, plunging the three of us into darkness except for the glow of my cigarette. Slowly, I exhale, my eyes piercing Dom’s.

“I can assume you’re here because this isn’t exactly going over well with the

vassal families.”

He makes a face. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Cill. But no. Not at all.”

“How bad are we talking?”

His jaw grinds. “Look, you know the Farrells are loyal. We’re not going anywhere.”

“I appreciate that.”

I mean, it’s *partly* Dominic doing me a favor, because he *is* fucking loyal. But it’s also just smart business. This recording and the whole issue with my brother’s FBI deal might be making things shaky. But Dominic is smart enough to know that he’s *far* better off sticking with me and having the might of the Kildare family at his back.

Not just because I make him *lots* of money. But also because it’s not at all lost on me that I scare the fuck out of him.

“The Foleys aren’t going anywhere, either.”

Well, no shit. The Foley family is currently run by the young Tiernan Foley, after backstabbing and infighting led to the premature death of his father. The fact that I didn’t burn the entire Foley operation to the ground after that has pretty much cemented Tiernan’s loyalty for life.

“Who else?”

Dom clears his throat. “The McCormicks, the Kearneys, and the O’Riordans are all solid. The problem, the spark leading the call for a goddamn revolution, is Liam McCarthy.”

Shit.

Castle, echoing my thoughts, swears under his breath. “Yeah, I don’t imagine any of this news is sitting very well with him.”

That’s putting it *obscenely* lightly.

Seamus O’Conor’s allegiance was always to whomever paid him. And years ago, before the McCarthys were officially under the Kildare banner and thus had our protection, a rival of theirs hired O’Conor.

Liam was seventeen and away at college when Seamus murdered his father, Michael.

His mother and little brother were crucified *bled out* by that fucking maniac.

As a result, Liam became the head of the family before he was even old enough to buy cigarettes. And now he’s just gotten proof that our organization made a fucking rat’s deal with the goddamn FBI to turn O’Conor in, rather than skin him alive for his atrocities?

The shit isn’t about to hit the fan. It’s about to arm itself with a thermonuclear device, cover its ears, and push the goddamn red button.

Dominic exhales quietly in the darkness. “Look, Cillian, whatever you need done, just say the word. I mean, all love to Liam McCarthy. But this is potentially full-on mutiny or insurrection if he doesn’t slow the fuck down and shut his mouth. If it’s gonna be war...” he nods grimly. “Well, you know whose side we’re on.”

I do. The problem is, I also understand that even with his support, there’s no winner if it comes to war within the Kildare empire. The bloodshed from something like that would accomplish less than nothing and could quite possibly set in motion the slow, spiraling death of our entire organization.

Much as the monster in me salivates at the idea of blood spilling in the streets...it’s not an option this time.

“There won’t be a war, Dom.”

He shakes his head. “Well, I don’t see how we deal with this, then.”

Castle nods. “He’s not wrong, Cill. I’m also not sure how you’d heal two warring factions like this.”

No shit. Neither do I.

I exhale slowly, turning to let my gaze sweep over the brownstone. My eyes stab through the wall of windows of the conservatory upstairs, where everyone is still finishing dinner. Where Hades and Calliope are cracking jokes with Eilish. Where Kratos is laughing heartily and doing some ridiculous little dance while Neve and Ares cheer him on.

Where Neve has just slipped into Ares’ lap, turning to look deeply into his eyes with all the love and power and unbreakable connection that, I’ve been told, soulmates have for each other.

My brow furrows as I watch them gaze at each other. As Ares gently tucks a lock of her red hair back from her face before leaning in to kiss her softly and yet possessively. As she winds her fingers into his dark hair, smiling through the kiss.

They make it look so easy and so natural to be so carefree and happy like this.

And then suddenly, as I stand there in the shadows, watching two former bitter enemies who were once ready to spill each other’s blood in the streets look at each other with the purest and fiercest forever-love...

It suddenly clicks.

“Marriage.”

The word falls from my lips in the dark silence, startling the two men I’m

standing with. Castle arches a concerned “what the fuck are you suggesting” brow. Dom frowns.

“Cillian—”

“Marriage,” I growl again. “A marriage to bury the sins of the past would put an end to the schism in the ranks.”

Dominic glances warily at Castle before turning back to me.

“You gonna dig up Seamus’ fucking corpse and tie the knot with him?”

I ignore the sarcasm.

“Would that do it?”

“Cillian—”

“*Would. That. Do. It.*” I hiss. “Would a marriage between O’Conor and Kildare bury the fucking hatchet?”

Castle’s eyes narrow, staring at me in shock. Dom looks at me like I’m more insane than usual before he clears his throat.

“I mean, necrophilia aside, if an O’Conor married into the Kildare family...” he shrugs. “It might actually work. But if we’re talking hypotheticals like that, I mean, shit, Cillian. Let’s just get a fucking time machine and go back to stop your brother from—”

“We don’t need a time machine. *Or* Seamus’ corpse.”

I take one last drag of my smoke, drop it, and stomp it into the ground.

I’ve got the key to stopping this uprising tied up in my goddamn basement.

THE SECOND DOMINIC LEAVES, Castle whirls on me in the darkness of the backyard.

“You cannot be fucking serious.”

Even though Castle frequently crosses a line with me that most people wouldn't dare, the look on his face and the fury in his tone is well past any confrontation we've ever had before in the ten years I've known him.

I don't really blame him, given that he understands exactly where I'm going with what I just said to Dom.

“Cillian,” he hisses through violently clenched teeth. “Are you out of your goddamn fucking mind?”

Most of the time, yes.

“She's an O'Connor, Castle.”

“Yeah, *that* would be the reason for the look on my fucking face right now, Cill,” he snaps. “You've got Seamus' goddamn kid locked—”

“She's not a kid.”

“She's *his* kid! That fucking sociopath had children, and you've got one of them locked in your fucking house. And now your grand plan is to fucking *marry* her?”

“That is exactly what my grand fucking plan is, yes,” I hiss thinly. “Because that's how the old ways *work*.”

I yank a new cigarette out of my case and light it brusquely, inhaling as the smoke curls around my face.

“You have to tell her.”

Her, as in *Neve*.

As in my niece, who Una's father kidnapped and tortured, *twice*. Who almost lost her husband to that maniac.

"I'll handle it."

"*Cillian—*"

I spin around with a snarl, grabbing Castle's collar as my eyes go livid.

"I said I'll fucking *handle it*."

He glares at me. I glare right back. But I do let go of his shirt.

"Believe me," I hiss. "I understand exactly how shitty a conversation *that's* going to be."

"Yeah, well," he mutters. "It's not going to be half as shitty as the one where you tell Ares."

No shit.

Telling the God of War that I'm about to marry the daughter of the man that he watched almost kill his wife?

Yeah, this should be barrels of fun.

UNA

I JOLT, shivering as the rusty, wrenching sound of the cell door opening fills the room. The one small mercy is that while he was gone Cillian left the lights on, so at least I wasn't going insane in utter darkness.

Having the lights on, though, also meant that I managed to talk to Apostle.

...And managed to reach out from the bolted-down chair I'm chained to and grasp one of the old tiled support pillars of the room. And managed to pry one of those old tiles off.

And managed to grind and shape that broken tile against the chair, and hone it into a makeshift blade.

Because I'm good like that.

As the door wrenches open, I scramble, shoving the weapon down beneath me and shifting to sit on it gingerly. My hand flies up to my necklace, making sure it's back in place just as Cillian rolls in like a black tide.

"I hope you didn't have too much fun at Hotel Kildare while I was gone."

I glare at him. Cillian—devoid of his usual jacket, but still wearing the customary black dress shirt—starts to roll the sleeves up his muscled forearms, which for some reason fills me with dread.

Like it's going to get *messy*.

I swallow, my pulse thudding as he slowly approaches.

“Well?”

“I have some comments for the management.”

His teeth flash, like a shark's. “I'll have to take those under advisement.”

He inhales and exhales slowly, those piercing green eyes of his stabbing into me. Unblinking. Unflinching. Unmerciful. I shift, biting my lip as the sharp edge of the tile under my ass pricks my skin.

Slowly, Cillian begins to circle me, his hands behind his back.

“There's been some developments. I—”

“Why the fuck were you in my apartment?”

He stops his pacing with a suddenness that actually startles me, turning to level that psycho green glare right into my eyes.

“Given your current situation, I would think that was obvious.”

My teeth chew at the inside of my lips, the hairs on the back of my neck prickling as he starts to circle me again, like a wolf. The uneasy feeling I've had off and on for the last few weeks...the shivering sensation that I'm being watched...

It all suddenly hits me like ice water being dumped over my head.

“It wasn't your first time at my place, was it?”

He stops his pacing again just long enough to glance at me, those eyes turning my insides to liquid fire as he arches one brow.

“No.”

Then he starts to walk again.

“Did you...” I swallow, my cheeks reddening. “I mean, why did you...”

Why did you steal my panties?

But that question seems about as forbidden to say out loud as the other one burning in my core. Like, why does knowing he was invading my space, seeing where I sleep, touching my things, picking me apart from the inside, ignite something in me?

Cillian’s slow pace brings him behind me, and I shiver as I feel him linger there—feel his piercing gaze scorching into me.

“As I was saying, there’s been a development.”

My heart turns to ice.

He’s come to kill me.

For revenge. Or maybe just because he is who he is. Because he’ll *enjoy* it.

I shudder, my mind churning before my thoughts shoot to survival. To the makeshift blade I’m sitting on.

I have to act. Before he does first, and it’s too late.

My pulse pounds in my ears, adrenaline flooding my system as I think through my moves: use my free hand to reach between my legs and grab the tile under me. Spin, jump as far up from the chair as I can, and stab him before he can do God-knows-what to me.

The fingers of my unbound hand twitch on my thigh. My muscles coil and tense, ready to spring into action—

Then I’m screaming as he’s suddenly on me.

I gasp sharply, wincing as Cillian grabs my free arm and yanks it behind my back. His huge hand shoves between my thighs with a snarl.

“*My-fucking-my,*” he rasps darkly. My face turns to ash as he pulls his hand back, one finger bleeding slightly as he holds the sharpened tile in his hand. He growls deeply in his chest, holding the makeshift blade right in front of my face—taunting me with that single drop of blood on his finger.

That’s all the damage I did, for all my grand plans.

“I’m insulted,” he sneers, tossing the tile away. “And a little curious. What the fuck else do you have hidden down here?”

My mouth goes slack as Cillian slides his hand back between my legs. His huge palm boldly and unapologetically cups my pussy through my panties. And when one of his thick fingers unexpectedly drags up my seam, I react.

Horribly.

Mortifyingly.

My skin ignites with heat. My muscles strain at the bonds holding me fast, my body shuddering as he nonchalantly touches me, taking what he wants. And knowing that he could take *anything* he wanted right now should not—should *not*—have this effect on me.

I should be horrified, not eager.

I should be terrified, not hungry.

I should be fearful, not on pins and needles wondering what he’ll do next.

Why are you like this?

Cillian chuckles darkly in my ear, wrenching me from my fucked-up little fantasy world.

“And there you go, getting *wet* for me again. Can’t help it, can you, my good girl?”

Sweet Jesus.

Heat explodes through my core, my nipples hardening as arousal floods shamefully between my legs.

Cillian chuckles a low, rumblingly laugh, and I grit my teeth as I strain against his grip pinning my arm back.

“You son of a bitch.”

“Let’s not start trash talking each other’s parents, shall we?” I shudder as his breath teases over my neck. “Least of all our fathers. My dear old da’ was a real bastard. But something tells me you’d still win that competition hands-down.”

My teeth grind. There’s a jangle of keys. And suddenly, the manacle around my wrist, the one holding me to the chair, unlocks and clanks to the ground.

“Let’s go.”

My breath catches in my throat as Cillian suddenly and forcibly yanks me out of the chair and half-guides, half-drags me across the stark room with chains on the ceiling and drains in the floor.

I stumble after him out the door and down a dimly lit, grimy hallway to an elevator. When the doors open, I blink in shock. The room I was just in was a horror show. The hallway wasn’t much better.

The elevator looks like something out of *Architectural Digest*.

Sleek, matte-black metal and glass. Modern, discreet lighting. A soft, elegant chime when the doors open.

What the fuck is this?

Inside, I gasp as he slams and pins me to the wall. His unnervingly unblinking, venomous glare holds me captive as he reaches behind him to push a button. The doors close, and slowly we start to rise. And rise. And rise.

Slowly, my jaw *drops*.

Where the fuck am I?

An apartment. No, not apartment. That word doesn't do what I'm staring at justice.

It's a freaking *palace*. A penthouse, with the elevator rising up into the middle of a huge, open space. The doors open with another soft ding, and I gasp quietly as Cillian yanks me out by the arm into the most glamorous space I've ever been in.

The penthouse is done all in dark wood tones, brushed metal, and black iron factory windows. There's almost no furniture. Just a single dark brown Chesterfield leather couch in the middle of the floor in front of an *eye-popping* feature—an enormous, easily fifteen-foot-high glass clock-face window, facing out over the view of all Manhattan.

It's not even the most gorgeous space I've ever been in. It's the most gorgeous space I've ever *seen*, and I've watched some pretty over the top movies.

My mind flashes to the group homes. The shitty motels. The streets. My crappy Hell's Kitchen apartment. And suddenly, the sheer audacity of thinking I could come after this man is almost comical.

Cillian isn't just some guy Apostle wants dead. He's a fucking *god*, living above the rest of us, breathing rarified air. What the fuck did I even think I

was going to do to him?

Hey, you did manage to stab him.

Well. Look where that got me.

I gasp as Cillian's grip on my arm tightens, dragging me stumbling after him across the huge open expanse of the penthouse. He pulls me down a dark, elegant hallway that opens into a *stunning* bedroom.

At least, it would be stunning if there was some freaking light in here. Currently, the huge walls of windows are blocked with blackout curtains, turning the elegant master bedroom with the slate-black walls and black ceiling into a cave-like space.

Perfect for a monster like him.

Through another doorway, my eyes pop when I find myself in a fucking *gorgeous* master bathroom, ultra masculine and *entirely* Cillian.

The whole place is slate-black, just like the bedroom, with brushed gold accents and a few dark wood elements. I stare at the huge glass shower with the skylight and rainfall showerhead above it. At the living accent wall covered in climbing vines.

When Cillian drags me over to a huge bathtub that looks like it was carved out of a single piece of slate-black and gray marble, and starts to crank on the hot water, my brows furrow.

“What are you doing?”

He says nothing, still gripping my arm viciously hard with one hand while the other twists the knobs and tests the temperature with his elbow. He pushes a button on the side of the tub, and instantly, it starts to fill with soapy bubbles.

My pulse quickness.

“What is this?” I snap.

“A fucking bathtub. Get in.”

My core tightens.

“What?”

“It’s bath time, Una,” he grunts, turning to let those green eyes of his lance into me. “Now get the fuck in.”

My head shakes. “No.”

“I think you’re imagining the question mark at the end of my last sentence.”

“I’m not taking my clothes off in front of you.”

I blush the second I say it, as his lips curl deviously and his eyebrows fly up.

“Nothing I haven’t seen before.”

I simmer. “That...that was different.”

“And why is that?” he says, eyes narrowing. “Because you were trying to kill me at the time?”

I swallow as he turns to face me fully, towering over me with a vicious, thin smile on his chiseled jaw.

“I *did* notice that didn’t stop you from coming all over my cock, by the way.”

Explosive, vindictive, sinful heat explodes through me as he leans down close to me and cups my jaw firmly in his hand, lifting my chin as his eyes eviscerate me.

“Now,” he reaches behind him, twisting the water off. “Get the *fuck* in.”

The bathroom goes silent but for the slight drip-drip-drip of the faucet into the sudsy water. I purse my lips, defiantly staring right back up into his eyes.

“How about instead, you go fuck yours—HEY!”

He explodes into action so fast it’s almost supernatural. He grabs me, lifting me like I weigh absolutely nothing before turning...

...and unceremoniously dunking me into the tub, clothes and all.

I sputter and cough, trying to claw my way out. But his grip is unmerciful, his powerful arms pure corded iron as he shoves me right back down into the bubbles.

For a half a second, terror fills me, wondering if *this* is actually his revenge. If this is how he kills me, by drowning me in his tub. But just as that thought crosses my mind, his grip on the front of my dress tightens, yanking me back up out of the water.

I cough and sputter and hurl obscenities at him. But not a one of them fazes him. He doesn’t even blink, even when he drops his hand from my dress to stand back, smirking at me sitting there in his tub like a shipwreck survivor.

“This would probably be easier if you took off your clothes.”

“Get fucked.”

He shrugs and suddenly pulls a butterfly knife out of his pocket and flicks it open.

“WAIT! PLEASE!”

When he drops down next to the tub, and when the blade plunges under the bubbles, it’s not my flesh he’s cutting and slicing.

It’s my *clothing*.

I jolt, gasping as Cillian surgically slices through my dress, cutting all the way from my cleavage down to the short hem, literally carving it off my body. But he doesn't cut me—not even a nick, even with the savageness of his moves and the dark glint in his eyes.

I'm not wearing a bra under the dress, and I blush, quickly trying to cover myself with my hands. It's useless. His hands plunge deep between my legs, making my body quiver and shudder as his blade slides through the fabric of my panties at both hips. He pulls them from between my legs, making me shudder as the wet lace drags against my lips and my clit.

Yup, I am *way* broken. Super, super fucking broken.

It's not until he grabs the necklace and unclips it from around my neck and tosses it aside that I realize it also went into the water with me. And something tells me that secret phone devices hidden in necklaces aren't exactly waterproof.

I don't think I'll be talking to Apostle using that anytime soon.

Cillian rolls his sleeves even further up his muscled forearms, pushing them over his elbows to the bulge of his chiseled biceps and giving me a glimpse of tattoo ink. He plucks a bottle of something off the floor beside the tub, and a fluffy loofah—black, of course.

I stiffen as I watch him squirt body wash onto it.

“What the fuck are you—”

“Bathing you, since I'm out of patience and would rather not have to deal with a protesting child.”

“*Excuse me*—hey!”

I flinch when he grabs my arm, pulling it away from my breasts and lifting it

high before the loofah scrubs over my skin. I try to fight him, to pull my arm back. But it's like trying to get free of a boulder, and he offers just as much give.

“I don't—STOP—!”

“Given the state of that shithole you were calling home, and given that you've been sitting in my kill room for the last few hours...”

Kill room.

Jesus Christ.

“Yes,” he mutters. “I would say you *absolutely* need a fucking bath.”

Deftly, ignoring my hurled insults and screamed swears, seemingly uncaring about the water I'm sloshing all over the floor as I fight him, Cillian washes my arms. Then my torso, ignoring the way my face turns crimson when he soaps my breasts. Then my legs, despite my kicks.

Then *between them*, as my throat tightens and forbidden heat sizzles through my core.

The whole time, he says nothing and offers no reaction, except for a deviously dark smirk on his face when my breath catches at the feel of the silky loofah over my pussy.

I sputter and choke when he pours water over my head. But when it's followed with shampoo, and then his strong, thick fingers rubbing and massaging that shampoo into my long, dark hair, something inside of me flickers awake and shivers.

Something whimpers.

Something purrs.

I don't realize I've stopped thrashing and kicking until I realize starting up again wouldn't do a thing anyway. So I sit there, stewing and chewing on my lips as the dangerous, beautiful psychopath who's apparently now kidnapped me washes my hair.

What the fuck is happening?

“Stand.”

I blink, opening my eyes and realizing he's finished as the water begins to drain away. I turn away from him, shyly trying to cover my chest and between my legs with my hands.

That is, until Cillian roughly pulls them away, yanks me around to face him, and wraps a big towel around me. I gasp as he lifts me from the tub, sets me on a fluffy mat, and then proceeds to *dry my hair* with another towel.

And at this point, I'm not actually sure if he's planning to kill me, fuck me, or make my freaking skin into a dinner jacket.

Possibly all three.

“Follow me.”

When I stubbornly plant my feet, he turns back to me, his eyes raking over my skin and his lips curling sardonically.

“Alternatively, I could carry you over my fucking shoulder, *without* the towel. You get to decide in three, two—”

“Okay, okay!” I blurt. “Okay, fine. I'll follow you.”

As he starts to turn back to the door, my eyes drift to the black marble vanity.

To the gleaming silver straight-edge razor sitting on a little stand.

“Don’t even think it.”

I jolt, my gaze ripping back to him—to the thin smile on his lips.

“I—”

“Save yourself the embarrassment and me the effort of restraining you. It’s not going to happen.”

I glare at him. Cillian shrugs and starts to turn away.

In a flash, I lunge for the blade. But he’s right.

It’s not going to happen.

I gasp sharply as he suddenly grabs me in his powerful arms, and freaking *tosses me* over his shoulder—ass up.

“You fucking prick!” I scream, pounding on his back as Cillian ignores me.

And carries me, kicking and screaming like a mad thing, into his bedroom.

UNA

MY PULSE ROARS—WHETHER from fear, anticipation, or something between the two, I couldn't say. But no. He keeps walking—past the huge bed, out of the bedroom itself, and back down the hall into the main area. He carries me into the kitchen, keeping me right there on his shoulder as he yanks open the fridge and rummages inside.

Then he turns, striding over to a dining area next to a wall of black-iron framed factory windows looking out across the East River to Manhattan. Oh. We're in Brooklyn.

I shiver as he sits, pulling me off his shoulder and onto his lap. I blush as I feel his muscled thigh beneath me, where the not-that-large towel is barely covering my ass.

“When's the last time you ate?”

I glance down at the plate of fruit, cheese, crackers, and charcuterie in front of us. My back straightens, my lips thinning defiantly.

“I *eat*,” I mutter.

“I didn't ask if you consume food. I asked when the last time it was that you *did*. And I mean a full meal. Not tuna fish out of the can that you had to share

with the cat.”

My face heats—embarrassment mixed with the terrified feeling of knowing just how closely he was watching me.

“Why the fuck do you care?”

My breath catches as his hand wraps around the nape of my neck.

“One of us has tried to stab the other, *twice*. Dial back the shitty attitude.”

There’s something authoritative about his voice that...*does* something to me.

And it’s something really not okay.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Swallow your pride and your seriously pathetic attempts at lying to me and fucking *eat* something.”

“No—*hey!*”

I shudder, gasping as Cillian abruptly yanks the towel off of me and tosses it aside, leaving me stark naked on his lap. I try to bolt, but his hand still grips the back of my neck firmly, keeping me pinned right where I am.

I turn to glare at him through the flush throbbing in my face.

“*Sadist.*”

“Is that your way of asking me to fuck you again? Because you’ll need to ask much more nicely than that.”

My face burns hotly as my lips purse to a line.

“Oh?” I hiss. “Didn’t seem to take much before.”

His lips curl devilishly in the corners, his green eyes turning steely.

“Careful, little girl.”

A shudder of shameful heat creeps through me.

“Stop fucking calling me that.”

“I will when you stop acting like a child and eat the goddamn food.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“And a terrible liar, it would seem. *Eat.*”

“Get fucked—”

I moan—and I mean I fucking *moan*—when Cillian suddenly reaches up and roughly pinches one of my nipples.

Which also has the effect of making me open my mouth—a reaction he uses to stuff a strawberry between my lips.

Out of pure spite and defiance, I go to spit it back out. I even go so far as to turn first, so I can do it in his *face*. But before I can, his big hand comes up to cup my jaw, closing my mouth firmly.

“Eat.”

I glare at him. His other hand snakes around my waist. My eyes bulge as he cups my breast and then suddenly pinches that nipple, too.

I make a moaning, choking sound with my mouth held shut—instantly flushing bright red.

“Chew,” he mutters.

When I don’t immediately do as he says, he pinches and then twists my nipple again. This time, when I shiver, he does it again. Then again, pulling and pinching mercilessly on the little pink nub until a shudder of pleasure

ripples through my core.

“*Chew, Una.*”

I glare at him. He glares right back. Then, begrudgingly, I do. And the second I bite down, the sensation is almost orgasmic. Holy shit, I haven’t had fresh fruit in months. The sweet taste of the strawberry is like pure sin on my tongue.

When I swallow it, Cillian’s brow arches. “Finished?”

I nod.

“Show me.”

I sneer, opening my mouth and sticking my tongue out.

“Happ—”

I sputter as he sticks a piece of cheese and uses his hand to close my jaw.

It’s infuriating. Infantilizing. Demeaning.

...And oddly sensual.

I don’t really know what to think or feel as I sit there naked on his lap and he feeds me. We fall into silence, and in a weird way it’s actually almost comforting.

“Do you know what your father was?”

That comfortable, sensual feeling shatters like glass. I stiffen, pulse thudding.

“I asked you a question.”

I turn and glare at him. “Just what the fuck would you like me to say?”

“I think it was a fairly straightforward question. What. Was. He?”

My teeth grind.

“A killer,” I hiss. “An abusive, manipulative monster. A psychopath.” My lips purse as I glare at him. “You know, *you*.”

A deadly tension hovers between us as his eyes flicker darkly. Cillian just smiles back.

“Your father did terrible—”

“Yeah, trust me, I know—*ah!*”

I gasp as Cillian’s hand swats my inner thigh, hard, making me squirm and shift on his lap.

“Don’t interrupt. Were you aware that fifteen years ago, your father kidnapped my niece, Neve?”

Oh my God.

There’s a lot that I know about my father—things that have kept me up or woken me from nightmares my entire life. His cruelty. His inhumaneness. The way he made it abundantly clear to both Finn and I that we were his tools of destruction before we were his children.

I knew he did bad things. I knew he killed people, and sometimes even read about it in the newspapers, even during that time we were going to see him at Coal Creek every two weeks.

But I didn’t know *that*, and my face pales when he says it.

There’s fury in his eyes and vicious anger in his voice. “She was nine.”

My face falls in horror.

“He drove her to a hunting cabin, trussed her up to a fucking *crucifix*, and had every intention of bleeding her out until she died.”

My stomach twists poisonously, my very soul shuddering.

“I—” I swallow, my mouth dry as I shiver. What do you say to that? “I’m sorry,” I mumble quietly. “I *hated* my father—”

The world explodes, and the words are choked in my mouth as Cillian suddenly grabs my jaw tightly.

“Then why the *fuck* were you trying to kill me?”

I’m shaking. My eyes lock with his—wide and unblinking as those lethal green orbs eviscerate me. His lips curl into a demonic snarl, and the muscles in his neck ripple as I tremble, his jugular pulsing.

And then just as suddenly as it exploded out of him, the violence evaporates. His hand drops from my jaw, his eyes cold as he turns. He plucks up another strawberry, turning back to hold it to my lips. This time, I eat it without struggling.

I take the next bite of food too, also without defiance. Finally, as the silence between us drags on, I clear my throat.

“Why am I here?”

“You’re not asking the questions yet.” He turns to me, his arm still wrapped around me—fingers splayed across my bare ribs, just under my breast.

“Where’s your brother?”

The floor drops out from under me. I try and hide it, mask it. But I know the second I see his lips curl that my face has given me away.

“You know, the twin brother you used to go visit your father with at Coal Creek.” Cillian smiles sadistically. “Believe me, there is *nothing* I don’t know, Una.”

The gasp chokes in my throat as Cillian wraps his powerful hand around it, squeezing slightly.

“My patience has a limit. Especially toward someone who’s tried to hurt my family.”

“I—I—!”

Air wheezes into my lungs through my constricted windpipe. My eyes bulge from my head as they lock with his even, cool, lethal ones.

“*Where. Is. He.*”

I should be terrified. I should be fighting as hard as I can out of fear he’ll kill me. But I’m not, and I don’t.

Maybe it’s the knowledge that if this man—of all people—wanted to kill me, he’d just do it, and probably without batting an eye.

Or maybe it’s the incredibly *fucked* realization that as Cillian’s hand squeezes my throat, and as I squirm on his lap, I can feel him getting hard.

Really, really hard.

But even that’s not the most fucked up part. The most fucked up part is that the harder he squeezes, and the more I writhe on the thick bulge under me, *the wetter I get.*

It’s a deadly combination, a heady, illicit rush and shock to my system that has every nerve screaming and every inch of my skin tingling with raw need. Cillian leans close to me, his eyes stabbing into mine as my face burns hotly.

As my pulse roars.

As my core quivers and tightens and threatens, mortifyingly, to explode at any second as he knowingly or unknowingly pushes me to the very fucking

brink of my sanity.

And then suddenly—he stops.

I choke on my breath as his hand drops from my throat and he pulls back, a hard, sneering glint in his eyes as he shifts me onto his thigh.

“Maybe we should stop,” he murmurs as I sit there in shock, practically shaking on his leg. Cillian smiles sardonically. “Before you come all over my pants.”

Sweet. Fucking. Jesus.

My face turns the color of the strawberries on the plate in front of me.

“My brother... I... I don’t know.”

He eyes me with that piercing, venomous green gaze.

“I don’t, honestly. I...” I bite my lip and look away. “I haven’t seen or talked to him in almost two years.”

Cillian is silent. When I turn back, though, the malice has faded from his eyes, and I see his chin almost imperceptibly nod.

“Now,” he growls quietly. “Be a good girl and open up.”

Numbly, still shaking, I open my lips, allowing him to slip another piece of cheese onto my tongue. I chew it slowly, meekly, unable to meet his eyes.

“What do you want with me?” I finally whisper.

When he doesn’t answer, I pull my gaze to his, shivering at the venomous green that glints back at me from his darkly handsome, chiseled face.

But he still doesn’t answer. And as the seconds tick by, and the anxiety really starts to gnaw at me, I can’t stand it anymore.

“Please,” I blurt. “If you’re going to kill me, just fucking—”

“If I was going to kill you, little girl, you’d be dead already.”

I shiver at the calm, conversational way he says it—a stark reminder of the lethal psychopath that lurks beneath the darkly handsome exterior, like a monster lurking just under the surface of a still, summer lake.

“If you’re going to fuck me, just—”

“Your skills at seduction are truly awe-inspiring.”

My lips curl. “Fuck you.”

“Maybe later. The night is young.”

I lick my lips.

“Allow me to make this easier for you,” he growls. “Right now, in here, you’re safe.”

I resist the urge to bark a sarcastic laugh. Cillian catches it anyway.

“You can make a glib joke or insult me like a child all you like. It doesn’t change the reality that I know you’re smart enough to understand. Someone sent you—for whatever reason, which I *will* get out of you—to kill me. You’ve failed,” he says thinly. “More than once, actually. Now, if *I* were this person who wanted to kill me, I would probably be looking at a plan B at this point. And when you go to a plan B in matters of this nature, it’s usually best to tie up any loose ends with plan A.”

My pulse quickens.

Cillian’s eyes narrow. “Tell me I’m wrong about whoever it is who’s been putting you up to this. Tell me they *won’t* kill you without hesitation, after failing them so many times.”

I start to shiver.

“I’m actually offering you *protection*, Una,” he growls.

I swallow, slowly and nervously lifting my eyes warily to his.

“And?”

He smiles deviously. “And what?”

“What’s the catch? What do you get out of—”

“Oh, I think we both already know the answer to that...”

A horrifying, forbidden feeling coils and throbs in my core.

“I get *you*.”

I try to will back the heat that instantly floods my face. I could fight him. Or tell him to go fuck himself, or do what I’ve done my entire life, which is fight the tide, over and over and over again.

But I’m so. Damn. *Tired* of trying to swim against the tide. Because it always wins.

And he’s right. It hasn’t gone unnoticed by me how Apostle has become increasingly cold the longer this whole thing has dragged out. How his patience is clearly wearing thin.

How right Cillian might be about Apostle deciding I’m not worth the risk if I can’t get it done. What that means for Finn is too much to even think about. I can’t help him or save him if I’m dead.

There’s a chance I can if I’m *not*, though. And if that means staying here as Cillian’s...what, sex slave? His obedient little pet, ready and willing to let him do whatever he wants to me? Then so be it.

Yeah, as if you're at all upset about any of that.

I blush as the thought inside my head pretty much rolls its eyes at me.

But it's also not an incorrect thought. A morally *wrong* one, perhaps. But not factually incorrect. Because the idea of letting Cillian do what he wants with me is...electrifying.

Intoxicating.

Dangerously seductive.

Terrifying but alluring, like watching the edge of a knife glint in the moonlight.

"Fine," I blurt quickly. I stand from his lap, and without blinking, even though my face is burning hot, I suddenly bend over the edge of the table. "Fine, do what you want."

Nothing happens.

He doesn't pounce on me. Or spank me, or bite me, or punish me.

Or fuck me.

And I hate that the feeling I'm currently experiencing because of that is "disappointment".

I shiver when I feel his hands grip my hips—full of power and a sensual sort of hardness. Suddenly, he's pulling me back, planting me on his lap again. Heat floods my face, my pulse thumping as he brushes my hair aside, and I gasp when his lips brush my earlobe.

"Such an eager little thing."

I bite my lip so hard it almost bleeds to stop from whimpering.

“But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. You *will* be mine,” he growls quietly. “But I’m not sure you understand the full extent of what I’m saying.”

His hand cups my jaw, swiveling my head as I shiver, bringing my eyes level with his.

“You’re going to be my wife.”

It’s as if reality itself is glitching out. At first, I’m sure I’m hallucinating, or that I heard him wrong. But the longer I sit there, fucking naked on his lap, his eyes piercing into mine, the clearer it becomes how real all this is.

“I—” I stare at him.

He can’t possibly be serious. But he just stares back at me, unblinking, and the knot in my stomach curls and tightens even more.

“You can’t honestly be suggesting that.”

“It wasn’t a *suggestion* at all, Una. It’s what’s happening.”

I blink, shuddering as something heated and fierce hooks its claws into my chest.

“I…” I shake my head. “No, it’s not.”

Cillian smiles that thin, sadistic smile of his. “You really don’t have the luxury of choice here.”

“The fuck I don’t!” I blurt, feeling my breath coming faster. “You can’t *force* someone to marry—!”

“Let me make this *abundantly clear* to you,” Cillian growls. I shiver as his hand lands heavily on my thigh and tightens. “Out there, you’re dead. Period. It might be at the hand of whoever the fuck is calling the shots with you. Or it might be at the hands of any number of your father’s enemies, once they

realize who you are.”

I stare at him in horror. “Is that a *threat*?”

“No. That is cold, hard *reality*,” he snaps. “I have resources and connections such that I’m the first to have figured out who you are. But I won’t be the last.”

My face pales, my body and brain going numb.

This can’t be happening. This can’t be real. This is all a bad dream.

I stare at him, my breath coming ragged and fast. “I—why...” I shake my head. “I mean, what do you get out of—”

“A marriage between our families heals a divide in my organization—one that has *everything* to do with your father, by the by.”

I shiver as his hand cups my jaw, lifting my chin so that my eyes lock with his.

“So: you get protection. I stop a civil war. *And...*” He leans close, making my breath catch and my body jolt as his lips brush my ear again. “*I’ll let you truly explore this darkness in you, in a way that nobody else can.*”

I gasp, my pulse skipping as feel his hand on my thigh tighten possessively. As I feel his teeth suddenly nip at the tender flesh of my neck.

“Now be a good girl and *spread your fucking legs.*”

CILLIAN

IT'S TAKEN every fucking ounce of my willpower to have gone this long with her sitting naked on my lap and not have bent her over the fucking table in front of us and fucked her hard enough and deep enough to slake my hunger for her.

Now, that patience is at an end.

The problem isn't *just* her nakedness. It's not *just* that I've tasted her before. Not *just* that I've felt her come insanely hard as she squeezed my dick, or that I've been craving her, even while hunting her, ever since.

It's that I've seen the darkness in her.

I've seen how deep her own depravity goes. I've seen the porn she likes, and the fantasies she has. I've realized that the band she wore on her wrist that night at Club Venom wasn't just an act, or her "cover".

I've watched her step onto the edge, teetering over the abyss in an attempt to satiate the dark desires she keeps locked inside.

And it's all of *that* taken together that has me unable to stop or deny myself any longer.

Given who and what I am, it's not like I'm out cruising the city picking up

random club bunnies every night of the week. But I'm also forty-one, and I've hardly spent my adult life as a monk.

Still, it's taken less than a week of watching her to understand there's something rare about Una.

I've never once seen a darkness and viciousness similar to mine reflected back at me by any woman.

Dangerous, depraved desires, buried deep inside. And yet in her they're also mixed with a sort of intoxicatingly defiant innocence. As if there's a war forever raging in her, between the good and the bad. Light and dark, caught for all eternity like lightning in a bottle.

I'm dying to smash it open.

She gasps, shuddering as my hand slides up her bare thigh.

"I said, be a good girl and *spread your fucking legs.*"

Una stares straight ahead as I breathe the words into her ear—defiance in her eyes, her jaw clenched.

But it's all an act. It's a shell she's learned to hide within—to stop the world from seeing the darkness swirling inside of her.

She's embarrassed by her own desires. So she keeps them locked deep inside like a dirty little secret, masking herself with this chip-on-her-shoulder toughness and devil-may-care sass.

Which I see *right fucking through.*

Because game, as they say, recognizes game.

I've spent my entire life wearing masks, ever since my uncle Lorcan saw—truly *saw*—the devil in me that had my parents unable to meet my eyes.

Lorcan was the one who first taught me to channel that darkness—to find steam vents to release the pressure, so that I could at least hide within normal society.

So when Una tries to put her own mask on, it's a lost cause when it comes to me. Her emotions and her secrets might as well be as naked as she is right now.

My hand slides up her thigh. She stiffens, and goes to shut them. But when my bare palm smacks the tender flesh of her inner thigh, she yelps and ceases the movement. She also turns bright red. I watch with amusement as she so desperately tries to hide the hunger on her face, the way the pink of her cheeks floods down her neck to her chest, the way her nipples harden when I smack her thigh again.

“The band you wore that night at the club really wasn't just a disguise to go with the wig, was it?”

I already know the answer. But I want to hear her say it. I also wouldn't mind if she lied and forced me to spank the truth out of her.

“I...I don't know.”

Another smack to her thigh. “I've seen the videos you watch online.”

Her eyes bulge, her mouth falling open before she snaps it shut and swallows.

“Not to mention, just in case you've forgotten, I've had first-hand experience feeling how fucking *wet* you get when pain comes into, shall we say, play.”

Her bottom lip catches between her teeth as she stiffens, and her eyes dart to me before stabbing straight ahead again.

“I don't... I mean, I'm not like...”

“Like what?” I growl thinly into her ear. “Like me?”

She swallows but doesn't speak.

“What am I, Una?”

When she still doesn't answer, I force a sound to her lips—a gasping moan as I reach around her and pinch one of her nipples again. That gets her to whip her gaze to me, eyes wild.

“Well? What am I?”

I see the flash of defiance and fight in her eyes. I know she wants to use this opportunity to call me a psychopath, or an asshole, or a tyrant, or any number of a string of names.

I'm surprised when she just says the one.

“A sadist,” she breathes quietly.

“At times, yes. And you know what that means?”

Of course, I *know* she knows what that means. But I want to open her up. I want to lay her bare. I want to make her say it out loud, for both of us.

“Yes,” she whispers. “It means you want to hurt people.”

I shake my head. “Not exactly. I want to hurt people who attempt to hurt me or my family, anyone would. But in the context of me and you, it's not that I want to hurt you, Una.”

Her eyes go wide and her lips quiver as my hand slides all the way up her thigh to cup her pussy.

Warm. Wet.

I fight back the urge to pin her to the table right here and now and fuck her until she can't walk straight. Instead, I settle for twisting her nipple with one hand while the hand between her legs drags a thick finger up her lips.

Una shudders, swallowing a moan.

“It means I want to find the dark, black, parts of you and *rip them out*,” I rasp. “It means I want to expose those needs you have that you’re so ashamed of that you keep them hidden away, and inflict them upon you until you’re *mine*.”

“So, you do want to hurt me.”

“More to the point, I want to hurt you the way I know you fucking *want* me to hurt you.”

She shivers, and I swear to fucking God I can feel her pussy grow even warmer against my hand as she squirms on my lap.

Her gaze slides to mine, her cheeks flushed as she chews on her lip. “And if I say no?”

I arch a brow in amusement. “You won’t.”

She puts on a partially convincing shocked face. “But if I *do*, though? If I say no, or stop, will you?”

“No.”

She shivers.

“Because we both know that’s only part of your kink. Part of what makes it thrilling for you. The other part is that you might say no, and *I might not give a fuck*.”

My finger strokes her glistening, silken, dripping wet pussy, watching in dark amusement as she tries to bite back a breathy moan.

“But...” she bites down on her lip hard again as I roll a finger over her clit. “But if it *has* to stop. If no really, truly means no...”

“Then you use your safe word.”

She stares at me. “*No*. I mean if I don’t want you to do any of those things to me. If it’s *all* a no, and you keep going anyway, do you even know what that’s—”

“I know the defiance in you wants so badly to say no. But the devil in you won’t let you.”

“What devi—”

She chokes, moaning as I quickly sink two fingers deep into her messy little pussy. I curl them against her front wall, watching with amused hunger as that sass on her face melts away completely and she melts in my lap.

“*That* devil,” I growl. “The devil that craves the roughness and the pain and the darkness you know damn well only I can give you. You might’ve been at the club that night to hurt me, Una,” I hiss. “But you were also there to stare out over the abyss, into the darkness you like to *play at* with your choice of porn and your methods of making yourself come—”

Her face turns bright pink and a whimper tumbles from her lips as I slowly stroke my fingers in and out.

“You were there to see if truly looking into the darkness you crave would scare you away forever, or suck you in and never let you go.”

She squirms, trying to glare at me, which is hilariously unsuccessful given that my fingers are stroking in and out of her pussy and my thumb is rolling over her clit.

“You...you don’t know a thing about—”

“I do. I know *everything* about you,” I hiss. “Every dark desire. Every depraved need. And if there’s anything I’ve missed, believe me...”

She jolts, gasping as I start to drive my fingers into her harder, without mercy.

Which of course, makes her even *wetter*.

She shudders on my lap, her teeth biting her lip so hard I'm almost positive they're about to bleed. Her eyes fade in and out of focus, her cheeks flushing as I curl my fingers deep against her g-spot.

Mercilessly dragging her release from her. Viciously pushing her to the very fucking edge.

I reach around her with my other hand, making her gasp and whimper as I pinch hard on a nipple. I twist the pebbled bud in my fingers, torturing her as her sopping pussy floods my fingers with her desire. As she clutches the edge of the table and shivers enticingly on my lap.

"I can feel this greedy little cunt is ready to come for me," I rasp into her ear, punctuating my words with a sharp bite to her neck. "I know a huge part of you is trying to hold back. But I *will* break through that defiance, Una."

She starts to stiffen, her knuckles and fingers turning white as they grip the edge of the table.

"I'll break through every fucking defense you have, my little *fuck toy*."

Her pussy clamps down on my fingers, hard, her inner muscles clenching as her eyes roll back and a silent scream hangs on her trembling lips, waiting to be let out.

"And just so you know," I rasp into her ear. "The next time I do this, you won't see it coming. You'll be completely unaware when I grab you, tie you up, and fuck every tight hole in your fucking body, without mercy, and without a care, ignoring every *no* you manage to choke out around my cock while it's down your fucking throat."

Una *explodes*, coming like a bomb exploding as she screams and writhes and wriggles in my lap. I bite down hard on her neck again, driving the pleasure higher as I pinch her nipple and ram my fingers deep in her eager, clenching, orgasming pussy.

Then she goes jelly-like in my lap, her whole body trembling and shaking as her eyes fight to focus.

“*Good girl.*”

Heat floods her face—from shame, or desire, or probably both, given who she is.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. *Fuck.* Frowning, I snatch it out to shut it off, until my eyes land on Hades’ name on the screen. Double fuck.

“I need to take this.”

Slowly, I ease her off my lap, stand, and then sit her back in the chair.

“Stay. *Eat,*” I growl, nodding at the plate of food before I turn and march across the floor to the main living area. Standing by the massive clock-face window, I glare out over Manhattan as I call Hades back.

“Well?” I growl when he answers.

Hades exhales slowly. “We’ve hit a dead end with the brother.”

Shit.

For a second there, I’d harbored a brief hope that if we could find the boy, I could use him as leverage to force Una’s hand in this insane marriage idea, if I had to.

“Hang on,” he mutters. “Sending you a photo.”

My phone buzzes. I pull it away as the next message pops up on my screen.

My eyes narrow at the grainy image of a grim, clearly drug-ravaged young man.

...Who looks *identical* to Una.

“That’s Finn *Smith*,” Hades is saying when I pull the phone back. “And that’s a picture the nuns at a halfway house on Staten Island showed me. I don’t know about you, but that sure as fuck looks like the kid from the photo all grown up to me.”

It doesn’t just look like it. It *is*. I’m looking at Finn O’Conor—Una’s twin. Slowly, my jaw clenches as my brow deepens.

“How dead of an end do you mean?” I growl quietly.

His brief silence says it all.

“I mean a literal dead end. Finn Smith was a heroin junkie who overdosed and died at that halfway house eighteen months ago.”

Fuck.

“So now it’s on you to find that psycho bitch who stabbed—”

The phone flies out of my hand as I’m yanked around and slammed against the clock-window.

With a kitchen knife shoved against my throat, a scared, angry, and unhinged-looking Una holding the handle.

“*I’m sorry*,” she chokes, her eyes wide and wild.

“Una—”

“*I have to*,” she blurts, shaking, her gaze piercing into mine. “I have—”

She shakes her head, then she gasps I step closer to her, until my throat is

pressed hard against the tip of the knife. Her wild eyes lance into mine, pupils dilating as she shakes her head.

“I...” She’s blinking rapidly, her chest rising and falling with her breath. I can see her pulse thudding in the hollow of her delicate neck.

“He has someone I love,” she finally chokes. This...this isn’t personal.”

“I beg to differ.”

She shivers, her eyes pleading. “It’s not. But...I have to. I *have to*, or he’s going to kill—”

“Your brother?”

She stiffens.

“*Please—*”

“This person wants you to kill me, or he’s going to kill Finn? Is that what he said?”

An anguished cry sobs from her throat as tears well in her eyes.

“*You don’t understand. I would do anything to save him.*”

My mind glitches. Memories come bobbing to the surface with a snarling vengeance.

I’m sixteen. There’s still blood on my shirt from taking her to the hospital when I get home and find the kitchen door ajar.

When I find my mother limp and motionless on the ground, with him standing over her. When he turns to me, and fucking shrugs.

“*What are you going to do about it, you little freak?*”

Anything. Anything and everything. That’s what I’d do to save my family.

I push the memory down and stare into Una's tear-streaked face, feeling the tip of her knife piercing my neck—feeling the drops of blood dripping down my skin as our eyes lock.

I sensed it before—our shared darkness. Our mutual appreciation for the edge, and for looking over it into the abyss to see what's down there. To see if that would make us normal.

But now I see, we're not just similar monsters.

We're the same.

Time slows, my pulse beating in time with hers, as if we're connected by the steel in her hand piercing my skin. And I see with utter clarity that she would do, and has done, *anything* for the family she loves.

If I had a heart, it might break a little right now from what I have to tell her.

"You don't have to do this," I growl quietly.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Una. Finn is dead."

She looks like I just punched her in the gut. Her face crumples. The light inside her switches off. The knife quivers against my throat, leaking blood down, soaking the collar of my shirt.

Then her eyes narrow.

"That's a fucking lie—"

"Heroin."

She chokes.

"He overdosed. Eighteen months ago."

Una starts to cry, her shoulders shaking as she moves her head side to side.

“*Stop. Fucking. LYING!*”

“My phone,” I growl quietly, nodding to where it’s fallen to the floor. She swallows, shaking as she pushes the blade against my skin and uses her foot to drag it over.

I could probably—definitely, actually—make my move when she bends down to snatch it up. But I don’t.

I need her to see this.

“Look at the texts from Hades Drakos.”

Her eyes dart between me and the phone as she lifts it to illuminate her face.

“What the fuck is—”

Then she sees it: the framed picture of her brother, with two dates etched into the brass plate beneath it above the simple words from the book of John: “*Let not your heart be troubled*”.

“*No...*”

She jolts, sobbing, as I grab her wrist, wrench the knife away, and fling it across the room. Her face collapses, pure anguish on her beautiful face as she looks up into mine.

Ready. Accepting. Waiting for me to kill her right here and now.

Maybe I should. Listening to my monster, however damned it may make me, has gotten me this far in life, after all.

But this time, I silence those dark thoughts.

And this time, they actually fucking listen.

She chokes, gasping as my arms go around her, pulling her into my chest.

“I’m sorry, Una.”

Instantly, she breaks like crystal in my arms, all the clenched stiffness gone—crumpling and sobbing as whatever was left of her world gets yanked out from under her.

It’s a feeling I know all too well.

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CILLIAN

THE TENSION SPREADS through the room like ice cracking over the surface of a frozen lake. Like glass spiderwebbing under a weight it's not meant to hold, until the whole thing collapses.

And when it does...

It shatters.

“ARE YOU FUCKING SERIOUS?!”

Ares roars, like the gates of Hell themselves opening up, letting forth all the wrath the God of War can muster. He surges across the glass penthouse, stopping just short of where I'm sitting at their dining room table, and leers right into my face.

“Tell me this is a sick fucking joke.”

I inhale slowly. I'm not looking at Ares. I'm looking squarely at his wife, my niece, sitting across the table from me.

Neve.

Stoic. Unblinking. Unspeaking, but with about a million emotions flickering like barely contained wildfire behind her eyes.

“Answer me, you fucking Irish psycho!!”

Slowly I turn my head, pulling my eyes from Neve to let them settle on Ares.

“You will *watch* how you speak to me, God of War.”

His head shakes slowly. “No, Cillian. Not this fucking time. Are you out of your fucking *mind*?!”

I stiffen when he grabs the front of my shirt. So does Neve.

“Ares...” she murmurs warningly.

It’s her voice and her voice alone that can ever reach him when he’s this furious. And it does. He flinches, his nostrils flaring before he slowly exhales and turns to her.

“Let him go.”

“Love, we’re talking about—”

“Ares. Please.”

“You’ve got three seconds to take your hands off my shirt,” I growl quietly.

His eyes snap back to mine, considering. Then he shakes his head, hissing as he lets me go, and backs away.

“I mean, what the *fuck*, Cillian...”

Neve stands, moving quietly to her husband’s side and leaning up to kiss his cheek. “Take a walk, okay? I’ve got this.”

His jaw clenches. “Neve—”

“Please? For me?”

His stormy eyes burn into me, his head shaking before he turns away. “*Fine.*”

He leans down to kiss her softly, and then he's blowing out the door of their penthouse like a hurricane.

Then it's silent.

Neve turns and walks quietly toward the bar cart in the living area.

"Neve—"

"Want a drink?" she mumbles numbly.

"Only if you're joining me."

She laughs a cold, brittle laugh as she pours two glasses of whiskey.

As if that was a question that needed to be dignified with an answer, after I've just told them that I'll be marrying the daughter of the maniac who almost killed them both.

I follow her into the living area and sit on one of the sofas. Neve hands me a glass before taking a seat across the coffee table from me. Her face is impassive, her hand tight around her glass as she takes a sip.

"I'm sorry," I murmur. "This isn't something I ever planned for, and it's not something I relish doing. Not given your history with—"

"Is she the woman you've been seeing?"

Her voice is brittle, and she looks positively ill as she asks the question.

"No," I growl. "No, I..."

I could lie. I could sugarcoat this in a few ways to lessen the pain I know it'll cause her. But fuck it, I've never been anything but honest with Neve. We've both been caught up in way too much violence and pain in the past to be anything but that.

“There is no woman. Never was. Castle made that up to explain why I’d been lying low. *This* woman...Seamus’ daughter... Someone put her up to killing me in revenge for Seamus. She tried and failed. I’ve been hunting her just as she was hunting me.”

Neve’s face goes white. “*Cillian—*”

“She was being strong-armed, if that’s any consolation. There’s someone above her, someone she doesn’t know. But Una has...” I frown. “*Had...* A twin brother. The person pulling her strings was holding the threat of killing him over her head. Except, the brother’s been dead for a year and a half. She didn’t know that.”

Pain and something that might be anger or hate flickers over Neve’s face. She’s quiet, saying nothing as she sips her drink.

“You know full well about the cracks in our empire,” I continue. “Coming from the leaked story about your father’s deal with the FBI in exchange for O’Conor. This stops those cracks from getting any wider, exactly as the old ways of marrying to end blood feuds have always been meant to do.”

Neve is still silent, her head turned away, gazing out the windows of the penthouse looking out over the Hudson River. Slowly, she turns back to me.

“So, once again, a Kildare is marrying a sworn blood enemy to stop everyone from killing each other.”

Just like her and Ares.

I sigh. “It appears so.”

A slight smile twists her lips as she takes another sip. Then her brow furrows slightly. “Do you trust her?”

No. I don’t know. Maybe.

“I have to,” I mutter. “Or there’s going to be a civil war.”

“That doesn’t sound like a very good answer.”

“Did you trust Ares?”

She arches a brow. “I trusted *you* to not have made the worst decision possible for me in marrying me off to him.”

I smile wryly. “And what did I do to deserve that?”

“You saved my life,” she shrugs. “That comes with perks, you know.”

We both drink in silence for a moment.

“Who do *you* trust, Cillian?”

My monster. My darkness.

Except it’s so hung up on tasting Una and *devouring* her that I’m not actually sure if I *can* trust it anymore.

“I’m not looking for your blessing here, Neve. Just your understanding.”

Her lips curl as she shakes her head, looking away again.

“*That*, you have. I’m just not sure about the first one.”

“And you never have to be, and that’s okay.” I frown. “Ares...”

She sighs. “I’ll deal with Ares. You’re going to have to allow him his anger, though.” Her jaw clenches. “After everything that happened. After what this girl’s father did. To me, to him...”

She shudders, and one of her hands crosses to the other, automatically rubbing the thin, pink scar there on her wrist that’s gradually healing.

Seamus’ mark.

“I’m sorry. I realize this must bring it all back.”

“It’s...fine.”

“It’s really not.”

“But *it is what it is*, right?” She smiles wryly at me.

“Apparently so.”

Neve shrugs. “So, you think that should be our new Kildare family motto? ‘Well, fuck it. Guess I have to’?”

I chuckle quietly, sipping my drink. “I’ll look into commissioning a family crest with that on it. Maybe even have it translated into Latin, to sound more posh.”

“Perfect.”

I smile at her. She smiles back.

“She’s not her father, Neve,” I murmur quietly. “For whatever that’s worth.”

Her lips curl into a small grin. “I suppose it’s worth something.”

We finish our drinks, I get up to leave, and Neve stands and hugs me tightly.

“You have my understanding already, Cillian. I’ll work on the blessing.”

“Your understanding is all I ask for.”

I pull away and head for the door.

“Cillian—”

Neve’s voice stops me halfway out. I glance back to see her grinning a dry, amused smile.

“Welcome to arranged marriage life. Congratulations.”

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UNA

IT'S BEEN FIVE DAYS. I think. Maybe four. Six? I don't know. I've stopped keeping track.

Finn is dead. It's not a nightmare. It's not a trick of the mind. It's my bleak reality.

My twin—the other half of me—isn't here anymore.

When I collapsed in Cillian's living room, I vaguely remember screaming that it wasn't true. That it *couldn't* be true. And I wanted to believe—so badly—that Cillian really would stoop so low as to make me think Finn was gone when he wasn't.

Until he called the halfway house on speakerphone and let me talk to Sister Angela—one of the nuns who worked there. An older-sounding woman whose voice filled with compassion when I told her, yes, I was Finn's sister.

A Finn they knew as Finn Smith, a sweet but severely troubled addict who couldn't ever shake his demons.

Finn Smith had Finn O'Connor's same eyes. The same hair. The same birthmark in the shape of a triangle on his upper left arm, and the same "Unbroken" tattoo on his forearm that I vividly remember watching him get

done in a tattoo shop in Venice Beach.

Finn Smith, who died eighteen months ago from a shot of heroin cut with fentanyl.

In a way, the pain is diminished. Dulled. Because in a lot of ways, I lost him years ago. We'd been living on the streets in Los Angeles when he started to get deeper into heroin—something I tried once with him, and personally couldn't stomach.

But heroin was how Finn covered up his pain. It's how he managed to make it through each day. Yes, I hated that he used it, and tried so many times to pull him away from that life. But I understood why he did it, because I of all people knew the demons and the horrors that kept him up at night.

Except something went wrong with a dealer he owed money to, and we both had to get out of town, fast. The plan was to go north to Seattle. But then, at the bus station, Finn told me I'd be safer if he rode out the heat away from me.

Getting on the bus that day, *without him*, was the worst moment in a life full of terrible moments. It was like losing a piece of myself. I'd been with him my entire life, through so much.

And just like that, our cord was cut.

I got a postcard from Phoenix, then some calls on a prepaid phone when he moved to Chicago. When that line went dead, I wrote to the PO box he'd given me as his address there, only to get a reply from him from Nashville when that letter was forwarded to his new post box.

And those were the last few times we were in touch. It wasn't as often as I wanted, and I kept asking him when I could just hop on a bus and at least visit him, if not stay. But Finn was convinced the dealer from LA was still

looking for him, and he said he wouldn't let me put myself in that kind of danger.

Now, I wonder how much of that fear was real, and how much of it was drug-induced paranoia.

Just under two years ago, we talked for the last time. He told me he was moving to New York, and I pretended not to be freaked out at how erratic and unstable he sounded.

I got one postcard from New York once he landed here.

Then nothing.

Eventually, danger or not, I hopped on a bus and came across the country to find him.

And all for nothing, it would seem. Just like I've done all of these horrible things for Apostle, for *nothing*.

There was no gun pointed at Finn's head, ready to end his life.

He'd already done it himself with a needle.

All this is to say that yes, in many ways, I lost my brother years ago. But it still hurts to hear that he's dead. And I still can't do anything but wallow in the guest room Cillian's left me in.

Or rather, that he's *locked* me in.

On a somewhat regular schedule, food arrives at my door, or sometimes he brings it in. There are new, clean, clothes that are my size in the dresser. Toiletries in the ensuite bathroom. But I've still barely moved from the bed.

One afternoon, on day number who-even-knows, the door opens a crack. My back is turned to it, lying on the bed, and I wait for the sound of him putting

food on the table by the window and telling me to eat it in that firm, authoritarian, tyrant way he has.

But there's nothing. Suddenly, I hear a tiny pattering sound. Then I startle as a light weight lands on the bed.

Something warm and furry nuzzles at the back of my head, and my heart jumps into my throat.

“*Bones!*”

I scream so loud that I almost scare him away before I manage to snatch him up and pull him into a huge hug, just as the door to the room shuts softly.

Tears fill my eyes as I hold the cat, nuzzling him for a good few seconds before pulling away to check him out. After all, I've been gone for *days*. The poor guy must be starving—

My brow furrows. Or...*not*.

Because he looks well fed...actually, he looks plumper than perhaps I've ever seen him. And when I peer closer and sniff, I can literally smell cat food on his breath—the good kind, too. The fancy expensive kind.

“Sooo... You're doing well, I see.”

Bones meows, squirming out of my arms and meandering over to the other pillow, which he proceeds to knead.

“Well, at least I've got you here.”

He turns in a circle three times and then sits on the pillow. Yep, that's his now.

IT'S MAYBE an hour or two later when the door opens again—*without* a knock, as per usual. I stiffen as Cillian steps in, those preternaturally green eyes of his sweeping over me.

As if I'm not dealing with enough, this is my *other* reality: I'm apparently *marrying* this man.

A powerful, wrathful tyrant. A lethally psychotic killer.

Part of me wants to say who fucking cares. What do I even have to live for anymore, anyway? But the fighter in me won't let me. The fighter in me won't let me capitulate and be his pawn.

His political puppet.

His fuck toy.

"You're welcome, by the way."

I frown.

"For the cat."

I swallow, eying him warily, waiting for the trap to spring. "Thank you. His name is Bones."

"Because he was skin and bones, due to lack of food?"

I glare at him. "Because his markings reminded me of a skeleton. And I *fed* him."

"In the strictest definition of the word, yes, I suppose so."

I squint at him. "I haven't exactly been flush with cash."

"Ah, right, you haven't been gainfully employed." He smiles thinly. "Now, why was that, Una? Your busy charity schedule? Were you off changing

lives? Or, wait, were you compiling a fucking *hit list* of me and my fucking family and plotting to kill me?”

I swallow, avoiding his gaze.

“You’ll forgive my utter lack of sympathy, Una.”

“What do you *want* with me?”

Cillian leans against the doorframe, crossing his veined, muscled arms over his firm chest. As always, he’s in a black button-up shirt and black pants.

I mean Jesus Christ, he doesn’t *have* to dress like the Devil, does he? As if it’s not painfully obvious he is anyway?

“You haven’t been eating.”

It’s not a kindly, worried observation.

It’s a reprimand.

“I haven’t exactly been hungry.”

“You still need to eat.”

“I. Can’t.”

He doesn’t respond. He just lets those lethal eyes bore into me. Which should be unnerving. I *know*, logically, that a look this penetrating from this man should freak me right the fuck out.

Except it doesn’t. Instead, it’s weirdly...*warming*, which is insane given how cold a look it is. But it’s the same look he gave me when he told me he’d rip out all my secrets. That he’d pry out and expose every dark part of me. And now, seeing it again, that’s all I can think about.

Dark, illicit desires.

Stop that.

“So. Are you going to eat, or are we going to have to play it how we did before?”

My face burns hotly, remembering when he planted me on his lap and force fed me, while...*torturing me.*

Deliciously. Sinfully.

“I’m waiting for an answer, Una.”

Jesus Christ, the bossiness. The controlling tone and the arrogance to talk to me like I’m a wayward child who needs to be told what to do and when to do it.

“I’ll *eat*, okay?” I snap.

He smirks at me, lifting a brow at the untouched orange and a plate of toast from this morning.

“Soon.”

“*Now.*”

I glare at him.

“I’m more than happy to do it the other—”

“Okay, okay, *Jesus,*” I grumble, sliding from the bed.

I’m wearing one of the t-shirts and pairs of leggings that was left for me. But I still wrap the duvet around myself, shooting Cillian another withering stare as I trudge over to the table by the window.

I still don’t have an appetite. But I’ll admit that my stomach knots and groans at the mere sight of food. He’s right. I haven’t really eaten anything in days,

and I can feel it in the weakness of my body.

Cillian watches like a hawk as I devour the piece of toast. When I leave the orange and turn back to the bed, he shakes his head.

“You’re not finished yet.”

I roll my eyes. “Are you joking?”

“Do I come off to you like a jokey individual?”

“You come off like an *asshole*, actually.”

His shoulder lifts as he nods at the plate. “Eat it.”

“It’s not peeled.”

“Are you *seven*?”

My mouth purses.

I had a job once, years ago, at a fancy, overpriced grocery store in LA, in the prepared food section. Twice a week, I had to peel oranges so the segments could be packaged up and sold to rich idiots willing to pay five times as much than they would for a whole orange because they didn’t want to wreck their manicure.

My cuticles felt like fire for *months*.

“*For fuck’s sake*,” Cillian hisses under his breath. I jump as he surges toward me. When the knife flicks out of his jacket, my mouth falls open. Is the guy really crazy enough to kill me over an orange?

Actually, yes.

“Okay! *Okay*! I’ll eat the fucking—”

Cillian blasts past me, grabs the orange, and deftly and surgically slices the

skin from it with his blade. He smirks and sets it on the plate.

“There we go, *princess*.”

I glower at him. But I pick up the orange, doing my best to hold back a sigh of contentment as I bite into it. It’s delicious.

Cillian watches me eat the entire thing. When I’m done, I shrug, giving him a sneering look.

“Well? Happy now?”

I gasp as he leans right into me, bending down to let his lips brush my ear.

“Not till we work on that attitude.”

Heat traitorously floods my core.

Goddammit, self.

“Come with me.”

I shiver as he grabs my arm, pulling me into the ensuite bathroom—not as lavish as the one in his room, so, just the *second*-most glamorous bathroom I’ve ever seen.

When he starts to fill the tub, I stiffen.

“What are you doing?”

“Running a bath.”

“*Thanks*,” I mutter. “But I really can bathe myself.”

“I’m confident you can.” He turns to smile thinly at me. “Now, you know how this goes. Strip.”

Heat shivers down my back.

“No.”

“Una, Una. You keep imagining these question marks at the ends of my sentences. It wasn’t a question, or a suggestion. *Strip.*”

I swallow, hugging the duvet around me as the tub fills with steamy water and scented bubbles.

“I’m happy to cut your clothes off again if that’s what you’re angling for, little rabbit.”

My core clenches.

Little rabbit.

It’s what he called me in the club.

As he undressed me.

Unraveled me.

Undid me.

When the knife flicks open with a *schnick* sound, my mind jolts out of my filthy replay.

“Okay! Okay! Jesus Christ, are you always this much of a demanding asshole?”

“Usually.”

I roll my eyes, turning away and grumbling as I let the duvet drop to the floor. “No wonder you have to force someone to marry you.”

I start to pull the hem of the t-shirt up, when I stop and glance at him.

“I can do this myself, you know.”

“Again, *yes*, I’m well aware that you’ve most likely mastered the delicate art of taking a bath, Una,” he sneers. “But given that it’s been five days, I’m going to make sure it gets done.”

Tyrant, I think to myself.

“Correct.”

I spin around, my face white as I stare at him. “What?”

“I said *correct*. As in, whatever creative insult or label for me you just thought, assume it’s correct. Now *take your fucking clothes off*, or I will.”

Heat tingles over my skin.

“Fine.”

I turn away again, pulling the t-shirt off and then peeling down my leggings. I flush, covering my chest as I turn to him.

“Normal people don’t take baths in their panties, I hate to break it to you.”

“Do you want me to even *approach* the list of ways you or anything about you is the furthest thing from normal?” I spit back.

Cillian lifts a bored brow. “Take them off; get in.”

I purse my lips defiantly.

His knife flicks out again, and my body shivers—nipples hardening as my skin tingles.

“*Okay!* Jesus!”

My face heats as I turn away again, dropping the panties and then bringing a hand down to cover myself. Moving at an angle, away from him, I step into the tub, holding back a groan as the hot water and fragrant bubbles envelop

me.

“Okay, I’m in,” I mutter. “You can go now.”

Cillian rolls up his sleeves as he kneels next to the big marble tub.

“Uh, what are you doing?”

He grabs the bodywash and loofah sitting on a shelf built into the tub.

“*Seriously?* This again?”

“*Seriously.* Lift your arms.”

I shoot daggers at him.

“Lift your arms or I’ll tie you up spread-eagled in my shower and we’ll do it that way instead.”

Heat simmers in my face as I purse my lips.

“Maybe I *like* showers,” I mutter under my breath as I look away and limply lift an arm.

“Keep up the attitude, and I’m *more than* happy to oblige.”

I shiver as he soaps me up just like before—washing every single part of my body, slowly. I pretend to hate how much I hate it when he moves up my thighs beneath the bubbles.

But I don’t. And my body doesn’t lie. There’s no stopping the ripple of heat that ignites through me when he slides the loofah over my pussy, or the eager way my pulse races.

Just like before, my hair is next. I shiver, almost freaking purring like Bones as he shampoos and conditions my hair, slowly. Gently.

Sensually.

I cross my arms over my chest as my nipples harden, closing my eyes as he rinses my hair.

And then, suddenly, he's done.

I blink in surprise when he drops the loofah into the tub, dries his strong hands on a towel, and stands resolutely.

“You can fight this all you want, Una. But as much fun as this back and forth is, I'm out of fucking time. This marriage is happening.”

The marriage. As if I could forget.

I turn and lift my head to look at him. I feel so small and vulnerable in this enormous tub with him towering over me. And yet, there's something weirdly comforting about it, too.

A feeling of protection, unlike anything I've felt in more than fifteen years.

Maybe ever.

“There's food out there when you're done. Eat it.”

Then, with that final tyrannical and yet bizarrely nurturing decree, he's gone, leaving me to my jasmine-scented bubbles and black-tinged thoughts.

UNA

IT TAKES me longer than I'd like to admit to get out of the bath. I just sit there, hugging my knees to my chest, trying to shake off that...*feeling* he leaves lingering over me after every meeting.

Physical or otherwise.

Because the problem is, as domineering and tyrannical as Cillian may be...I don't *hate it*.

Actually, I kind of *like it*. Because I'm broken like that.

There's an unflinching, unapologetic power in the man who's just told me—not asked, told—that I'm going to be marrying him. A coldness, and something unhinged you can see in his eyes that should by all rights terrify me. Not just because of what that makes him. But because of who that makes him *like*.

My father.

I shiver, sinking deeper into the warm, sudsy water.

Except, for all the similarities you could draw between them—their murderous tendencies, their fondness for violence, and their dark power—there is something fundamentally different between them. And after sitting

there in the gradually cooling tub for ten, maybe even fifteen minutes, it finally hits me.

Cruelty.

My father was drenched in it. He breathed it. He reveled in it and lived for it. But for all of Cillian's fury, danger, and unflinching viciousness, he's never *cruel*. At least, not that I've seen.

My father wielded the threat of violence and his own darkness like a club.

Cillian uses it like a tool. Or maybe armor. I'm not sure.

Possibly both.

“What do you think?”

I glance across the room, where Bones has taken up a new residence on top of an admittedly *way* nicer toilet.

No response. Classic Bones.

Well, whatever it is, and whatever *he* is—Cillian, that is—I'd better make peace with it. Because this insane marriage idea is real and very much happening—that much is crystal clear in those deep green eyes of his.

Real, and *forever*.

I swallow, shivering as I pull myself out of the tub and away from that thought. I towel off, but when my eyes find my reflection in the mirror, I frown as my gaze drops to my thighs and the little white lines there. But specifically, to the freshest, still-healing cut.

I obviously don't have my little metal box, like back at my apartment. But yesterday, when I was feeling especially low and like I needed to vent the pain *somehow*, there *was* have a safety-pin holding a tag to one of the new

pairs of leggings Cillian left in my room.

I'm not proud of the fresh line down my inner thigh, courtesy of that safety-pin. But it did drag me back into the world of the living. Sort of.

The hot bath has loosened the band-aid I have over it to the point where it's falling off. And the cut beneath it drips a single drop of blood. Deftly, I pluck the band-aid from my skin and toss it in the trash before I start rummaging in drawers. I find a box of band-aids soon enough and plaster a new one over the cut.

Good as new.

When I leave the bathroom, though, there actually *isn't* food "out there" in my bedroom as he said.

Great, more mind games.

Can't wait to be married to this guy.

I scowl as I pull on jeans and a hoodie. For all of my protesting about him feeding me, I *am* actually hungry. I go to the door to knock and try to get his attention. But when I reach it, I stop.

It's ajar.

I slowly open it and peer out, half expecting a booby trap.

But there's no trap. No Cillian, either. And when I think about it, tricking me into leaving a room with an open door really doesn't sound like him at all. Does it?

So I step out, and then pad quietly down the hall into the main living area.

"No, it's not a trap."

I almost jump out of my skin, my gaze ripping across the room to where

Cillian is sitting on the sole couch, reading a dog-eared copy of, unbelievably, *American Psycho*.

“Really?”

He glances at the book, then up at me. “Yes. Why not?”

“No I just mean...you know...”

“Please, elaborate.”

His eyes glint with the hidden dare.

I take the bait purposefully, deliberately.

“It’s a little...apt. You taking notes?”

“Let’s say professional critique.”

I bite back a small grin.

“There’s food in the kitchen, as bold and groundbreaking a revelation that may be to you.”

“Thanks,” I mumble.

“And the door won’t be locked anymore.”

“What a touching engagement present.”

He drops the book, eyeing me with that cool, thousand-yard stare that I gather freaks most people out.

Oddly, it’s not having that effect on me anymore. I’m trying to remember a time when it did.

“You seem fairly confident I’m not going to try anything. I mean, having free range and all.”

Cillian lifts a single brow. “Perhaps. I also feel confident that if you *do*, I’m more than capable of *dealing* with it.”

I smile weakly. “I’m not going to, by the way.”

“We’ll see.”

I frown, glancing around the penthouse that is gorgeous but almost totally devoid of furniture.

“Ever thought of buying some tables and chairs?”

“Yes.”

Cillian brings the book back up.

Ooookay...

In the kitchen area, I find the stuff to make a BLT sandwich—a huge favorite of mine that I haven’t been able to afford in forever—in the fridge. Once assembled, I bite into it with gusto, relishing the bacon. When I’m done almost literally inhaling it, I frown as I glance over to where he’s still reading.

Forever is a long time.

I slowly walk toward him before I clear my throat.

“How long?”

Cillian frowns as he looks up. “Excuse me?”

“The marriage.” My lips purse. “I’ll do it, but there’s an expiration date.”

“Curious that you are still under the mistaken impression that is in any way a negotiation.”

“Everything is a negotiation.”

Life is a negotiation, Una. Each day, each breath of air is a negotiation with fate, and with God.

Darkness floods my mind. I *hate* that I'm hearing my father's words in my head again.

"And what's your *opening bid*?"

"Six months."

He rolls his eyes. "No deal."

"Hear me out. Six months is more than enough time for you to fix your own shit, right?"

His eyes narrow. "*Careful.*"

"After that—"

"No. The marriage ending within six months would almost guarantee to nullify the whole point of us doing it in the first place."

"Not *ending* like me leaving or anything. I think I actually have an even better idea."

He smiles, indulging me. "And what might that—"

"In six months, you'll kill me."

Cillian goes still, his eyes piercing into me.

"I mean, not really."

"I gathered that. That, or your little pain and submission kink runs much deeper than I thought."

My face heats horribly, but I barrel on.

“I mean, a staged thing. Like, you had to because I tried to kill you, self defense, that kind of thing.”

His brow furrows as he rubs his jaw. But there’s a new look buried there beneath the swirling green pools, an emotion I don’t think I’ve seen before.

“You can tell your family or organization or whatever what happened, and it’ll make you seem even stronger. I mean, come on: killing the daughter of the monster who tried to destroy your family? And I’ll disappear. I’m good at that.”

I can almost see the wheels turning behind his lethally beautiful, sharp face.

“Six months.”

I nod. “Six months.”

Cillian rakes his fingertips down his jawline.

“I have my own terms to add.”

I frown. “Okay. What—”

“Your brother used heroin, yes?”

My lips thin, a dark cloud swirling behind my eyes.

“Una...”

“Yes,” I spit. “And?”

“Did you?”

A cold feeling shivers slowly down my spine. I hug my arms around myself, looking away.

“Answer me.”

“Once,” I hiss.

I gasp as he lurches from the couch with a low growl in his chest, closing the distance between us in two steps, until he’s towering over me.

“How many times, Una.”

“I just *told* you!” I spit back. “*Once*, okay?”

His lips curl into a disdainful sneer.

“Oh, *fuck you!*” I hiss at him. “You don’t get to judge me! Look at what you have! What I imagine you’ve always had. I *didn’t*, okay?! I grew up in group homes and foster care, and on the fucking streets just trying to not be killed or preyed upon! So *yeah*, Cillian” I spit. “I used heroin to dull the ache and the pain. *Once*. And it wasn’t for me.”

I look away, bringing the heel of my hand up to wipe away a tear. “Jesus. Are you happy now?”

“Have you ever been tested?”

I whip my gaze back angrily at him, tears still brimming in my eyes. “What, you’re afraid I might’ve *given* you something?”

His glare is hard. “The thought crossed my mind.”

I grit my teeth, all the pain and the shame of those really, *really* hard teen years on the streets of LA that Finn and I endured flooding back.

Not to mention the horrors we faced in foster care.

“Yes, I’ve been tested,” I spit through clenched teeth. “Of course I have. And I was lucky.” I blink away the moisture from my eyes. “Anything else while we’re at it?” I snap.

“Yes.”

I gasp when his hands suddenly fly out and grab the waist of my jeans.

“Hey! What the fuck are you—*hey!*”

Cillian yanks my jeans down, not even bothering to undo them first. The denim drags roughly but electrically over my hips as he shoves them down to my knees, leaving me standing there in a hoodie and panties.

“*This stops.*”

I bristle when his finger jabs accusingly at the little white lines and the fresh band-aid on my thighs.

“That’s not *any* of your fucking business, actually.”

“Wrong. It is now very *much* my business And it’s done with. Over. Finished. You’re not doing it anymore.”

My lips curl into a snarl. “Mind your own goddamn—”

I shudder when he suddenly cups my jaw with a surprising gentleness, lifting my eyes to his.

“I understand the why. You might not believe that, but I do. Still, it’s *done with.*”

I look away, simmering somewhere between embarrassment and anger.

“And I don’t just mean when you do it to escape whatever monsters keep you up at night. I mean for pushing yourself over the edge when you play with yourself, too.”

My heart skips, my eyes snapping to his as my face heats.

He knows. He knows about my...sickness.

Did he watch me?

“Is that clear?” Cillian’s voice is deep and edged, brimming with a commanding tone. “You won’t mar yourself anymore. *Ever. Again.*”

I look away, but then gasp as his hand closes on my chin, pulling my gaze right into those unearthly greens.

“Okay?”

I swallow, nodding.

“Okay—what—”

My eyes bulge as Cillian drops to his knees in front of me, eye-level with my panties. My face burns, my hips shifting awkwardly. I shiver as he reaches for me, but then suddenly, his fingers pinch the edge of the band-aid on my thigh.

“Wait, what are you—”

He plucks it away. My mouth goes dry, my pulse thudding as I watch his eyes laser in on the fresher cut and the single drop of blood that drips slowly.

“*I said okay,*” I mumble quietly. “I won’t—”

Nothing in the world or in my most insane dreams could prepare me for what he does next. In one motion, with zero hesitation, Cillian suddenly drops his mouth *to my cut*.

And sucks.

Jesus fucking Christ. He’s absolutely fucking INSANE.

The man is literally tasting my fucking *blood*.

His lips fasten over my cut, and the feel of his mouth sucking as his tongue drags over it is both reality-bending in its *insanity* and pulse-quickening in its intimacy.

Cillian's hand drags over my hip. His fingers curl into the waist of my panties before I can say or do a thing. And before I can even react, he's yanking them down to mid-thigh as his mouth pulls away from the hickey that now covers my cut.

I barely have time to even process what just happened before suddenly, his mouth goes somewhere else.

My pussy.

I cry out, my legs buckling as Cillian voraciously *attacks* my pussy with his tongue and lips. There's no easing into it. No build up. He's just instantly devouring me.

And I'm instantly already close to exploding.

I shudder and moan, my hands clinging to his hair literally to stop myself from toppling over as his tongue delves into me. His lips wrap around my clit, his tongue curling and flicking over it. Two fingers sink deep into me, making me moan deeply as my legs begin to shake.

As my core begins to clench and spasm.

As fireworks go off in my head.

Cillian snarls into me, fingering me and sucking hard on my clit as my reality blurs around me. Until suddenly, without warning and without a single way to stop it, the orgasm hits me like a tidal wave.

I cry out, moaning and shaking all over as I cling to his hair. The climax rips through me, leaving me shattered, breathless, and on shaky legs as Cillian slowly drags his tongue up my lips once more before pulling back.

I'm shivering. The only thing I can hear is the thudding of my pulse in my ears. Slowly, my fingers unclench from his hair, awkwardly dropping back to

my side. But Cillian stays where he is, eye-level with my throbbing pussy.

Then his gaze drops to the cut, and the single, fresh drop of blood beading there.

His gaze raises to mine, holding my wide-eyed, flushed-face, breathless stare hostage as he leans close.

And licks it off.

What. The. Fuck.

Or more importantly, *why the fuck* was that so fucking hot?

I'm still breathless, speechless, and shivering as he casually pulls my panties and jeans back up before standing.

He sticks his hand out. "So then, do we have a deal?"

I blink my head still spinning and my mouth still unable to make words.

"W—what?"

"Do we have a deal, Una. An agreement on all terms."

He doesn't mention or seem to acknowledge the fact that he just tasted my blood and made me come like a hurricane on his tongue.

I hesitate a moment, fully aware of the all-but-literal devil's deal I'm making with the man in black himself. But then my hand finds his, and a tremor runs through me as he grips mine firmly and shakes it.

"Deal," I whisper, shivering.

Cillian's hand grips mine a second or two longer than he needs to, his eyes burning into me before he releases me. I move to escape back to my guest room. But then I pause, turning to see him sitting back on the couch with his

book again, as if none of this just happened.

“When are we doing this, by the way?”

Cillian’s eyes raise to mine. “Tomorrow.”

Holy fuck.

I stare at him open-mouthed. “*What?*”

“Oh dear, is there a conflict with your busy schedule?”

I glare at him. “*No.*”

“Then that’s settled. Tomorrow.”

I want so badly to rebel against that authoritarian, commanding tone of his.
And yet I also want to submit to it.

Like I just did.

And I have no fucking idea how I’m ever going to begin reconciling that
polarity.

Seriously. What the *hell* have I gotten myself into?

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UNA

IT'S FINE. It's fine.

I tell myself it's fine all night.

I even manage to hang onto at least a piece of that feeling the next day on the drive over from Cillian's Brooklyn penthouse to the Kildare family home on the Upper East Side, convincing myself that I'm making this into *way* bigger a deal than it's really going to be.

But the false confidence and forced bravado evaporate as we step up to the front door of the brownstone. My pulse begins to thunder in my ears, thudding rapidly under my skin. Sweat slicks the small of my back.

What the fuck was I thinking?

It's not even the part where I'm going to be *marrying Cillian*. It's the fact that I'm about to come face-to-face with the rest of them.

His family, whom my father tried to—and almost did—kill.

The same people I had tacked up on my freaking *wall* at Apostle's demands, laid out like a fucking hit-list.

Marrying the confirmed psychopath and professed sadist standing next to me

as a devil's deal is one thing. Facing someone like his niece Neve, whom my father once—no, *twice*—tied to a fucking crucifix, is another story altogether.

And suddenly I'm not sure I can do this, six months or no six months.

“You're not your father.”

I flinch, snapping back to reality and finding myself standing right in front of the big front door. My eyes dart to the man standing next to me in his customary black suit and black shirt, currently no tie.

“What?”

Cillian's eyes flicker as he turns to pierce them down into mine. “You're not your father. Nobody ever is.”

He rings the doorbell and then goes ahead and unlocks the door himself anyway and strides in, with me trailing behind him.

Yeah, well, do THEY know that?

The second we step inside, I see a pretty girl with blonde hair and big green eyes not so dissimilar to Cillian's.

Eilish, Cillian's niece and Neve's younger sister. Twenty-one, incredibly smart, and about to start classes at Columbia Business School.

And I hate that I know who she is because of a hit list thumb tacked to my wall.

I think I hate it worse that *she* probably knows that, too.

And even if somehow she *doesn't* know that part, which I doubt, she still knows who I am: the daughter of the monster who tried to, and almost did, destroy her family.

I'm not just an outsider. I'm a threat. The enemy.

Guilty by genetic association.

So I can't blame her when she stiffens as she walks around the corner into the front foyer. Her green eyes snap to mine, narrowing slightly as her lips purse.

“Oh.”

Well, this is going to be fun.

Hi. I'm the daughter of the maniac who tried to kill your sister. And surprise, I'm marrying your sixteen-years-older-than-me uncle to stop a mafia civil war. How's YOUR Tuesday going so far?!

I manage a weak smile. “Hi, Eilish. I'm—”

“Yeah, I...” Her brow furrows.

“Right, yeah.”

I swallow the lump in my throat.

Great. Fantastic first impression.

“Eilish.”

She pulls her gaze from me to Cillian.

“Is everyone else here?”

She nods. “Almost. Castle is out back with Ares, Hades, and Kratos. Callie is —”

“Hi.”

My head jerks to see another girl around Eilish's age walking down the staircase, her dark hair, dark eyes, and tanned, olive skin easily giving her away as a Drakos.

“I’m Callie.”

I smile weakly again. “Nice to meet you, I’m—”

“I know. My brother’s the one who put a bullet through your father’s chest.”

Yeah, so, guess we’re coming out swinging for the fences here.

“I—”

“*Calliope*,” Cillian growls with a warning tone. “Easy.”

She shrugs, glaring at me as Cillian turns back to his niece.

“Is Ms. Guin here yet?”

“Not yet. Neve’s—” Eilish’s gaze drags over me top to bottom. “She’s upstairs.”

“Would you please take Una up and find her something to wear, something appropriate for the occasion?”

“Funeral black should do it,” Callie mutters out of the corner of her mouth.

Cillian hears her, but doesn’t respond, turning back to Eilish. “I’ll be out back.” His gaze swivels to me, making me shiver as the heated power in his eyes lances into me. “See you soon.”

Then he’s gone, and I’m on my own with two frosty faces glaring me down.

It’s not that I can’t stand on my own two feet. I’ve spent my entire life standing up to group home bullies, other foster kids trying to take my or Finn’s stuff, and God only knows how many creeps, predators, thugs, and worse on the streets.

Somehow, though, this is different. Those other times, they were just bullies. I could stand my ground because I had legitimate ground to stand *on*. Today,

while I'm *not* my father, to these two, I might as well be.

An O'Connor.

Tainted blood.

The enemy.

And it's proving to be a little harder to stand my ground.

"Look," Eilish says brusquely. "I don't know what your angle is—"

Fuck this.

"My *angle* is that your uncle has a problem within the Kildare ranks, and needs *me* to patch up that problem."

"My, how charitable of you!" Callie gushes with all the sincerity of a punchline.

"*Plus*, there are a lot of people out there who want me dead because of who my father was."

"Can't imagine why," Eilish mutters.

"So *my angle*," I say tightly, "is to stay the fuck *alive*. That cool with you?"

The two of them frown, glancing at each other.

"I am *not* my father," I hiss. "Oh, and for what it's worth?" I turn to level my gaze at Callie. "I *hated him*, and I'd actually love to thank your brother when I see him for sending him to Hell. So, if we're all done with the mean girl playground bullshit, can we go find me a stupid fucking dress to wear for this stupid fucking fake charade?!"

Silence bathes the foyer. Eilish glances at Callie. Callie glances back at Eilish.

Slowly, they both begin to grin.

Eilish walks over, lays a hand on my shoulder, and gives me a half grin. “I think we can probably find something of mine that will fit.”

My mouth widens. “Thanks.”

Upstairs on the fourth floor of the brownstone, Eilish pulls me into what is clearly her bedroom. I can’t help but smile as I turn slowly, drinking it all in. I know—again, shamefully, from my digging from before—that she and Neve grew up in this house, and that she still lives here. So the bedroom is a cross between that of a twenty-one-year-old business major on her way to an ivy league school, and that of a little girl.

The expected GMAT and MBA prep course books—but on a white and silver vanity-style desk that looks almost like something out of a dollhouse. Shelves and shelves of vinyl records—jazz, classical, and 60’s and 70’s rock, with a cello on a stand beside it. But the bed is the most little-girl princess thing I’ve ever seen—four posts, dreamy white and silver gauze draped across it, a pink duvet cover.

Before it all came crashing down, I once had a room like this. And there’s a weird twinge in my heart as I take it all in.

“I grew up here,” Eilish blurts, blushing a little as she rolls her eyes. “I know, it’s super—”

“Lovely.”

Her lips curl, a brow arching. “I was going to say dorky and childish and way overdue for a makeover.”

“I love it. Really.”

She lifts a graceful shoulder. “Well, thanks. I’m still thinking about moving

out when I start business school—”

“*Columbia*,” Callie breaks in. “She’s a fucking genius.”

I grin as Eilish rolls her eyes and opens a set of doors that leads into a stunning, enormous, walk-in closet.

“*Okayyy*, so, white...”

“Oh, it doesn’t have to be white. It’s not really my color anyway.”

I have no fucking idea what is and is not “my color”. But I also feel positively ill at the idea of putting on a fucking white wedding dress for this debacle.

Eilish smiles wryly at me. “I mean, it *is* a wedding...”

“A fake one.”

She smirks. “Yeah, well, we’ve had a lot of practice with those lately.”

“You mean your sister?”

She nods. “Yup, and Callie’s next.”

The youngest Drakos sibling’s face sours when I turn to her. “Not if I can fucking help it, I’m not.”

I wince. “I’m sorry.”

“Join the club, but thanks. He’s a west coast Italian mafia head. Thirty years older than me and a complete creep.”

My nose wrinkles. “God, that’s awful. *Why?*”

She shakes her head, looking away. “More Mafia world bullshit, what can I say. So, welcome to the club, I guess. I’m actually envious. I’d much rather have to marry Cillian than fucking Luca Carveli.”

“Callie!” Eilish makes a face. “We’re talking about my *uncle!*”

“So?” Callie grins innocently, turning to me. “I mean, at least Cillian’s fucking hot.”

My face goes red. Eilish’s turns a shade of sickly green.

“*Seriously* gross.” She shudders, turning and diving into the closet. “I’ll see what I’ve got. But you’re also a little taller than me. Ooo, hang on...”

She rummages around before finally emerging with three white dresses in different styles.

“One of these might—”

She tenses. I frown, then turn to see what’s so caught her attention.

I go stiff, my blood thudding in my ears, as I’m suddenly face to face for the first time with Neve.

She’s standing stiffly in the doorway, her eyes—green, just like her sister’s and her uncle’s—somehow both faraway and stabbing right into me at the same time. Her mouth is thin and small, and when my gaze drops, my stomach twists and I want to run.

One of her arms is crossed over her middle, the fingers rubbing and tracing habitually over the wrist of her other arm.

Over thin, pink scars.

My father did that.

When he tied her to a fucking crucifix as part of his vendetta against the Kildare family and tried to *bleed her out*.

The room is silent as I swallow, eyeing Neve as she stares right through me. Slowly, she frowns.

“You’re maybe a little closer to my height. C’mon.”

She turns and disappears back into the hallway. Following slowly, I shadow her back to her room. This one has a much less girly vibe than her sister’s. A framed poster for a Nina Simone concert in France. A wall of older DVDs that look almost exclusively to be 90’s and 00’s comedies. And a bed that looks more appropriate for a young woman than the fairy princess bed in Eilish’s room.

Aside from that, the room is actually kind of sparse.

“I moved out a few months ago,” she says dismissively, quietly, with a shrug.

“Of course. Congratulations, by the way.”

I feel weird even saying it. *Congratulations. Sorry your wedding present was my monster of a father hunting you and your new husband down.*

But when Neve glances back at me with a wry smile on her face, I don’t see any malice there. Nervousness, maybe?

“Look, Una—”

“My-father-was-a-monster-there-I’ve-said-it.”

She flinches.

I clear my throat. “That’s my awkward way of trying to tell you...” I shrug. “*Good*. I mean, I’m *glad* he’s dead, and I’m *glad* your husband shot him, and I’m really sorry about what happened to you.”

Neve smiles wryly.

We don’t have to say anything else. We’re on the same page.

“Let me see what I’ve got in white...”

“How about anything *but* white, actually?”

She turns to grin at me. “I like where you’re going with that. Wanna take a look?” She beckons with her head as she walks into a massive closet the same size as Eilish’s.

Inside, I start to trace my fingers over a rack of gowns and dresses, pulling a few out here and there, but ultimately putting them back on the rack.

Finally, I spot it.

And it’s *perfect*.

Neve grins widely at the black, floor-length, scoop-neck dress with the long trailing sleeves.

“*That* was my Morticia Addams Halloween costume my senior year of high school.”

“Is it too—”

“I honestly think it’s fucking perfect. All black for a fake wedding?” She grins. “Very goth. Go for it. I’ll give you some privacy to try it—”

“Oh, it’s fine. I don’t really mind.”

Standing in front of the floor-length mirror, I slip off my leggings, t-shirt, and hoodie and start taking the dress off the hanger.

Then I see Neve’s face in the mirror.

Her wide, horrified eyes as they land on the pink scars crisscrossing my back.

“God, I’m so sorry,” she blurts, turning away. “I—”

My mouth twists wryly as I turn to face her. “Guess we both know how good he was at leaving scars.”

She stiffens, her mouth small as her eyes snap to mine. Something passes between us. Maybe it's a truce. Or acknowledging the pain in each other's past.

Or just an understanding that despite it all we both survived.

I turn back and pull the dress on, adjusting it and letting my hair drape down the back. In the mirror, I watch my own lips curl into a grin.

“Oh *hell* yes.”

Still grinning, I turn at the sound of Callie's voice to see her and Eilish standing next to Neve in the doorway to the walk-in closet.

Eilish giggles. “Honestly, I have no idea if Cillian's going to hate it or love it.”

“I don't really care either way,” I murmur.

Neve chuckles. “Good. You're absolutely wearing that.”

I turn back to look at myself, a cheeky grin spreading over my face. And for the first time in longer than I can remember, which is *insane* given what's about to happen, I think I might just see a glimmer of genuine happiness somewhere in that smile.

THERE'S NO BAND. No music at all, even. No altar, or white foldout chairs, or any of that. I really don't think I could do this if there were, in any case. It's already hard enough to stop my jaw from clenching or my legs from shaking as I stand in front of a rose bush, face to face with Cillian.

The monster I can't stop thinking or fantasizing about.

The dangerous and dark psychopath with the venomous green eyes who I'm about to *marry*.

He doesn't say anything when I walk out into the back garden dressed as Morticia. But when I come to a stop in front of him—still, I notice, all in black, but with a tie now—I swear the corners of his lips curl up just a smidge.

Because there's no chairs, Neve and Ares, Eilish, Castle, Callie, and her two other brothers Hades and Kratos just stand in a semi-circle near us. Their facial expressions range from smiles mixed with a touch of sympathy from the Kildare sisters and Callie, to curiously neutral on the part of Castle and Kratos, to outright scowls from Ares and Hades.

But I think everyone knows this has to happen. Or the Kildare empire goes up in civil war flames.

And/or I'm *dead*.

Elsa Guin, a young British woman who I gather is sort of the Drakos family attorney, is presiding over this whole sorry debacle. She smiles professionally at Cillian and I as she stands in front of us in a very lawyerly coal-gray skirt suit, her white-blonde hair pulled back in a severe bun.

“Well, shall we?”

“Oh, *please*, let's,” Cillian drawls with a sarcastic edge.

And then, we're off.

We say the words, and to my shock, there's actually rings: two simple, unadorned gold bands. Which are oddly perfect, in my opinion.

Suddenly, it's done.

I'm *married* to Cillian Kildare.

If this were real, this would be the part where he kisses me, of course. For a second, he pulls closer, his eyes piercing into mine, my heart thudding as I get a little lost in the swirling green pools of fire.

For a heart-stopping moment I wonder if he really is going to kiss me.

He doesn't. And I immediately chastise myself for the freaking *disappointment* I feel when he doesn't.

Because I'm insane.

Obviously.

It's not real, none of it. Not the marriage. Not the ceremony, or the rings, even.

Not the confusing, conflicted feelings I feel swirling inside of me.

Fear and desire. Resentment and lust. Defiance and submission.

They're not real.

So *why* do they feel so much like they are?

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CILLIAN

THE WEDDING ITSELF IS SMALL. It's the "celebration" afterward that's big.

By necessity.

It's not quite like Ares and Neve, when we had to "sell" their relationship to truly heal the blood feud between the Drakos and Kildare families. No one has to think Una and I are fucking Romeo and Juliet or anything.

But they *do* all have to acknowledge the marriage—both its legitimacy, and Una's legitimacy as Seamus' next of kin. Considering no one knew she even existed until recently, I've come prepared for that with a DNA test comparing her to my late half-brother Declan, who was Seamus' nephew.

I used a blood test we had on record for Declan, and a strand of Una's hair I took from her brush. And the test conclusively proves she's an O'Connor. Ergo, per the old ways, this *should*—and will, I'll make sure of that—end the bullshit and the various calls for rebellion.

Of course, the longer I keep telling myself this is all about "mending cracks"—that it's all a business obligation—the more I want to crack my *own* head open.

Because I know damn fucking well that isn't true.

So I switch to other, more palatable lies for myself: I tell myself that I'm doing it because of the raw, dark, and dangerous lust she ignites inside of me. I replay in my mind, over and over, the way she whimpers and moans so eagerly and submissively under my punishing touch, to convince myself *that* is the pull here: a purely physical addiction.

Better. But even that isn't the full truth.

It's the way she looks over the edge into the abyss because it calls to her, just like I do. The way she's different, and hides the monstrousness in her, also like I do.

The way that the darkness in her somehow connects with and mimics mine in a way I've never felt before. The way all of that simultaneously sets me ablaze and soothes the roaring inside.

And fucked if I have any idea at all what that means.

The reception—held in an event space behind O'Bannon's, an Irish pub that the Kildare family has historically done business out of—slowly fills with people. When we went down this “marriage to heal the divide” road with Neve and Ares, the reception was filled with almost an exact fifty-fifty mix each of Kildare and Drakos family and tributary families.

This time, aside from the immediate Drakos family—Ares, his siblings, and their hawkish grandmother Dimitra—the guest list is all from the Kildare side, and our vassal families. The McCormick, Kearney, and O'Riordan families all pass by where Una and I are standing side-by-side, and pay tribute and homage by shaking first my hand and then Una's on bended knee.

At times, it's eye-rollingly medieval, as if I'm some fucking lord of the manor or a ruler that the lesser lords of my fiefdom have to pay tribute to. Except, that *is* kind of exactly what this is.

My world is *not* a democracy of any kind. This is very much an absolute monarchy.

And I am very much their mad king.

A band plays traditional Irish music in the corner, the lead singer crooning into her microphone with an especially whiskey-soaked voice. It was all Neve's idea, actually—meant as an extra show of respect to the senior heads of some of these households.

Over the sound of fiddles and fifes, and lyrics about hardship and misery that the Irish do so love for some bizarre reason to play at purportedly *happy* events like weddings, I shake hands and mend the friction, one house at a time.

Now the fences just have to last. At least for six months, until our agreed-upon dramatic not-so-happy ending.

Which I'm not actually sure I'll be honoring. But we'll see.

The muscles in my jaw are beginning to ache from the fucking smiling so much when a soft hand lands on my shoulder, pulling me aside. Neve grins as she hands me a glass of whiskey.

“Here. I know mugging for the cameras and kissing babies isn't exactly your favorite part of the job.”

I grimace, gratefully taking a slug from the glass. “Playing the politician was always your father's forte, not mine.”

She chuckles as her eyes slide past me, to Una. “Look, I know the dress—”

“It's fine.” I try to sound appropriately annoyed.

The truth is, it's more than fine.

It's a *lot* more than fine.

Yes, I know her decision to go with all-black for the wedding was meant as a fuck-you: to me, to the entire situation, to marriage in general, maybe. I could see that plainly in the smirk on her face when she stepped out into the gardens behind the Kildare brownstone.

But if she was trying to piss me off, she's failed. And I know she wasn't *trying* to entice me, or to bait me, or turn me on.

But she's very much succeeded in accomplishing *all* those things.

Neve grins apologetically, lifting her shoulder. "I mean, I know she picked it as a middle finger."

"You think?"

She laughs. "But it works! I mean, *you* rock the Johnny Cash look all the time anyway, Mr. Man-in-Black. You two look good together."

"Which is a zero percent concern of mine, but thank you anyway."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm just *saying*. I like the goth prom king and queen vibe you guys have going on."

"Oh good, that's what I always *dreamed* I'd hear on my wedding day," I mutter with a dramatic sigh.

Neve chuckles, slapping my arm. "Don't be a dick. Look, I mean, I know it's not—"

"Neve?"

She arches a brow.

"Before you launch into the same pep talk I'm sure I gave you when you married Ares, it's fine. This is what being at the top means."

“Well,” she sighs with a grin. “If you’ll let me finish, I’ll just say, you could have done a fuck of a lot worse than her.”

My brow knits curiously. I wasn’t present for Neve’s and Una’s first interaction back at the house, though I wanted to be, given...history. But when I caught sight of them outside in the garden talking, and having seen them together now, here at the reception, it’s clear that the meet went better than I could have ever expected.

“She’s not her father,” Neve says quietly.

“Funny, that’s exactly the way I put it to her this morning, too.”

“And,” she shrugs. “I kinda like her, actually. She’s pretty cool.”

Part of me wonders how “cool” Neve would think her new—*fuck*, her new *aunt*, technically speaking—was if she knew the details of said particular new aunt’s history of trying to *murder me*. But, the other part of me knows she’s right.

I could have done a fuck of a lot worse.

Hell, she could have been *normal*. Devoid of darkness. I could be politically married now to some wholesome, bubbly, peppy little suburban housewife type whose idea of inner darkness and baggage is the piece of candy she stole when she was a kid. Whose most depraved kink is keeping the lights on.

That would have been a bitter pill to swallow, even if it meant saving the empire.

It’s only the fact that Una *is* damaged, and dark, and fucked up like me that makes this palatable. No. Much, much more than just “palatable.” Even if she’s not *as* fucked up as me.

“It is what it is, Neve.”

She grins. “Well, *I* think she could actually be good for you.”

I’m already rolling my eyes but she stops me.

“No, I mean I know it’s about politics. But I mean she’s a good match for you. And you can relax, I don’t mean emotionally or romantically. I mean as in, you could honestly use someone who stands their ground in front of you sometimes.”

I look at her over the rim of my whiskey glass. “Is that your way of calling me a tyrant?”

“*That* was my way of saying having someone who can throw your shit right back in your face is a good thing. Trust me on that.”

I smirk as she glances past me, her lips pulling into a grin as she spots Ares across the room, talking to Dylan O’Riordan and Castle.

“It’s just politics, Neve.”

She shrugs. “I know. But if it ever became more than—”

“Just. Politics.”

She smiles a coy smile. “Ares and I were *just politics*, too.”

“Yes, well, the next time I’m actively looking for advice on my personal life, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

She rolls her eyes. “*Fine*, heard loud and clear. I’m done. And now I’m going to go find a drink.”

I smile as she heads off, before a heavy hand lands on my shoulder.

“Cillian.”

When I turn, Dominic Farrell is at my elbow with a dark look on his face.

“Problems, Dom?”

His jaw grits. “Just thought you’d want to know, I spotted Liam McCarthy walking in a few minutes ago, looking especially...” He clears his throat. “*In his cups.*”

Oh, good. The man calling for civil war because of Una’s father and my brother is pretty much the last person I want to show up drunk and angry.

This should go fucking *swimmingly*.

“Shit. I’ll—”

“Cillian.”

I frown as Dominic nods past me. When I turn, my jaw clenches.

Fuck.

Liam—looking fairly intoxicated, and with a dark expression on his face—just walked right up to Una. Dominic swears and makes a move as if to rush over. But, something in the way I watch Una stand tall, without cowering, without showing any weakness, stops me, and I halt Dom with a hand on his arm.

“Wait.”

“Cillian, he’s—”

“I said *wait*.”

Despite her petite stature, I of all people know that thinking of Una as a little waif who needs saving is to vastly underestimate her.

I’ve got a fresh scar on my side and still-aching bruises elsewhere from the little hellcat to back that up.

So I wait, watching from about twenty feet away as Liam approaches my new bride in black.

“Congratulations, *O’Conor*,” he sneers.

Una just smiles politely, ignoring the emphasis on her last name. “Thank you.”

His lips curl. “Do you even fucking know who I—”

“Yes. I know my father did horrible, unforgivable things to your family, Mr. McCarthy.”

Interesting. She’s done her homework.

“*Yeah*,” Liam hisses. “He sure fucking—”

“I would apologize for him. But I do not, never have, and won’t ever speak for my father. Or *of* him, with anything but disdain.”

I frown as Una reaches out and lays a hand gently on a slightly confused-looking Liam’s arm.

“I can’t apologize for my father, Mr. McCarthy, and I can’t change the horrors of the past. But I can tell you I’m very sorry for what was done to you and yours, and furthermore I can tell you that if you ever want anything, or need a direct line to the Kildare family, you can reach out personally to me, and I’ll make sure it’s taken care of.”

Well...*fuck me.*

I can honestly say I’d never have expected to use the word “diplomatic” when it came to describing the rebellious, defiant, perpetual middle-finger-raising little would-be-assassin I just married.

But here we are.

I'm intrigued.

Very intrigued.

Liam's whole face changes from sneering disdain to—surprise—an actual, honest-to-fucking-God *smile*. He reaches out and takes her hands in his—which has the bizarre effect of making fury *surge* inside of me, to the point where my teeth flash and I start to move toward them.

“I don't know where you found her, Cillian...”

Dominic's voice rips me from the murderous fugue state I temporarily fell into.

Liam taking his fucking hands off hers helps, too.

“But, thank God you did. I mean, she's *good*, Cill.”

The red mist clears from my face as I watch Liam smile at my bride.

“I...misjudged you, Mrs. Kildare.”

Mrs. Kildare.

Fuck, I might like the sound of that a bit too much.

Una smiles as she squeezes his arm—bringing a fresh wave of confusingly murderous thoughts to my head.

“I appreciate that, Mr. McCarthy. Again, you have my deepest condolences for the past.”

He smiles. “Thank you, Mrs. Kildare. The organization, and Cillian, is lucky to have you.”

“You're too kind. And it's just Ms. O'Connor, not Mrs. Kildare.”

My jaw ticks.

Yeah, *that* will need addressing.

They shake hands once more, both of them smiling before Liam pulls away and heads my way.

“One fucking hell of a diplomat,” Dominic mumbles under his breath.

Yeah, and where the fuck was that sense of diplomacy when she was stabbing sharp pointy things into me?

Liam comes to a stop in front of me, clearing his throat sheepishly as he extends his hand.

“Cillian, I owe you an apology.”

The cynical part of me wants to call him a treasonous little shit, and furthermore tell him I’ll still be burning his fucking family’s businesses to the fucking *ground* for his call for insurrection.

Instead, I take a page from my surprisingly diplomatic bride.

“The past is in the past, Liam,” I growl. “Are we good?”

He grins. “We’re more than good, Cillian. I herby re-pledge complete loyalty of the McCarthy family to you and the Kildare empire.” And then the fucker actually gets down on his knee before shaking my hand.

I mean, it’d carry a little more weight if he hadn’t been calling for open war all of five fucking days ago. But I also have to remind myself just how deep his hatred for Seamus O’Conor undoubtedly runs.

Fuck it. If he’s ready to get all smiley and forgiving with Seamus’ own daughter, I can drop my end of the bitterness.

I take his hand firmly—possible a bit *too* firmly, if only just to make a point.

“The Kildare family is happy to have you back in the fold, Liam.”

He smiles. “She’s good, Cillian.”

He turns, and my gaze follows his to where Una is now sitting at the head table next to Neve, happily chatting away.

“You’re a lucky and smart man for marrying her.”

“Thanks.”

“Mr. Kildare?” One of the catering staff nervously touches my arm, pulling my attention. “We’re ready if you are.”

My brow knits. “For?”

“For the cake, sir.”

The furrow in my brow deepens. “*What* cake?”

The man smiles blankly. “The, uh, cake, sir. The wedding cake?”

“There is no cake. We’re skipping that.”

He frowns. “We have one that was delivered an hour ago...?”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh! Never mind, they’re serving it now. Apologies for disturbing you, sir.”

Frowning, I look past him to where two other catering staff are carrying over a cake and setting it down in front of Una and Neve, sitting next to each other at the table.

An odd, blood-red cake. With a black cross frosted on the side of it.

I stiffen, peering more closely at it. No, not just a cross...a string of rosary beads along with the cross.

A cross dripping in blood, and riddled with...

Bullet holes.

Everything goes silent and still as it clicks in my head. I know that bloodied and shot up rosary—as a tattoo that only one man I’ve ever known had, inked on his wrist and the back of his blood-soaked hand.

And that man was Seamus fucking O’Conor.

I’m moving before I’m even aware of it, bolting across the room as Una smiles and leans curiously over the cake.

She sputters as I smash into her hard, tackling her into Neve as the three of us crash together to the ground.

...About a quarter second before the cake explodes.

The boom is deafening, throwing the room into utter chaos as smoke chokes the air and bits of crumbled cake and tabletop sprinkle down.

And then, I fucking hear it.

The voice of a ghost.

A devil. A demon.

A dead man.

“I’ll cut the throat of *every. Single. Fucking Kildare.*”

Seamus O’Conor.

The room goes deathly quiet, the only sound the recording of Seamus’ distinctive, gravelly tone repeating over and over.

“I’ll cut the throat of *every. Single. Fucking Kildare.*”

Una’s face turns to alabaster beneath me. The smoke begins to dissipate, and suddenly I can see something standing in the ruins of the exploded cake.

Another cross, dripping in blood, riddled with bullet holes, with that fucking voice from the grave rasping out of it on an endless loop.

“I’ll cut the throat of *every. Single. Fucking Kildare.*”

“I’ll cut the throat of *every. Single. Fucking Kildare.*”

“*It’s him,*” Una chokes.

I rip my eyes from the cross down to her. For a moment, a strange fear stabs into me when I see the red splattered across her face and neck. But then I realize it’s only the blood-red frosting.

I look over to Neve, still ducked down flat on the floor.

“Just a recording, Neve,” I growl, reaching for her and gripping her arm reassuringly. “It’s just a—”

She’s not moving.

At. *All.*

Then all I hear are the blood-curdling sounds of Ares roaring, Una screaming, sirens approaching...

...And my own pulse.

Snarling.

CILLIAN

“MILD CONCUSSION, that’s all. She’s going to be okay.”

The NYPD’s not always stupid. Today, they were smart enough to send officers who know me personally to O’Bannon’s when the frantic call came in from a concerned citizen who heard the blast. Castle spoke to the “friendly” officers to make sure they got the story straight about the “miscalculated celebratory fireworks that unfortunately went off inside prematurely.”

Friendly as they may be, I don’t typically like to mix personal Kildare matters with the police. And this is decidedly a *very* personal matter.

But never mind. The important thing is, Neve is going to be okay.

After she was checked over at the scene, I had all the immediate family, along with two of the arriving EMTs, moved from O’Bannon’s to the Upper East Side house. Which is where we all currently are.

Dr. Blythe, my go-to family physician for matters like getting stabbed or exploding fucking wedding cake injuries, nods to the room where Neve is resting, Ares by her side.

“A couple of scrapes, probably from wooden fragments of the banquet table.

And she'll need to take it easy for a few days. She got hit in the head pretty hard. But she's going to be fine, Mr. Kildare."

That's far more than I can say for whoever the fuck is responsible for what happened today, when I fucking find them.

I'm going to skin them alive.

When Dr. Blythe is gone, I step into the library where everyone else is gathered and am immediately accosted by a concerned-looking Eilish and Callie.

"She'll be fine," I murmur quietly. "Just a concussion."

Eilish visibly exhales in relief, shuddering as Callie hugs her around the shoulders tightly.

I turn to address the group. "Now, we all need to talk about what—"

"Cillian..."

"She's going to be okay, Eilish."

"Which is wonderful, but I don't know if *she* is."

She swings her face around, and I follow her gaze to where my eyes land on Una, sitting alone on one of the couches.

Looking like a ghost.

Shit.

"She's...really not responding to...anything," Eilish says quietly.

She's right. Una looks like she's somewhere else. Like her light is dimmed inside. Her hands clench on her lap, fingers picking at her cuticles as she stares blankly at the wall, her cheeks white. Her face and the black dress are

streaked with soot and the disturbing blood-colored flecks of frosting from the cake. Her hair is spattered with cake crumbs, and hangs limply down the sides of her pale face.

“Stay here.”

I leave Eilish with Callie. Una jumps when I touch her shoulder, her vacant eyes ripping from the wall to focus on me.

“*It was him.*”

My jaw clenches as I squat down in front of her. I take her hands in one of mine, stopping her from ripping her cuticles apart any further. The other raises to cup her cold face.

“There’s no such thing as ghosts, Una. Least of all ones capable of rigging bombs and hiding recording devices in wedding cakes.”

“That *voice...*” she shudders, a haunted look rearing up in her eyes. “That *fucking voice...*”

“That was a recording,” I growl. “From months ago, before his death, when someone was idiotic enough to think it would be a good idea to do a live interview from ADX Florence with your father. You must have heard about it. He killed a guard, put the reporter in a wheelchair, and grabbed the camera to start barking threats at our family.”

She swallows, her face somehow even colder.

“But then he *died*,” I hiss quietly. “He’s *gone*, Una.”

And when I find out who the fuck thought it was amusing or even remotely cute to fuck with my family like that, I’m going to *bathe* in their fucking screams.

I clear my throat, standing and turning to address the room. “Neve’s got a

small concussion, but she's going to be okay.”

Visible relief floods the faces of Castle, Kratos, and Dimitra, joining Eilish and Callie.

Hades' face, however, only briefly registers that emotion before it turns stormy and dark.

“Yeah, so,” he growls. “Are we going to discuss the fucking elephant in the room?”

My eyes drill into him, ice cold.

“I'd choose my next few words very carefully,” I growl quietly.

“Oh, would you?” Hades snaps. “As carefully as you made the *enlightened* fucking decision to bring *her* into this family!?” He jabs a finger at Una, sneering.

“Hades,” Kratos murmurs. “Take a walk.”

“*Fuck* taking a walk. That thing could have blown Neve's fucking head off!”

“And Una's as well!” Callie snaps at him. “Hades, she was standing *right next to it* too!”

My eyes are unblinking as they stab through him.

“Yeah, you can fucking psycho-eye me all you goddamn want, Cillian,” he hisses. “It doesn't change what we all just heard. That was *Seamus*.”

“Who is dead.”

“And still setting off *bombs*, somehow!”

“Hades!”

Dimitra strides forward and slaps his hand with a cold look on her face.

“She’s *family* now! *To aíma éinai aíma!*”

Blood is blood.

Fury explodes over Hades’ face. “Yeah, Ya-ya?” he snaps. “Except *her* blood”—he jabs a furious finger past me at Una—“is *poison! Her blood* almost killed my fucking brother!”

My eyes turn to dangerous slits as my hand slides into my jacket, fingering the blade I find there.

My violence roaring inside.

My mask of normalcy and humanity...*slipping.*

Quickly.

Dangerously.

“I would *suggest,*” I hiss quietly, “that you leave. Now.”

Hades looks like he’s ready to explode as he shakes his head.

“Her fucking father almost killed Ares and Neve. And that *does not* go away because you threw together some bullshit wedding to stop all the crazy Irish pricks in your own organization from tearing themselves apart like rabid dogs.”

My fingers curl around the handle of the knife.

“Cillian, she’s a fucking *O’Conor!*”

“Yes. And I’m telling you *one last time* to—”

“I mean for fuck’s sake, man!” he roars. “She tried to fucking kill y—”

I rush him, snarling, as the blade slips from my jacket, and comes to press against his throat while the rest of the room explodes in chaos.

“STOP IT!!!”

Everything freezes at the sound of Neve’s voice. My head whips around to see her standing in the doorway, leaning against Ares as he holds her tightly around the waist.

Her eyes dart to me first, and she shakes her head sadly.

“Cillian... Just put it away.”

My jaw clenches. My fingers tighten around the knife. Then, slowly, I pull away from Hades, slipping the blade back into my jacket.

Neve nods her thanks quietly before turning her eyes to Hades.

“Whatever anger you’re hanging on to, Hades, you *have to let that fucking go.*”

His jaw clenches. “Neve—”

“*I was the enemy once, in case you’ve forgotten?*”

“That was...different,” he mutters.

Neve rolls her eyes. “Exactly *how* was that different? Please explain it to me. Ares and I got married because your uncle and my father shot each other, and everyone thought we were heading into world war three in the streets. Yes. You’re right, Hades. Her father almost killed Ares and me. Her *father*,” she snaps. “Not her.”

Neve turns to look at Una, who’s still sitting looking numb and cold on the couch.

“If I of *all* people can let that go, you damn well can, too,” Neve mutters at Hades.

“*Eínai sto parelthón aderfé,*” Ares growls quietly.

My Greek's pretty limited, but I know that's at least partially "it's in the past, brother."

"Let it the fuck *go*, man," Ares adds with a glare at his younger brother. He glances at Una, shaking his head and taking a deep breath. "She isn't the enemy here. Whoever sent that bomb is." He glares at both Hades and me. "So how about we stop trying to kill each other and figure out how to find this motherfucker?"

I pin Hades with a stare. He does the same to me. Finally, he exhales and sticks out a hand.

"I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted."

We shake, and he smirks. "You were really about to cut me, weren't you?"

The look on my face and tilt of my head answers his question without words.

Hades chuckles quietly as he pulls close and awkwardly gives me a hug.

"If you were about to slice my goddamn throat over her," he mutters in my ear, "then I'm fucking sold." He pulls back. "Same team?"

I nod. "Same team."

"Besides," Callie says. "We don't even know if that thing was meant for Neve or—"

Her mouth snaps shut as she realizes she was about to voice out loud what we're all thinking.

Too late.

My face darkens as I watch Una's pale even more.

“*Nice one, Callie,*” Kratos mutters as his sister winces.

I look over at Castle, who nods at me. “I’ve already got some of our guys looking into it. There’s not a lot of people in this city who could wire up something that precise. We’ll find them.”

“*Precise?*” Ares growls. “It was a bomb rigged to blow up in Una and my wife’s *faces.*”

Castle shakes his head. “Which it did, but as bombs go, that wasn’t built for damage or death.”

Ares looks like he’s about to go thermonuclear, until Neve puts a hand on his chest and kisses his cheek.

“I know tempers are hot right now,” Castle growls. “But believe me, I know explosives. I trained on them in the Rangers. And *that* wasn’t a kill or maiming IED. Small blast, nothing evil stuffed in it like metal shavings or ball bearings to cause significant damage.”

Callie shudders next to him.

Castle shakes his head. “I know it was scary, but that was the whole point.” He turns to level his gaze at me. “That wasn’t meant to kill, Cillian. That was meant to send a message.”

Which I think we all got loud and fucking clear. The only problem is, dead men don’t send messages like that.

“I’m doubling security on the house. Eilish, sorry, I know you hate them, but you’ve got a detail now when you need to go out.”

She nods, hugging herself.

“We’ll do the same on our end,” Ares mutters.

“Good. And despite what we all heard coming from that speaker,” I growl, glancing at Neve, “I don’t fucking believe in ghosts. So let’s find the asshole who’s trying to play one.”

I move back to the couch and squat down again in front of Una. I take her hands in mine as her wide eyes drag up to me.

“Come.”

She swallows, wetting her lips. “Where are we going?”

“Home.”

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UNA

“Do you know why I am in here, little bird?”

I nod. “Yes, Papa.”

But he’s going to tell me again, anyway.

“I’m here,” he growls, shoving his fingers through his long silver hair, “because the world is full of sinners and monsters, Una. And to kill monsters, you have to embrace the darkness. To kill monsters, little bird, you have to be one, too.”

Across the room, Dr. Thompson sits with two of her assistants. I like Dr. Thompson. She’s always so nice to us—to Finn and me.

It makes me happy when people are nice to Finn.

Currently, she’s watching Finn draw a picture of the minor league baseball game our group home went to see the other day.

“Look at me, Una.”

I start, pulling my eyes back to my father. He gazes at me steadily.

“Somehow, in that shared womb, you took all of it, my girl.”

I frown. “All of—”

I cry out, wincing when he smacks the top of my hand.

“Do not interrupt me when I am speaking.”

I nod, pulling my hand back and rubbing it with my other one.

“Power, Una. The ability and drive to be brutal. That is what you took all of. Your brother?” He scoffs. “He has none of that. Finn will never be a monster.”

I resist the urge to smile.

Good.

“But you, my daughter. You have that monster inside of you. You will be an avenging angel for God when the time is right.”

When he sees the question in my eyes, he smiles.

“You may speak.”

“What would I be avenging, Papa?”

“Sin,” he growls. “You will be punishing the wicked for their evil ways.” His eyes narrow. “You will punish the monsters who put me in this place.”

The sound of a chair scraping back across the floor has me turning to see Dr. Thompson and her assistants standing.

“Well,” she smiles at me, my father, and then at Finn. “We’ll take a short break from observation to give the three of you some time alone.”

I wish she wouldn’t. I know she does it because she thinks she’s being nice, giving us time alone with our father, without being watched.

But those are the times I fear the most.

That's when he teaches us his lessons.

Metes out his punishments.

But she doesn't see the unspoken fear on my face as she smiles again before leaving, closing the door behind us.

Instantly, my father's eyes land on Finn.

"Boy."

Finn stiffens, his face paling as he sits up and stares straight ahead.

"BOY."

Finn turns to look at our table. My father smiles a mirthless smile. "Come. Show me what you were drawing."

Finn swallows, standing slowly and picking up the drawing. He shuffles over and lays it on the table.

"It's a baseball game, sir," he says quietly, biting his lip. "We went to one last week with—"

"And what is this, on the back—"

"It's nothing," Finn blurts, slamming his hand down on the edge of the paper.

Oh, no. No no no no no.

Our father's eyes flash with anger. "Lift your hand, boy, or I will lift it for you."

Finn's eyes, already brimming with tears, dart to mine in appeal.

"Papa," I say. "Look at the baseball—"

Finn winces as our father yanks his hand away and whips the paper over.

Oh God...

His eyes narrow to slits, his lip curling as he looks at the picture Finn has started on this side. Slowly, he smiles horribly at Finn.

“And what have you drawn here, boy?” he says quietly. “Describe it to me.”

I want to scream at Finn. I want to ask him what possessed him to draw such a thing. But I’m silent, helpless, as I stare at the drawing of what is clearly a jail cell, with a man behind bars.

A man with a silver beard and long silver hair. A man snarling in rage, with angry red eyes, a red pointy tail, and pointy red horns.

The room is silent.

“What is this, boy.”

Finn swallows nervously.

“I ASKED YOU A QUESTION!!!” Papa bellows, making us both flinch.

“It’s a jail!” Finn blurts.

“And who. Is. THAT.” His finger stabs the drawing as Finn shrinks.

“I—”

“Is it me?”

Finn pales. “I—it’s only a drawing, Papa—”

He shrieks as the back of our father’s hand smacks him across the face, sending him sprawling on the floor. I scream and jump to my feet. But our father whirls on me, snarling.

“SIT DOWN.”

He spins back to Finn, his mouth a thin line, his eyes filled with malice.

“Honor thy father, boy.”

“Papa! Please!” I scream. He ignores me.

He walks over to the corner of the room where Dr. Thompson keeps art supplies, kids’ books, and some toys for us. His hand clasps the thin, pink rubber jump rope I’ve gotten fairly good at. He pulls it from its hook, gripping both plastic handles in his fist and coiling the cable once around his hand.

“If you think I am the devil, my son,” he rasps, “then I will beat the devil from you.”

Finn scrambles to his feet and tries to run. But Papa is too fast. He grabs him by the back of his shirt, yanking him to the ground before slamming him into the wall. He raises his fist, and I scream as loudly as Finn as the pink rubber jump rope sings through the air and whips across Finn’s back.

“NO!”

No. Not this. Not to Finn, who’s so kind and sweet it hurts my heart. Before I realize it, I grab a pencil, rush my father, and don’t even blink as I stab the point into his shoulder. It stays lodged in there. Oh God, what have I done.

Papa roars, whirling with rage in his eyes. He hisses, letting go of Finn and reaching up and back to yank the pencil from his body. He tosses it away, his eyes slowly lifting to me as I stand there, petrified with fear.

Then he smiles.

“The will to be brutal. To kill or be killed.” His eyes flash. “There is my daughter.”

The smile evaporates from his face.

“Do you think I’m wrong for punishing your brother?”

I swallow. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s just a picture.”

He shakes his head. “Wrong. Because when you let them hurt and betray you in small ways, they will come back and do it two-fold the next time. Now, shall I continue correcting him?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“The punishment must come, Una. If it doesn’t come for Finn—”

“I’ll take it.”

Finn stares at me in horror.

“Una—!”

“Be silent, boy,” my father growls, still staring right at me. “Finn, sit in that chair. And then I want you to watch, and to see what a true O’Conor is prepared to do for family.”

“Papa, please don’t—”

“SIT IN THE CHAIR!”

Finn starts to cry, but I nod reassuringly at him. “It’s okay,” I whisper. “It’s okay—”

“Turn around, Una,” Papa growls. “And lift up your shirt, so it does not tear. This is a lesson you will not soon forget.”

All through the screams, and the feel of fire ripping across my back, and the wet tears dripping hot down my face as I grit my teeth, with each blow, I realize he's right.

I will not soon forget this.

But whatever lesson he wants me to learn, the one I will take from that day along with the marks on my back that will never fade is that I will never be him.

I will never be a monster.

Ever.

WHEN THE DOOR is securely locked behind us, Cillian moves across the floor of the penthouse, turning on a few lights and shrugging off his black suit jacket.

I can't move. I just stand motionless in the front entryway, my arms limp at my sides.

My stomach is knotted, my heart frozen, and the voice of a dead monster is still snarling in my head.

Everything hurts from when Cillian tackled me to the floor. There's bits of frosting, cake, and blast-soot still in my hair, on my face, hardened onto the dress.

"There's not much in the fridge," Cillian mutters from the kitchen area. "But I'll have someone go out for—"

He turns, and his face hardens.

“Una.”

I don't respond, staring at an invisible spot on the floor five feet in front of me. Hearing, but not. All I can really hear is that snarling, biting, vicious voice of the devil I once called father snapping at my heels.

“Una.”

Cillian's directly in front of me, but I still can't answer. Or even look away from whatever the hell spot I'm staring at on the floor.

“You're safe,” he growls quietly. “Nothing is going to—*Una!*”

I don't even realize I'm falling until he catches me. It's like my legs don't work anymore, along with my voice.

Cillian's strong, muscled arms go around me, and suddenly he's lifting me up and cradling me in those arms against his chest, like I'm a small child. I'd protest, if I had a voice. I'd hit him, if my arms worked.

But I can't, so I just stay still as he marches down the hallway, into his bedroom, and then into the ensuite bathroom. He storms right into the huge, glass-walled shower, using his foot to kick on the overhead rainfall showerhead.

I gasp, jolting and shivering as cold water pours down on both of us—clothes, shoes, and all. But quickly it turns hot and steamy, melting away the chill and the tension.

Cillian lowers me to my feet, keeping a firm hold on my arms as I find my balance. I still can't talk, and I'm still staring blankly at the wall. But I'm aware of him kneeling under the rush of the water and slipping off my heels.

Then of him standing and pulling the zipper down on the dress until it slips off my shoulders and drops to a black puddle at my feet. The hot water runs

over my body, turning my bra and panties transparent and pasting them to my skin.

I'm dimly aware of Cillian undoing his shirt and tossing it aside before stepping out of his trousers.

I shiver from something other than cold when his arms surround me, cocooning me in his strength and his warmth. His lips touch the top of my head as the water pours over both of us, steam filling the shower.

And slowly, I uncoil.

Slowly, all the tension, the torment, the anxiety, and the ghosts of the past leave me. And as I unclench, I'm finally fully aware of the muscled body and the power surrounding me.

"Why are you doing this?"

He turns me until I'm facing him, one hand cupping my chin and raising my face to his.

"What?"

"Why..." I swallow, feeling so...weak. So fragile. So close to breaking.

"Why are you helping me?"

"You're my wife."

"Cillian—"

"This might all be for show," he growls, his hand cupping my cheek as the other arm circles my back. *"And you might have fucking stabbed me, and there might be an expiration date to all this."*

I tremble as green fire ignites behind his eyes.

"But I will never let anything or anyone hurt you."

“I—”

“*Ever.*”

His mouth suddenly crushes to mine.

Brutally. Viciously.

Consuming me.

I shudder, whimpering as his lips sear mine, and his tongue slips between them. I moan as he kisses me deeply, and when his hands slide down to my hips, I gasp as he suddenly lifts me into his arms as if I’m weightless.

My own arms slip around him, my pulse thudding with fear and excitement—with lust and an explosiveness that both terrifies and electrifies me.

I moan into his mouth, whimpering at the brutality of the kiss as he storms from the bathroom, both of us dripping water as he moves into the bedroom.

Adrenaline and desire sizzle through my veins, and my pulse lurches as he suddenly drops me—letting me free-fall until I land on my back on the soft warmth of his bed. Without even missing a beat, he’s on top of me, crushing his mouth to mine again and kissing me even more viciously than before.

His lips and teeth move to my neck, biting hard and making me cry out as the pleasure shivers through my core.

“I only had you for a moment that first time,” he rasps into my ear as I whimper and cling to him. “This time, you can be sure I’ll be *taking my fucking time with you.*”

“I—”

“And don’t worry, little rabbit,” he growls thickly. “*I’ll be sure to make it hurt.*”

Oh, fuck yes.

Snarling, growling desire explodes inside of me as he bites down even harder on my neck, making me cry out in a sinfully delicious mix of pain and pleasure.

“Will you be my good girl and beg for it harder?”

“Yes!” I choke.

“Yes, *what?*”

Fuck. Me. Sideways.

If I wasn't already a freaking puddle, I am now.

“Yes, *Sir.*”

“*Good girl.*”

I shudder as he bites me again, mauling my fucking neck as my legs wrap around his muscled hips. I can feel him there—*right there*—the pulsing thickness of his bulge pressing against my pussy through the sheer, wet panties between us.

Cillian moves lower, biting and sucking at my breasts as he rips off my bra and tosses it aside. His mouth closes around a nipple, and I prepare myself for the attack, but still it hurts *so fucking good* when he bites hard on the tender pink nub and growls into my skin like an angry beast.

He moves from one nipple to the other, before he slides further down my trembling body. My pulse hammers like a drum in my ears as he drops to his knees on the floor, yanking me toward him with my ass on the edge of the bed. He peels the wet panties from my body, and I shiver with heat under his piercing gaze as his eyes land between my legs.

Slowly, a low growl rumbling in throat, his eyes raise to mine.

“You do know I’m going to ruin you, don’t you?”

“*Please do, Sir.*”

The look on his face when I say it is pure, violent *lust*. And suddenly, I’m crying out as his mouth descends between my thighs. His tongue drags slowly over my pussy, and I gasp when his powerful hands grip my thighs and hike them up over his shoulders.

He plunges his tongue deep inside, fucking me with it as I shudder and writhe under him. He turns his head, biting down on my tender inner thigh, making me squeal in pain before he suddenly assuages it by taking my aching clit between his lips and rolling his tongue across it.

Then he bites my thigh again, before going back to my pussy.

My whole body shakes. My head spins. It’s like going from ice water, to a scorching hot tub, then back to ice, then back to heat again. My senses are overloaded and near the point of short-circuiting. The way he plays my body like a virtuoso musician has me losing any grasp on reality.

Then his hand slides up my body. His fingers wrap around my throat as he devours my pussy. And when he starts to squeeze, hard, the final missing piece of my depraved puzzle clicks into place and ignites me as I rush toward the explosion.

Danger.

The feeling of his hand squeezing off my air as he wrenches and rips the pleasure from my body with his tongue snaking over my clit has my back arching from the bed, my eyes bulging and my face turning red as the sinful pleasure sinks its claws into me.

“I hope you remember our safe word.”

His hand starts to squeeze harder.

A *lot* harder.

My throat closes as Cillian completely shuts off my air supply.

And it’s *so fucking good* it scares me.

“Say the word, Una,” he rasps, devouring my pussy as my eyes roll back.

“Say the fucking word if you need it.”

I don’t remember the word.

And it’s that extreme fear—that knowledge that I don’t *know* the word that would let me breathe again—that suddenly takes me from losing control to outer-fucking-space.

Black spots swirl at the edges of my vision. The room spins. The only thing I can feel is his hand on my throat and his tongue dancing over my clit.

I don’t remember the safe word.

I don’t remember the—

Blue.

The safe word from the night at Club Venom is blue.

...But I don’t say it. And he doesn’t let up. And suddenly, my entire universe catches fire as I positively *explode*.

“**BLUE!!!**” I scream, choking through his grip on my throat as I come harder than I’ve ever come before—even harder than the night he pinned me against the wall and rammed through my virginity.

“*Blue!*” I choke over and over. “*Blue! Blue! Blue...*”

I collapse, dragging in rasping, choked breaths of clean, fresh air as his hand leaves my neck.

And then suddenly he's covering me with his body, cocooning me in his warmth and his strength again...cupping my face as he kisses me. I kiss him back, winding myself around him and eagerly tasting myself on his lips and tongue.

Cillian strokes my skin gently as my breathing returns to normal and the spots leave my vision. Slowly, he pulls back, his eyes locked on mine.

The front of his boxers *obscenely* tented.

The promise of much, much more written hungrily all over his face.

My pulse quickens and my eyes widen as I slowly nod. Cillian's thumbs hook into his boxers, sliding the waistband lower down his grooved hips until I can see the thick base of his huge cock.

This time, he'll fuck me for real.

Last time, it was only one thrust—one *first* thrust that had me exploding... right before I stabbed him and ran away.

He slips off his boxers, and my mouth drops open in shock as his thick, *large* cock springs free, bobbing swollen and heavy between my thighs, inches above my slick opening.

No, this time, it won't only be one thrust.

Cillian's eyes blaze with green fire as he wraps a hand around his cock and lazily runs the head over my lips. I whimper, shivering in pleasure before suddenly, the reality of it all hits me as he eases himself against my opening.

"Remember that safe word," he growls as his hand slides up my body to pinch one of my nipples, making me quiver and whine as he starts to push his

hips.

“Just...” my brows knit, my lip catching in my teeth. “Just...”

He frowns, waiting.

“*Just...go slow?*”

He starts to smile sadistically. But suddenly, he stops. His brow furrows, and I shiver as his eyes stab into mine.

“Una.”

“I want you to do it,” I hiss. “Fuck me. Just, when you do, go—”

“*Una.*”

My eyes slide up to his and my lips quiver as my pulse roars.

“*Jesus Christ...*”

“No, Cill—”

“Tell me that wasn’t your first time.”

I stiffen, blinking as my breath hitches.

“*Una,*” he hisses quietly, his brow furrowed deeply, a look I can’t quite place on his face. “I need you to fucking *tell me—*”

“*I can’t do that.*”

CILLIAN

THEY NEVER CAME.

Numb, standing next to the hospital bed, I stare at my sister's lifeless body as the attending nurse pulls the sheet up over her face. The priest finishes his last rites, glancing nervously at me when he's through.

I nod back, releasing him.

The son of a bitch almost refused to do right by Saoirse, because of how she got here. That piece of shit actually looked me in the eye and told me suicide was a sin in God's eyes, and he could neither read her the last rites, nor promise she would get to Heaven.

That was before he looked down at her again, and saw the last name on the charts at the foot of the bed.

Before he looked back at me with sheer terror in his eyes, realizing who I was.

And before I told him I'd make sure none of the pieces of him I left would ever get to Heaven, either.

When he's gone, when the nurses are gone, I drop my gaze back to my sister's body beneath the sheet.

She never had a chance in this world. She was too sweet. Too naive. Born under a cursed name, into a cursed house, with a monster at the head of the table.

And yet, she survived all of that—being born a Kildare, I mean. Being born the unwanted girl, destined to be traded by our bastard father like a golden trinket for more wealth or power.

Being that bastard's victim for so fucking long that it makes me want to scream and open up my own veins to join her, right here, right now.

A few years previously, Saoirse had been promised to a disgusting pig of a man—Atlas Drakos, the eldest son of Aeneas Drakos. Theirs was to be a marriage to end the bloodshed between Kildare and Drakos—and to line the pockets of Aeneas and my father.

And then, one day, after so many years, and so many times telling me “One day, Cill, I'll get out”, she really did.

Saoirse was gone.

She ran off with another man. And I was so fucking happy for her. For her freedom, even if it came with our father's wrath, and banishment from the family.

Good. Good for her.

She got out.

But nine months later, she was back on our doorstep—heartbroken by the man who'd since abandoned her, and ready to burst from the baby he'd put in her before he disappeared.

A baby girl our father made her give up as soon as she was born.

Rose.

My niece.

*He made Saoirse leave that sweet baby girl on the doorstep of a convent—
Our Lady Hildegard Home for the Sisters of Mercy.*

*And that's what finally broke my sister, after surviving all the other things
that should have broken her. The unwantedness. The predator we called
Father visiting her room at night again and again and again when she was
little more than a child. The man who stole her away just to use and abandon
her in the end.*

She survived all of that.

But losing Rose was the final straw that broke her.

*I hate myself. I hate that I saw this coming months ago, after that horrible
night when she left that baby with the nuns. I watched her get worse and
worse, until nothing I could say or do would ever bring a smile out of her.*

*I'd planned carefully for tonight, with the goal of just one smile. Her favorite
movies. Her favorite buttered popcorn and Skittles. The brand-new album
from Velvet Guillotine, her favorite band.*

*She wasn't in her room when I went to look for her. I knocked on the
bathroom door, calling her name before deciding she was probably
somewhere else. I even started to turn away from the door before I heard it.*

Dripping.

*I think that's when I knew. Before I even screamed her name. Before I even
slammed on the door. Before I even smashed it in, going numb as my eyes
landed on her body lying in the tub of opaque red water, the razor on the
tiled floor in a smaller pool of blood.*

I knew she was already gone even as I wrapped her in a blanket, not caring

about the blood I got on my shirt, put her in my car, and drove like maniac all the way to the hospital. I ordered them to take care of her, even though we all knew there was no person left in there to take care of. I screamed at them like a fucking devil to put her in that fucking hospital bed, put the fucking tubes in her NOW, and get her back to life.

But there was no coming back from where Saoirse had gone.

And they never. Fucking. Came.

Our parents weren't home when it happened. But I left them both easily a hundred messages. Nothing.

One of the people from the hospital gently asks me if I'm ready to talk yet about Saoirse's final wishes. About her burial, or perhaps cremation, and the steps that need to be taken first.

I tell him not to fucking touch her. That I'll be back.

Then, I'm driving home just as maniacally as before.

Their car is in the driveway.

I know full well the monster my father is. I know my mother is bowed under the weight of his firm rule, to the point of ignoring me time and time again when I scream at her about what is happening under our roof.

I want to believe that somewhere behind the fear of her husband, my mother is still a good woman inside. But she hasn't even responded to any of the messages I sent, and it makes me want to rip the house apart piece by piece as I slam on the brakes and shut off the engine.

I don't really clock the absence of any of my father's men or guards. But I do notice the kitchen door is cracked open. When I kick it in the rest of the way with my foot, everything freezes.

I instantly know she's dead. Her eyes are open, but there's no life there—her head hanging limply to one side as my father shakes her. He stops, turning to me with whiskey on his breath and madness in his eyes, seeing me standing there cold and still in the doorway.

“What did you do?”

He sneers at me. “Don't look at me and pretend to feel a fucking thing, Cillian,” he snarls. “Don't fucking lie to me and pretend you're normal. Or a human with a soul. We both know you're not.”

“What. Did. You. DO.”

He chuckles darkly, glaring at my mother before letting her drop, her head hitting the floor with a sickening thud.

“She wanted to leave me. Can you fuckin' imagine? After all I've given her.”

This stops. Now.

This madness is fucking OVER.

My father turns back to me, his eyes narrowing. “Don't you fucking look at me like that, you little monster.”

I step into the kitchen and shut the door behind me. Suddenly, everything's still and quiet.

“What are you going to do about it, you little freak?”

I ignore him, walking over to the kitchen counter.

“The fuck do you think you're going?”

I'm utterly calm as my hand closes around the handle of one of the big carving knives in the wooden block, just as his meaty hand lands on my shoulder.

“Don’t you fucking ignore me, you little bastard—”

I whirl and push the knife slowly into his stomach.

His eyes bulge.

“Why—?”

“For Saoirse.”

That’s not when he dies, though. Oh no.

I make him wait for that, until the next morning.

I STARE AT UNA, something raw thudding in my head. Something *wrong* crawling over my skin.

That was her first. Fucking. Time.

She can try and lie through her teeth about it all she wants, but it’s written all over her face as she yanks up the covers to hide her nakedness.

“Cillian—”

“That night at the club...” my eyes narrow. *“That was your first time?”*

Her eyes drop, her arms hugging herself. And I feel something I rarely, *rarely* ever feel.

Remorse.

Regret.

Because for all my darkness, and all my sadistic tendencies...I never would have touched her, least of all *like that*, had I known.

My sister's first time was also with a monster who wasn't gentle.

And you went right ahead and continued the goddamn cycle.

I grit my teeth, my pulse pounding heavily in my ears as I try and swallow back the feeling of complete self-loathing that I never, ever feel.

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

I storm over to my closet, pulling on briefs and black jeans before I hear footsteps. When I turn back, Una's standing in the doorway to the walk-in closet wrapped in the quilt, eyes locked with mine.

“Please...”

“That was your *first fucking time?!* ” I spit.

The pleading look on her face drops in the wake of my anger.

“Excuse me?”

“Was it, or wasn't it?”

Her lips purse. “The fuck does it matter to you?”

“Because it *does,*” I snap.

She swallows, looking away. “Fine. Yes. It was. But so fucking what?”

“Christ.” I push past her, storming back into the bedroom.

“*What?* Would you of all people have been gentle or sweet about it?” she sneers, her voice laced with sarcasm.

“I wouldn't have fucking touched you *at all.*”

“You do realize I'm able to make my own goddamn choices, right?!” she hurls at my back.

I hiss, spinning to her. “But that *wasn’t* your choice, was it!? That was you working for whoever was—”

“That was me, an adult, making my own choice to—”

“*Who. Is. He,*” I snarl.

Fuck this noise. We’ve danced around the question, I’ve given her plenty of time and space to just fucking tell me herself. Now, I’m done playing games. Una gasps as I surge toward her, grabbing a handful of the covers as I leer down into her face.

“No more lies,” I hiss. “No more dodging the question. Who the *fuck* was pulling your strings, because I know damn well someone was.”

She shivers.

“Una,” I growl quietly. “*Tell me.*”

”I...” She looks down. “I don’t know.”

When I growl again, louder, her eyes raise to mine.

“I honestly don’t know,” she chokes with utter sincerity before her shoulders slowly slump. “We never met face to face. He used a voice changer thing whenever he called.”

My jaw loosens a little, my eyes softening when I see a tear in the corner of her eye. I reach up, using my thumb to brush it aside.

“I just know his name is Apostle, and that he was one of my father’s...I don’t know... Fans? Followers?”

My pulse thuds.

Apostle.

Fuck me. I heard that name once, and then I completely forgot about it as I got swept up into *her*.

Apostle. The buyer Aaron Armstrong, the arms dealer, told me about, right before I killed him.

Another tear trickles down Una's cheek, and then a third. And before I know what I'm doing, I'm pulling her into me and hugging her tightly as I kiss the top of her head.

This isn't like me. This...humanity. This normalcy. I could say it's my darkness meeting its match in her. But, black plus black equals a darker, deeper black.

Not... Whatever this is.

"There's nothing else?"

She shakes her head, clinging to me.

"I'm sorry," she murmurs into my chest.

"For what?"

I lift her chin as her eyes find mine.

"I...should have told you."

"Then I wouldn't have taken you to that room, and you wouldn't have done what you needed to do, and none of the rest of this would have happened."

She smiles a wry, thin smile.

"Get dressed," I murmur. "Then come with me."

UNA

“YOU MUST BE UNA.”

When last we spoke, Sister Angela heard me at my absolute worst—over the phone, when she confirmed that Finn was dead. I might still be clenching my hands into painfully tight fists to stave off the emotion this time, but I’m not falling apart at the seams now as we meet face-to-face for the first time.

She smiles as she steps out from behind her desk in the slightly cluttered but quaint little office of Hope House, the halfway home for the at-risk and in need on Staten Island.

Where Finn died.

“I’m Sister Angela. We spoke...” she smiles sadly and shakes her head as she takes my hands in hers. “I’m so very sorry for your loss, sweetheart.”

I force a painful smile, nodding. “Thank you.”

Cillian remains like a rock behind me, one hand on the small of my back.

“So many of God’s children come through these doors,” she sighs. “But I have to say, there was something very, very special about your bother. He was a good soul.”

“He was the best,” I murmur quietly.

She winces. “I’m afraid, since it was so long before we even knew he had family, his few belongings have already been donated to those in need.”

I shake my head. “No, that’s fine. It’s not why I’m here.”

She nods. “All right, dear. I can show you where he’s buried, or I can just tell you the plot number and you can make your way there yourself, if you like.”

“We can go ourselves.”

Without thinking, I reach back and slip my fingers into Cillian’s—as if I need something solid and real to hold on to right now.

He holds tight and doesn’t let go.

“You’ll find him in row M, number thirty-four.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, I...” She blushes awkwardly. “There is one thing of Finn’s I held on to. It’s not exactly policy, but I couldn’t just throw it away. And a part of me always hoped that someone would come for it one day.”

She bustles back to her desk, opens a drawer, and rummages around inside before pulling out a notebook of some kind.

No, a *sketchbook*.

My eyes tear up as she smiles and hands it to me.

“He was so very good at drawing.”

I smile a crooked, sad smile. “He always loved to, when we were kids.”

“He really was good. I don’t know when you last spoke. But he used to talk about becoming a tattoo artist one day.”

A tear slides down my cheek as I open the pages, flipping slowly through truly incredible pencil sketches and ink drawings of tattoo ideas: everything from hardcore biker stuff, to gorgeous floral designs, realistic animals, and some really incredible free-hand lines of text—mostly lyrics from favorite songs of his.

I pause, choking slightly when I come to a stunning, full-page design. At the bottom of the page, in his handwriting, it says “for Lunatic.”

His nickname for me.

The design is...*unreal*. It’s intricate, and complicated, and full of delicate lines and dot-work shading. It’s so “me” it hurts. And every single part of the composition is significant.

The main focus is waterlilies, from my love of Monet’s works. There was a traveling exhibit once that came through LACMA—the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—that we decided we had to go see. Somehow, we panhandled and pickpocketed enough cash to take a cab out to the museum and get tickets, even though it meant walking home after.

The next week, Finn surprised me with another trip back to the museum, just for me, because he knew how much I’d loved the waterlilies the first time.

“How’d you get the money, Finn?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Finn—”

“I got this, Lunatic. I always got you.”

Curled around the waterlilies is a dragon, and I smile when I realize it’s Smaug from *The Hobbit*, which we used to take turns reading to each other in the group home. Soaring up through the lilies themselves is a Phoenix with

intricately-drawn flames and wings spread wide.

That was us—one day, we'd rise from the ashes.

There's more, too. The half-moon pendant hanging from a chain that was our mother's and was in that first big house of ours before we had to leave. The Fool tarot card—that's Finn.

And across the top, surrounded by gorgeous filigree and more flowers, is the exquisitely-lettered phrase "What does not kill you".

"What doesn't kill you, right, Lunatic?"

"What doesn't kill you...what?"

"Makes you stronger. I think that's how it goes."

"Right. Or leaves you crippled."

"Nah. What doesn't kill you makes you, you."

"Weird?"

"Better. Unafraid."

"I like that."

When I start to cry, Sister Angela squeezes my hand tightly before releasing it as Cillian scoops me into his arms, taking the sketch book from me.

"Thank you very much, Sister."

WEIRDLY, I'm doing better when we stop in front of the plain white stone with "Finn Smith" etched in it in black, along with his two dates beneath it. Maybe it's because I've already cried all my tears back in Sister Angela's

office. Or maybe it's because actually seeing my brother's grave makes me realize he's finally at peace.

Cillian's brought the flowers from the car. I smile, nodding as I take them and lay them on the grave.

"There's this, too," he says quietly. "If you want to."

This time, he's holding a black permanent marker. When I frown quizzically, he nods his chin at the stone.

"If you wanted to fix the last name."

I smile and take the pen. Kneeling, I cross out "Smith" and write "O'Connor" above it.

That's *our* name. Not that monster's.

When I stand, my hand slips into Cillian's.

"Thank you."

WE'RE JUST GETTING into Cillian's car when one of the front ground-floor windows to Hope House opens, and Sister Angela sticks her head out of her office.

"Wait! Una!" she calls. "Before you leave!"

I glance at Cillian, who nods. "Go. Take whatever time you need. I'll be here."

I bite my lip, smiling at him before I turn and jog back to the house. Inside, I step into her office to find her looking at me curiously, her office phone receiver in her hand.

“Sorry, but they just called as you were leaving.”

My brow knits. “What? Who?”

She holds the receiver up, lifting a shoulder.

“He didn’t say. But he asked for you by name.”

My heart clenches, face paling. “Was...is his voice garbled?” I croak. “Like a weird mechanical sound?”

Sister Angela looks at me like I’ve got two heads.

“No, sweetheart,” she smiles, lowering her voice and covering the phone as she holds it out to me. “He sounds like a perfectly nice man.”

I’m losing it.

I shake my head, smiling as relief floods my coiled muscles, relaxing them. “Sorry, that’s not as weird as it sounds if you know the story. But, thank you.”

She laughs. “It’s okay. I’ll be outside, to give you some privacy.”

“Thank you.”

I take the phone, glancing through the office window to where Cillian is leaning against the car, smoking a cigarette. I hold up a finger. He nods as I smile and lift the phone to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Hello, little bird...”

The ground falls out beneath me. It’s like the earth comes to a screeching, terrifying stop, making me want to throw up, or break into pieces, or scream.

Because the voice on the other end belongs to a dead man.

“*Who is this,*” I choke, my throat closing up as darkness presses down all around me.

My father chuckles.

“How was your wedding, Una?”

The room spins. The color drains from my face as I cling to the edge of the desk, looking right ahead yet seeing nothing.

“*This...*” I try and swallow. “*This isn’t real.*”

“Oh, but it is, little bird.”

No. NO. NO. NO. NO.

“You’re... You’re dead...”

He chuckles that dark, horrible, rust-edged laugh of his. “*Am I, though?*”

He’s dead. This isn’t real. You’re losing your mind.

“I always knew you were the strong one, Una. Finn was *weak.*”

Tears begin to pour down my face as I shake my head violently side to side. Through the blur and the screaming in my head, I turn to look through the window, seeing Cillian suddenly racing as fast as he can for Hope House.

“Stay strong, Una. And stay the course. You’re so close to—”

“YOU’RE. NOT. *REAL!*” I scream, my voice breaking as I ignore a horrified Sister Angela swinging the door open.

“Wait until the blood starts to flow,” my father’s ghost hisses, just as Cillian crashes past Sister Angela, his face lined and determined.

“Then you’ll see how real I am.”

Cillian yanks the phone away, just as I hear the click of the line going dead. I collapse, sobbing and shaking, as he drops to the floor next to me, scooping me into his chest.

“Una—”

“*He’s alive,*” I choke.

“What?”

“*He’s alive...*”

Tears of terror stream down my cheeks as I shudder and curl into a ball against him.

“Una, *who—*”

“*My father.*”

Cillian goes still as I lift my tear-streaked face to his.

“My father is *alive.*”

CILLIAN

SHE'S silent on the drive home, her face stony as her blue eyes lance through the window into the night.

At some point, my hand slides from the shifter over to her lap, my fingers lacing through hers. She doesn't turn my way, but she squeezes my hand tightly, like she's afraid she might float away if she wasn't tethered like this.

I want to tell her that she's not going anywhere. That I've got her, and I won't let her go. I want to scream into the night so fucking loud that whoever that was on the phone hears me and *weeps* in fear.

Because when I find them, I will redefine the words pain and suffering for what they did to her today.

He's alive. My father is alive.

I don't know who that fucker was on the phone. But it sure as hell wasn't Seamus O'Connor. My foot presses down on the gas, sending the car lurching forward over the Verrazzano Bridge.

Ghosts aren't real. But even if they are?

This one will learn to fear me.

BACK IN BROOKLYN, at the penthouse, I lead a still dazed looking Neve over to the couch and make her sit. I pour a couple of drinks and slip a glass into Una's clenched fingers. She shivers, looking up at me with wide, terrified eyes as she takes a sip.

"You don't believe me."

It's not that I don't believe that she thinks she heard her father. It's just that that's fucking categorically impossible.

"Una—"

Her eyes narrow. "I heard what I heard, Cillian."

"I know you heard what your mind is telling you—"

"Stop," she hisses quietly. "Don't do that."

I pause, taking a drink.

"This wasn't 'my emotional state playing with my mind', okay? This wasn't someone imitating him, and I'm *not* fucking crazy."

"I know you're not."

"It was *him*, okay?! I fucking *heard it!*"

"Your father is *dead*, Una," I growl. "I saw his corpse with my own eyes. Fuck, I walked over it, twice. Ares put a hole through his *heart*."

Her jaw clenches as I shake my head.

"Believe me, I of all people know death, and that man is *dead*."

"He's *not*."

“Una—”

She stands, whirling and suddenly throwing the glass in her hand as hard as she can at the wall, shattering it.

“Then who the fuck was I talking to?!”

Tears roll down her cheeks as she starts to shake, hugging herself and looking left and right like she’s ready to explode.

“*Who!?* Because I’m not fucking crazy, okay?! I’m *not* fucking—”

She collapses when I grab her in my arms and yank her against my chest. Una sobs into me, shaking and sucking in air as her small hands grip my shirt fiercely.

“*What do you need,*” I growl into her hair.

“I need to feel something other than the sensation of running without *ever* fucking stopping for *once in my life,*” she chokes. She lifts her head, her eyes big and so full of pain and need as they look into mine. “I need to feel something that isn’t sadness. *Please.*”

My hand lifts, cupping her face possessively. Something dark and voracious flickers, sparks, and catches between us like wildfire.

Like a force of fucking nature.

A compulsion.

The crackle of a storm cloud right before it thunders.

“*Please,*” she chokes. “Please, let me feel—”

She whimpers, moaning as my mouth captures hers. As my lips bruise hers so hard as to make her feel it always.

“Please,” she whispers into my mouth as I scoop her into my arms and storm down the hall to my bedroom. *“Make it hurt.”*

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UNA

I *GASP*, choking on my breath as Cillian slams me against the bedroom wall. For a moment, as he kisses me, I'm worried that what he knows now about that first night at the club will change how he looks at me.

How he touches me.

That he'll...*temper* himself or hold himself back somehow with me. Like he's afraid of breaking me now.

"Don't..."

He pulls away, frowning as the word slips from my lips.

"Don't hold back," I breathe. "I want you to do your worst."

A dark, malevolent energy tingles over my skin the second I say it. And when I see the almost supernatural, demonic look blaze in Cillian's eyes, I know I'm pushing him past his breaking point, into that dark place he goes when he loses control.

Good. I *want him* to lose control.

Because even if the last supposedly normal fragments of my psyche are screaming at me, asking me if I'm truly insane and if I really understand what

I'm doing, I can't stop.

I don't want to stop.

Because that vicious part of me that I've hidden, and been afraid of, and ashamed of for so fucking long comes *alive* when he touches me. When he kisses me like he's conquering me.

When he pushes me right up to the line of my own hesitation and then shoves me headlong over it, screaming in hedonistic pleasure.

“Are you going to be a good girl for me?”

I whimper, desperate for him. “Yes.”

His hand instantly wraps tightly around my throat, pinning me to the wall.

“*What did you just fucking say to me?*”

For a second, real fear slices into me when I see the way his face changes. Something ripples just under the surface. His eyes dim to a dark, murky green void. His lips curl into an animalistic snarl and despite the alarm bells blaring in my head, all I'm aware of is *how fucking wet I am*.

How much I want this, all of this, even though I've hidden it away sometimes even from myself.

But there's no hiding anything from Cillian. There hasn't been since that first moment I felt his presence against my back in the club, like a black hole, sucking me into the void and never letting me go.

Into a darkness that matches my own. Sending me hurtling toward a monster that sees the ways I'm broken and wants to consume me, and claim me, and *fuck me* in the wreckage.

A psychopath who sees the true depths of my depravity and wants to join me

there.

And even though he's looking at me like he wants to sink his teeth into my skin and literally eat me alive, it's not that I'm afraid he'll hurt me...

It's that *I know he will*.

And I know I want him to.

"I—"

"I fucking asked you a question. Are you going to be a good little fuck-toy *slut* for me?"

His hand tightens abruptly.

I'm so turned on, there's a chance I'm going to come before he even takes my clothes off.

"Yes!" I choke, shuddering in pleasure. "Yes, *Sir!*"

"*Maybe,*" Cillian rumbles, his voice so much lower than it usually is, as if the monster inside has truly been set free. "Maybe I should tie you on your hands and knees to a bench and choke you while your virgin ass swallows every last inch of my cock."

Heat explodes across my face as I stare at him, wide eyes, mouth open.

He knows. He saw my web history, because of course he looked.

"*This* is what you wanted that night at Venom, isn't it," he snarls close to my face. His hand tightens just a little more on my throat, and I whimper as I feel the thickness of his cock pulsing hard against my core as my legs wrap around his hips.

"To be my eager little fuck toy. My greedy little *slut*."

I whimper, gasping as Cillian suddenly whirls and storms across the bedroom floor.

Tosses me face-down on the bed.

And suddenly grabs my leggings and my panties and roughly yanks them down over my hips to tangle at my knees. I whimper and try to turn over. But then I'm gasping as Cillian grabs a fistful of my hair at the scalp, pinning me down. His palm comes down sharply on my bare ass, making me squeal as the sound fills the bedroom.

He does it again, and then again, before suddenly his hand dives between my thighs to cup my dripping wet pussy.

“Bad girl.”

I moan when he rasps the words into my ear.

“Such a greedy, eager little fuck-toy that you're making a fucking puddle on my bed with this messy, *greedy* little pussy.”

He drags a finger through my lips, and then suddenly, without any warning, two of his fingers ram deep inside of me.

Holy fuck yes.

I cry out, my body rippling with pleasure as Cillian curls his fingers deep. He drags them out only to roughly drive them right back in, making my toes curl as I whimper. He's still fingering me hard like that, when I hear the skin-jangling sound of a blade opening.

“What are—”

I yelp when he spanks my ass again before ramming his fingers right back into me. There's the sensation of a blade at the back of my neck, and I go rigid as that naked, true fear mixed with fucked-up desire from before hisses

like acid over my skin.

But he's not cutting me. The blade doesn't even nick me.

He's cutting my fucking *clothes off*.

I jolt, gasping as Cillian violently slices through my shirt and my bra, turning them into ribbons that he yanks from me and tosses aside. His fingers still churn inside of me, filling the room with lewd wet slurping sounds as I shudder and shake with pleasure.

The knife slices with surgical sharpness through the leggings and panties at my knees, and then those too get tossed aside.

I gasp as he suddenly and roughly flips me onto my back. I flush as he yanks his black shirt off, and my eyes slide over his body.

I mean holy shit.

The man is forty-one, with the physique of a guy half his age who plays professional sports. Broad, bulging muscles, powerful arms, a rock-hard chest, and abs that turn into those grooves on his hips you only see on Armani models.

And a dick...

Sweet Jesus...

I mean I've seen him before. And of course, that first night, when I *felt him* pounding into me .

But this time, I'm staring right at him: every. Single. Thick. Inch. Of. Him.

If he hadn't been inside me before, I'd swear there was no way that cock would fit inside any human woman at all, let alone *me*, as tiny as I am.

But it has. Viciously. Brutally. Painfully, but in the most toe-curling way that

had me exploding from one fucking thrust.

He stalks toward where I'm sprawled on the bed.

He still has the knife in his hand.

I start to back away on the bed. That is, until he roughly grabs an ankle and yanks me to the edge. I try to close my legs, but Cillian growls, shaking his head.

"No no, little toy," he rasps dangerously, with an equally lethal glint in his eyes. He brings the knife forward, and I shiver, my breath catching as he suddenly drags the tip of it up my inner thigh.

Oh my fucking God...

He's not cutting me, or even breaking the skin at all. But the intoxicating sensation of that edge teasing so dangerously over my skin, dragging higher and higher like he's actually going to keep going until he gets to my pussy has my brain short circuiting.

Fear versus lust.

Danger versus need.

The urge to run versus the overwhelming desire to be pinned down and *fucked within an inch of my life.*

Cillian moves between my thighs, which open for him without me even realizing it. He slides onto the bed, looming over me, his hips nudging my thighs open even wider as the blade traces up over my body. Over my stomach, my ribs, my nipples, making my breath choke as I stare at the lethal tip with delirium.

Then it moves to my throat.

His eyes go *black*.

My body contorts with pure, undiluted fear.

And that's exactly when he thrusts every inch of his enormous cock balls deep inside of me.

I scream, clenching and writhing desperately as my body adjusts to the sheer size of him. He growls, tracing the point of the blade over my jugular as he pulls his hips back until just the swollen head of him is still stretching me open.

His black-green eyes stab into me, as sharp as the blade in his hand against my neck.

He's insane.

For a second, the thought curls into the edges of my consciousness so viciously that I wince. I've been casually referring to this dark, dangerous man as a psychopath without truly absorbing what that means.

He's a fucking literal psychopath.

Devoid of feelings. Cold. Brutal. Domineeringly self-serving.

Bloodthirsty.

But then, Cillian drives into me again, crushing the air from my lungs as his cock fills me to the absolute breaking point, and I don't care. His mouth crushes to mine, biting and sucking on my lips as I moan louder and louder. Because the more he fucks me with reckless abandon, the more brutally hard his strokes...

The wetter I get.

The more my body ignites, and every single hidden kink of mine is laid bare.

The more I want him to do whatever the fuck he wants to me, as hard as he wants.

Cillian snarls, dancing the blade over my jugular before he suddenly flings it across the room. His hand wraps around my throat, squeezing and making me moan even louder as he rams his huge cock into me over and over.

My arms wrap around him. Suddenly, he's shoving them above my head and pinning them there with one powerful hand, the other still around my throat as his muscled, coiled body rolls into me. As his cock rams into me so deep I swear he's in my fucking throat.

“Is *this* what you craved that night, little rabbit?” he snarls into my ear. “To be used and abused, to be pinned down and fucked like an eager little toy? To have this tight little cunt torn apart and punished in the way I know you crave?”

My eyes roll back in my head. Black spots swim in the periphery of my vision as I let loose a sound that might not even be human.

He roughly slides out of me. Before I can even react, he's flipping me over so I'm lying face down, flat on the bed. I moan when his body covers mine, his knee shoving my legs open before suddenly, I can feel his fat cock dragging up my lips.

He grabs a fistful of my hair, shoving my arms above my head and holding them there before he suddenly rams into me with full force. I scream, writhing and moaning on the bed as he fucks the absolute *shit* out of me.

Like a toy to be used.

A slut with no limits.

Just holes to fill.

I shudder when his teeth bite down on the lobe of my ear.

“Stop. Fucking. Holding. Out,” he snarls. “Don’t you fucking try and hide it, little rabbit. Don’t you fucking try and keep it at bay.”

I cry out as his hand leaves my neck and spans my ass so fucking hard it involuntarily makes my pussy clamp down around his dick as my nipples drag electrically across the duvet.

“And don’t you fucking dare keep that orgasm from me.”

His thickness pistons into me. His palm spans my ass raw before it comes up to wrap around my throat again. His fist in my hair tightens along with the one around my windpipe until suddenly, everything goes blurry.

Fear and lust.

Danger and need.

And the overwhelming sensation that I’m about to come so fucking hard it might actually kill me.

“Come for me like a good girl, just like you did on the night your ruined virginity bled all over my cock.”

Fuck. *Me.*

When I come, everything goes black. I’m only vaguely aware of writhing on the bed, as if in a fever dream. Of screaming and making other sounds that don’t sound human. Of my entire world shattering and exploding around me as Cillian rams his cock deep, flooding my insides with what feels like gallons of his hot cum.

I have no idea how long we stay like that, both of us shuddering from our desperate inhalations of air. Slowly, I feel him slipping out of me, and I wince a little.

This is going to hurt later.

SO fucking worth it.

I'm dimly aware of Cillian moving me up further on the bed. Of collapsing into the pillows as I feel his weight settling next to me. Slowly, I raise my head.

His eyes are still that dark, almost black green, swirling with lethal desire.

He's still rock fucking hard.

I whimper, biting my lip as my gaze drops to his cock.

"You're...you're still so hard."

When he growls, I shiver as my eyes slide up to his.

"You're still so hard, *Sir*."

I moan, shuddering as he suddenly sits up, grabbing a fist of my hair and slamming his mouth to mine.

"And what does my good girl think should we do about that?"

"*Anything you want, Sir*," I whimper, shivering in anticipation when I see the darkness flare in his eyes.

"I want you to clean it with your *tongue*."

I stiffen.

"*Get. On. Your. Fucking. Knees*," he rasps, ripping a gasp from my throat as he tightens his grip in my hair.

You can do this. It's fine.

It's not HIM.

But the alarm bells suddenly blaring in my head as I slowly allow him to guide me between his legs aren't the erotic ones I get whenever the thrill of this monster sends my adrenaline spiking.

These ones are from my past.

These ones are from a time I wish I could never remember again.

Now, who's going to give me a back rub? Which of you wants to help me feel better today?

The room goes dark at the edges, and red miasma starts to cloud my vision.

"Una."

My eyes roll back as every part of me shuts down and goes catatonic and numb.

"UNA!"

Everything fades.

UNA

“FINN and I were twelve when we aged out of the group home.”

I’ve never once wanted to think about this again, much less talk about it. Even Finn and I had an unspoken agreement to go through our lives as if that period was a nightmarish hallucination that never actually happened.

Even though it did.

And yet, for some reason, I know I can tell Cillian. It’s like looking over the edge of a black canyon and screaming your secrets out into the darkness of the abyss, knowing no one will ever find them again.

Cillian hands me a drink. I nod in thanks, taking it in both my hands as I sit on the edge of the bed, the blankets wrapped around me. Cillian sits in a deep leather chair by one of the windows across from me, naked but for his boxers. He slips a cigarette between his lips—a habit that I’ve noticed he’s been indulging in with less and less frequency recently—and lights it with a flick of his silver Zippo.

I swallow, raising my eyes to meet his through the darkness of the bedroom, lit only by the city lights slanting in through the single open window, and by the glow of his cigarette as he inhales slowly.

“It was in Denver, so we could...”

I look away, taking a sip of the whiskey in my glass and letting the burn dull the pain inside.

“So you could visit that monster.”

I nod quietly, grimacing. “I *hated* those visits with every single fiber of my being. And then, when we were twelve, it was like a miracle. The doctor stopped her research on him, and that was it. We didn’t ever go back to visit again, and then it was time for us to leave the group home.”

I close my eyes, determined not to let the demons of the past choke away my words.

I’ve never once wanted to come back here. But I know I never will again after today, so this is it.

I’ll see this through—just the once, just to cauterize it from my memory—even if it fucking kills me.

“There’s not a lot of foster parents out there who want a teenager. We’re too broken by then, too rebellious, come with way too much baggage and emotions, not to mention hormones. And there’s even fewer who want *two* of them. Every now and then, we’d get someone interested in *just* me, or *just* Finn...”

I blink, hot tears welling in my eyes.

“But we always made a huge stink. We were *not* going to let them separate us. And then one day...”

One day, the devil came knocking.

“Una...”

I know he can see the pain walking all over my face and treading on my throat. But I shake my head and push on.

“A man came one day, in this really nice car, dressed in a really nice suit, took one look at us, and told us on the spot we were coming home with him.” I laugh bitterly. “We couldn’t believe it. Finn and I joked we were like Little Orphan Annie and her brother, and Daddy Warbucks was finally here to sweep us off to the good life. He filed the paperwork *that day*, and two weeks later, were looking up in awe at the front door of his huge fucking house. Three cars, a pool, the whole bit.”

Tears start to roll down my cheeks.

“We thought we’d won the lottery. And for about a month, that’s what it felt like.”

I look away.

“Then we realized we were in Hell.”

Cillian’s jaw clenches, his eyes glinting in the glow of his cigarette.

“He...” I start to cry harder. Cillian stands abruptly, stubbing out his smoke and crossing to the bed, dropping to his knees. He takes my hands in his, gripping tightly as I stare blankly at the wall.

“He’d pick one of us and tell us his back hurt. That he needed us to help him *feel better*,” I spit venomously, bile rising in my throat.

“*On your knees, yes, just like that.*”

The ring flashes on his finger. That FUCKING ring—a cheap knockoff Superbowl Championship ring from when the Denver Broncos won.

A ring that leaves marks when he backhands if you’re not fast enough to get to your knees.

A ring that sometimes catches in your hair when he grabs it.

“You and your brother are so good to me, aren’t you? Now, open wide...”

Cillian’s grip on my hands tightens so hard it hurts. But it also grounds me. It keeps me from falling over the edge into the void.

“He never...” I look away, blinking back the pain, the shame I know in my heart I didn’t deserve, the tears. “Finn took it most of the time. He was like that. He always shielded me from predators. It was the same later when we were teenagers on the streets in LA. And those streets were *filled* with monsters.”

Finn nods to the Lexus waiting at the end of the alley. “It’s fine, Una. I’ll be back in no time.”

My nails dig into his forearm, my eyes pleading.

“Please, don’t do this—”

“It’s fine. Really. Hey,” he shrugs, shooting me that grin of his I love so much. “We gotta eat, right?”

“Then let me go this time—”

The smile evaporates from his face. “Not fucking happening.”

“Finn, you can’t—”

“No, YOU can’t,” he growls. “I’ve got this, Lunatic.”

He stands, pulls a flask of cheap vodka out of his back pocket, and takes a swig. Then a second, and a third, his eyes fading into that faraway look they get whenever he does this.

When he faces the monsters and the predators for the both of us so I don’t have to. When he gets into strange cars with strange, horrible men, and

comes back twenty minutes or an hour later with money, and food, sometimes drugs.

Smiling, even though his eyes are dim.

“Finn!”

“I’ve got you, Una.” He turns and grins at me as he walks to the car. “I’ve always got you.”

I start to shake as the tears flow hot down my cheeks.

“That was always the pretext. That he wanted a back rub, alone with one of us. Except it was never just a—”

Cillian snarls something vicious and inhuman, spinning away. My breath hitches at the loss of his grip on me—at the absence of his power grounding me. He whirls, pacing the floor in front of me with a look I’ve never once seen on his face.

Pure hate.

Pure, unbridled rage.

Pure. Fucking. *Malice.*

“First it was hands. Then he wanted mouths...”

Cillian roars, and I jump when he grabs the lamp off the bedside table, whirls, and sends it crashing into the wall.

“Then, one night when we were fourteen, Finn stole his wallet, woke me up with two bags already packed, and we left. We never went back.”

I’m sobbing now, the agony of the re-opened wound so painful that I feel like I might die. But then suddenly, strong, powerful arms circle around me, cocooning me against his broad, warm chest.

I choke on my tears, clinging to him so hard I know my nails must be drawing blood. But Cillian doesn't flinch.

He doesn't pull away.

He doesn't look at me like I'm broken, or disgusting, or shameful, or a whore.

He just holds me, and rocks me, and strokes my hair softly as I scream my pain into his chest, for I don't even know how long.

When the tears finally stop, he still doesn't let me go. And I don't want him to.

I still feel safer in the arms of an actual psychopath than I've ever felt before.

"Who is he."

I stiffen, my pulse racing.

"Cillian..."

"Who."

It's not barked, nor does he even raise his voice that much. But that's what makes it possibly the scariest thing I've ever heard. It's the quiet, unemotional way he asks it.

"Cillian, please..."

"Tell me his name, Una."

I squeeze my eyes shut, pressing my face to his chest before I slowly pull back, shaking my head. My tear-streaked eyes meet his cold, lethal ones.

"I've buried my past," I whisper quietly, pleadingly. "Please don't make me dig it up again."

His jaw grinds. He blinks. And then slowly, I can see cracks splintering their way across the deathly mask he always wears, until it finally falls away.

“Come here.”

He moves onto the bed, sitting against the headboard and pulling me into his arms as I burrow into him.

“We...I can try again—”

“No. Forget that.”

His arms circle me, holding me tightly, possessively.

Unflinchingly.

“No one is ever going to fucking hurt you, understand?” he growls quietly into the top of my head. “I’ll never let anything happen to you ever again.”

The safest I’ve ever felt, in the arms of monster.

Who knew.

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CILLIAN

“THAT ISN’T FUCKING POSSIBLE.”

Ares’ authoritative voice cuts through the stunned silence of my office at the Upper East Side brownstone. Besides Ares, the other faces in the room include Castle, Hades, Kratos, Dimitra, and New York City Director of FBI Operations Shane Dorsey.

It’s been two days since Una and I visited Hope House, where she got a call from the afterlife. I’ve just told them all what happened.

Una dealt with moving past everything she told me by burrowing under the covers for a full twenty-four hours before deciding she had to get out. Currently, she’s having lunch with Neve, Eilish, and Callie at Neve and Ares’ penthouse apartment.

I dealt with it by tracking down a serial rapist the police have been looking for in Sheepshead Bay, *gelding* him, choking him with his own severed balls, and then cutting him from chin to navel and watching the blood spiral down a storm drain in the middle of the dark alley where I found him.

I still don’t feel any less murderous. Or hateful. Or full of absolute *rage* for the things that piece of shit did to Una and her brother in that foster home, when they were goddamn children.

“Did *you* hear him?”

Dimitra’s melodic, heavily Mediterranean accent always exudes a certain power when she speaks. She might be a tiny, frail little thing. But I know foolish men have died thinking the Drakos matriarch is anything less than the hurricane force to be reckoned with that she is.

I shake my head. “I didn’t. But she heard what she heard.”

“Or she’s making shit up—”

Ares doesn’t finish his words, and the room explodes into shouting as I close the distance between us in a quarter of a second and grab him by the collar.

“That is the *last fucking time* you speak of her like that,” I snarl as he grits his teeth and grabs at my own collar, ignoring the yells from his brothers and Castle to back off, both of us.

“She’s your *pretend* fucking wife, Cillian!” he shouts in my face.

“And what is *Neve*, Ares?” I hurl back. “Or rather, what was *Neve*, when our two families stopped a war?!”

The room goes quiet. Ares looks away, shaking his head. He releases his grip on my collar and exhales slowly. When he turns back, his jaw grinds as his eyes meet mine.

“Okay, I apologize. That was way out of line.”

I drop my own grip on him, both of us moving back a step as the tension melts a little.

Ares shoves his fingers through his hair and eyes me. “You trust her?”

“I do.”

It comes out faster than I expected or intended. Ares just nods slowly.

“Well, okay then. But that doesn’t change the fact that Seamus O’Conor is fucking *dead*, Cillian.” His mouth thins as he jabs a finger at his shoulder. “You might have forgotten, but I shot him in the fucking *heart*, through my *own* goddammed body.”

“It hasn’t exactly slipped my mind.”

It never will. Crashing through the fucking door of that godforsaken hunting cabin in the woods.

Blood everywhere.

Neve so fucking pale with her life blood in a puddle around her, next to a dying—or possibly already dead—Ares.

The day I almost lost one of the few people I actually care about in this world, *again*.

No, I haven’t forgotten.

I glance at a grim-looking Castle, who I know also vividly remembers that horrific day. “I know what we all saw. But...she *heard him*.”

I jam a cigarette in my lips. I’ve been getting better about this, smoking less every day for the last few weeks. Or I *was*, until two nights ago when Una opened her soul to me.

Hades clears his throat, turning to Shane. “What happened to Seamus? His body, I mean.”

Our friend in the Bureau nods slowly. “Buried at a Bureau forensic facility in New Jersey. Only a number on the grave, to keep his fans away.”

Kratos scowls. “Why wouldn’t you burn that son of a bitch, or dump him in the sea?”

Shane gives a wry smile. “Bureau policy. Piece of shit that he was, he was also a Catholic. Even monsters like that get a proper burial.”

Ares hisses something vicious sounding in Greek under his breath, violently looking away.

Hades frowns. “What happened with the psych Doc?”

Shane lifts a brow, glancing my way before he clears his throat. “I’m...not sure what you’re talk—”

“Shane.”

He swallows, glancing at me again when I growl his name.

“Where’d you hear about that?”

“Not from you,” I mutter dryly. “Which would have been *much* nicer.”

“C’mon, Cillian. Those were sealed files from before my promotion.” He frowns, turning to glare at Hades. “You also could have *asked* before you, what, broke into some server somewhere?”

Hades shrugs. “Homeland Security guys with gambling issues can be very helpful in a pinch.”

Shane sighs, looking away. “Okay. So, that cat’s out of the bag I guess...”

“I don’t under-fucking-stand. O’Conor was the most incarcerated man in the country, and you geniuses let him out to go have fun-time in a cushy little psych ward, with visits from his goddamn *children*?” Ares hisses. “How the fuck does something like that even get approved?”

Dorsey snorts. “Are you joking? You’re talking about the same FBI that kept illegal surveillance flies on Elvis, John Lennon, and Groucho Marx, not to mention a few hundred other famous individuals. The same FBI that used

faked evidence and psychological warfare to discredit civil rights activists like Dr. *King*.” He laughs bitterly. “I’m not gonna sugarcoat this. Letting a shrink study a crazy asshole so she can write a book about it is pretty goddamn low on the list of skeletons the Bureau’s got in its closet.”

“I’ve dug into the doctor from Coal Creek who was interviewing him, Dr. Gail Thompson,” Hades says. “But it’s like she doesn’t exist anymore. What the hell happened to her and that whole project?”

Shane shrugs dismissively. “Administrations come and go, leadership changes. The DOJ and the Bureau did another evaluation of her work and decided it wasn’t nearly worth the risk of him breaking out. So, they shut off the funding and canceled the whole thing. Seamus went back into his hole, and I presume Dr. Thompson went and found some other pet psychopath to put under her microscope. I honestly have no idea where she is now, and I doubt anyone at the Bureau gives a shit about her.”

He sighs, steeping his hands as his eyes lift to mine.

“Look, all respect to your wife, Cillian. But...” he frowns. “Seamus is *dead*. You were there. You saw the damage Ares did, and it’s clearly laid out in the autopsy report I’ve read—and signed off on—listing *me* as the shooter...”

Yeah. Some truths were blurred to keep both of our families out of the newspapers that day. It also made Dorsey’s career, putting a close friend to the Kildare empire in a high place. Win win.

“‘Massive chest trauma, complete arterial destruction, and fatal blood loss’.” Shane lifts a shoulder. “He’s *dead*, Cill.”

“Did you see him?”

He gives me a look. “Cillian—”

“Did. You. See. His. Dead. Body.”

“*You did*, Cillian,” Castle murmurs, finally interjecting as he stands from where he’s been lurking quietly in the corner. “Look, stress and trauma can fuck you up. You can hear and see shit—”

“If you’re suggesting that Una is crazy,” I hiss dangerously. “Then we have a serious—”

“I’m *suggesting* that the mind is a complex fucking thing, man.” He grunts. “Seamus O’Conor is dead, Cill. We both saw him—him *and* the gaping hole where his heart was. You don’t bounce back from that, no matter how many fucking vitamins you take every day.” He shakes his head slowly. “You’re chasing a ghost, Cillian.”

This would be so much easier if I agreed with them. If I could remind myself that Una *does* come from a long history of abuse, violence, and major stress, even beyond whatever her monster of a father ingrained into her and Finn when they were kids, secretly visiting him at that psych ward.

Yes, she may be broken, and damaged. But that doesn’t make her crazy.

At least, not *that* kind of crazy.

The problem is, I *do* believe Una heard her father’s voice on the phone the other day. Which means I’ve opened up a whole new level of crazy for myself.

Worse, that ghosts are real.

UNA

CILLIAN'S second in command is quiet as we fight our way through the gridlocked streets of Manhattan toward Hell's Kitchen.

We're on our way to my old apartment. A while back, Cillian brought a bunch of things from the place when he went to get Bones. But earlier today, I realized with a pang that I didn't have the old photo album of Polaroids of Finn and I from our LA days.

It's one of my most precious belongings, and I hate that it took me this long to notice it was missing. And I wanted to scream, realizing it was probably long gone by now, thrown out ages ago.

That is, until Cillian casually mentioned that he's been paying the rent on the apartment this whole time. Which I obviously demanded to pay him back for.

Which he obviously ignored.

But, that means my stuff is still there. Hence, Castle driving me over to retrieve it.

I awkwardly clear my throat. "Thanks for driving."

"No problem," he responds in a clipped tone.

My brow furrows, my eyes watching him sideway as he maneuvers the tortuous traffic. I know he's not always this gruff and stoic. I've seen the way he interacts with Neve and Eilish, and even Callie.

But with me, he goes full on strong and silent type.

"So, how long have you worked for Cillian?"

"A while."

Okay, this is ridiculous.

"Do you not like me?"

He hides it well, but I catch the way his eye flickers, his jaw clenches, his hands grip the wheel a little tighter.

Castle's got this classic all-American football star thing going on that I'm sure drives most women crazy. Blond, blue eyes, square, corn-fed jaw, six and a half feet tall, and built like a tank. I even looked for a flirtation between him and Eilish the other day, given that he was, and continues to be, her de facto bodyguard, and really, that salacious story writes itself.

But I was way off. The two of them are basically siblings, the way they behave—he the overprotective older brother; she the perpetually annoying kid sister. It's actually pretty damn adorable.

But there's nothing adorable about the hard look he gives me over the center console of the Range Rover.

"It's a simple yes or no question. My feelings won't be hurt if—"

"It's more that I'm trying to figure out if I can *trust* you."

I swallow as he suddenly yanks the SUV to the side, jams it into park, and turns to face me. His eyes narrow.

“Well?”

I clear my throat. “You can.”

“If you were me, and I was you,” he mutters. “Would *you* trust me?”

“I’m sorry, would I trust you, being me, to be...me?”

He glares at me as my grin shrinks.

“Sorry, that was supposed to be a joke.”

“Trust is *earned*, Una,” he growls. “I want to trust you. But I’m a suspicious person by nature. And that nature only goes into overdrive when the person telling me I can trust them is the same person who put a knife in my friend’s side with the intent to kill him. The same person who then went and tried to do that a *second* time.”

My jaw tightens. “You do know I was being coerced, right?”

He nods. “I do.”

“By a lunatic follower of my insane father—who I hated, in case you haven’t got that memo yet.”

“Yes, a mysterious lunatic follower of your father’s. The one you’ve never met, never heard his real voice, never seen his face, don’t have anything but an obviously fake name for...”

My eyes narrow. “*And?*”

He inhales slowly, his eyes locked on mine. “The Kildares might as well be my family. Cillian is a brother, Neve and Eilish are sisters, and I am *very* protective of that family.”

I get the ferocity and weight to what he’s saying. I would have killed—literally almost *did* kill—for Finn.

“Look, Una, I’m not trying to pick a fight with you. I like you—”

“Yeah, no, that’s super obvious,” I mutter dryly.

Castle smirks, lifting a shoulder. “And I can’t imagine what you’ve been through, being an O’Conor—”

“You’re right,” I hiss. “You can’t. You don’t know anything about me.”

He nods. “So, let’s change that.”

“Yeah. Let’s not.”

He chuckles. “I’m actually one of the good guys, Una.”

“With trust issues.”

“Guilty.”

I sigh. “You don’t think if there was *anything* underhanded or sketchy about me, that Cillian wouldn’t have batted an eye about cutting my throat and dumping me in the Hudson before he’d let me get near his family?”

Castle tips his head back and forth before turning to stare thoughtfully out the window at the passing traffic.

“Before? Sure. Now?”

He exhales slowly as he puts the Range Rover in drive and pulls away from the curb.

“Now, I honestly have no goddamn idea.”

HELL YES.

I grin as I yank the dusty shoebox out from under my old crappy bed, in my old crappy apartment. I wish I could say I have fond memories of my time when I was pretty much squatting here, but that's not true at all.

Those days were filled with fear, and the unknown. Of worrying about, and looking for, Finn. Those were the days of the eerie phone calls from Apostle. Of a *hit list* on the wall of what is now my de facto adopted family.

I scowl. *Screw you, Castle.*

I might not have known them all very long. But I've never *once* felt accepted into something so quickly, so warmly, and so wholeheartedly as I have with the Kildare family; the Drakos family, too, for that matter. Well, some of them, at least. Callie is awesome, and Kratos has said a few kind things to me in passing. So has their tiny grandmother.

Ares is standoffish, but that's fine. And I get that, given his personal history with my father.

Hades still looks at me like he wants to make pushing me into oncoming traffic his new hobby. But, whatever. He's also an arrogant, pretty-boy dick, so yeah, screw him.

But as for Neve and Eilish? We might barely know each other. But they're some of the nicest, most genuine people I've known in...well, possibly ever, other than Finn. I'd *never* hurt them, or betray them.

The same goes for Cillian.

I shiver, grinning a little as I sit on the edge of the bed. *That's* been an interesting development the last week or so: every time I'm away from him—or, hell, even *with* him—I get all...moony.

Tingly.

Needy, and achy.

And flushed and flustered, in this ridiculous schoolgirl crush way. Which is a hard thing to wrap my head around. Number one, because Cillian is not a “crush” type of person. You get crushes on the boy next door. The doctor at your OB clinic with the ridiculously charming smile and the cute British accent.

You don’t get crushes on a sadistic, dangerous, more-than-slightly unhinged monster who forced you to marry him.

I mean, you’re not *supposed to*.

But also, number two, because despite our...*physical* relationship, Cillian and I aren’t “real”. Not when there’s a date approaching a few months from now when all of this will change.

When we’ll fake him killing me, and I’ll disappear for, hopefully, the last time. That’s a thought that’s getting increasingly bitter to think about with every day I spend in this new adoptive family of mine.

But I shake all of that from my mind as I open the shoebox and look inside. The little photo album is still there, and I feel my lips curling into a fond grin as I slip it from the box.

...Just as there’s a soft knock at the door.

My heart leaps into my throat, fear strangling me as my eyes fly to the door. When the knock comes again, I set down the album and grab the iron fire poker sitting against my bedside table—a weird dumpster find I always liked to keep there, given the sketchiness of the neighborhood.

Gripping it tightly, I move to the door and open it a crack, leaving the chain in place.

My brow furrows at the older woman with graying dark hair in a quirky, wide-brimmed hat, thick horn-rimmed glasses, and a fairly plain yet professional knee-length blue dress.

“Can I help you? I think you have the wrong address—”

She stiffens, her eyes widening as she stares back at me.

“I...yes is this...” She swallows. “*Una?*”

A cold sensation creeps up my back.

What the fuck.

“Una, is that you?” Her voice is so hopeful as she suddenly pulls the hat off and looks right at me.

Holy shit.

I put the poker aside, undo the chain on the door, and swing it wide to come face to face, for the first time in almost thirteen years, with Dr. Gail Thompson.

She smiles quietly and nervously. “Hello, Una.”

OUTSIDE, Castle immediately springs from the SUV and marches over.

“Easy there, Captain America,” I sigh. “It’s fine.”

He eyes Dr. Thompson up and down warily. “Excuse us for a moment.” He pulls me aside, his voice lowered. “Who the hell is that?”

“An old friend, relax.”

I mean, it’s kind of true.

“And where the hell are you—”

“To get *coffee*, Castle,” I groan. “Not plot the downfall of the entire Kildare empire.”

He glares at me. I glare right back.

“We’re going right over there to that café. You can stay right here and spy on me and send little notes to Cillian. *M’kay?*”

He doesn’t look too pleased, but I leave it at that as Dr. Thompson and I cross the street to the café.

“I HEARD you were living here in New York, and I just *had* to find you and see how you were doing.”

I bring the mug of black coffee to my lips, blowing on it as I smile curiously at Dr. Thompson, or Gail, as she’s insisted I call her now.

“How? I mean how did you find me?”

“I...” she smiles shyly. “I’ve been tracking down, or should I say trying to track down, both you and your brother for years now.” Her face darkens with a sad expression. “You... You were so very young, and I felt like such a part of your lives back then.”

She’s not wrong. She *was* a big part of our lives. Even though there was so *much* she never saw, and so much Finn and I would never have in a million years told her about our father’s *lessons* on killing, and infiltration, and revenge. Still... Gail was nice to Finn and me back then, even if she never saw the horrible stuff.

“How are you, Gail?”

She smiles as she sips her tea. “Oh, fine, I suppose.” She shrugs. “I don’t practice psychiatry anymore.”

“No?”

“Not after you and your bother. I couldn’t.”

Her face falls, and I watch her eyes well up as she looks away. “Una, I feel very responsible for so many horrible things I didn’t really see at the time back then. That’s why I’ve been looking for you. You were both put through so much, and I know now that my focus on my research was clouding my humanity.” She sniffs back a tear, shaking her head as she reaches across the table to take my hand. “I *never* should have allowed any of that, and I’m so incredibly sorry.”

I squeeze her hand back, smiling sadly. “It’s...fine. It’s in the past. And he’s gone now.”

She nods, looking down at her tea.

“I was so worried when they ended the program, and suddenly you and Finn weren’t at that group home anymore either. And they couldn’t even give me your foster address, because of course it’s against policy. But, Una, I was worried *sick* about the two of you. Although...” she smiles. “It looks like you’re doing okay?”

I swallow, looking down. “It... There were some not great years there. But, yeah.” I smile a crooked smile. “Yeah, I’m okay now, I guess.”

“And Finn? Is he here in the city too?”

A stabbing sensation in my chest makes me wince.

“Una?”

“He’s... He died, actually. About nineteen months ago.”

Gail's face goes chalk, pain in her eyes as she reaches over and squeezes my hand. "My God, I'm so sorry to hear that, Una. He was..." she chokes back tears. "He was such a good boy."

"*The best,*" I whisper quietly before exhaling the pain away. "But I'm doing okay." I snort a laugh, rolling my eyes as I lift my hand to show her the simple gold band. "I'm, uh...I'm married, now. Recently, actually."

Her eyes lose their momentary sadness as she grins, wiping the tears away. "You are! My goodness, how wonderful!" She beams at me. "Congratulations, Una! Who's your husband? What's he do?"

"Oh, he's..." I smile. "He's in management. Finance. That kind of thing."

Gail winks at me. "Can I see a picture?"

"Sure."

Feeling weirdly giddy and blushy, I pull the smartphone that Cillian recently bought me out of my bag and open up the photos app. I scroll to a shot of Cillian I took the other night—of him standing by one of the windows in the penthouse, looking out at the city. I took it from the side, showing his profile, a slight reflection in the window itself. It's a good shot, if I do say so myself.

"This is him."

Gail gasps, eyes going wide before she grins a little salaciously at me.

"My goodness, Una! He's *very* handsome." She giggles. "And quite a bit older, I see."

I blush. "A little. But...it works."

"I'm jealous!" she laughs. "I've been here in the city for two years, and I haven't met *any* tall, hunky older men like this yet. Much less *married* one!"

I grin. “You live here in the city now?”

“I do, yes. In SoHo. I always wanted to live here, and I wasn’t practicing anymore. So I thought...why not?”

She glances back at my phone and goes to touch the image, as if to zoom in. But she accidentally swipes to the next picture. I stiffen for a moment, wondering what the eff is the next photo on my phone? But I sigh to myself in relief when I see the little furry face.

It’s Bones, lying on my guest room bed, sprawled against the headboard, basically upside down. As if he’s standing on his head.

“Oh my God, who is *this*?!” she gushes.

I chuckle. “That’s Bones, my cat. He’s a weirdo.”

“He’s adorable! I love cats,” she sighs. “I just can’t have them in my apartment, unfortunately.”

Her brows arch suddenly, remembering. “Oh! Also, I always wanted to give you this, if I ever found you.”

She rummages in her bag and suddenly pulls out a manila envelope, sliding it across the table to me. When I open it, my breath catches.

It’s pictures of Finn and I—Playing in the grass at Coal Creek. Drawing pictures inside the classroom Gail set up for us. Building stuff with Legos. I’m grinning so hard my cheeks hurt until I flip over the next photo.

And the world goes a little dim.

This one is of my father—looking grim, cruel, and just plain evil as he looms over Finn and I drawing something on the table in front of us.

I don’t realize I’m frozen, staring at those leering, cold eyes until Gail’s hand

drops onto mine.

“Una?”

I shiver, flinching. She winces.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean for that to hurt you.”

“It’s fine,” I blurt quickly.

“It’s just…” she shrugs. “My own father died young, and I just… Look, I know who and what your father was. But a parent—”

“I think you can keep these, but thank you.”

“Family is so rare—”

“I’m *painfully* aware of that,” I snap.

Immediately, I feel terrible for lashing out as I watch her face fall.

“I—I’m so sorry, Una,” she blurts, quickly grabbing up the pictures. “I’ve upset you, and spoken way out of turn—”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s *not*.” She frowns, looking down and quickly pulling out a few photos. “Here. These ones are just your brother and you. I’d like you to have them. I’ll get rid of the rest, I promise.”

I swallow, nodding as I take the pictures of Finn and I. “Thank you.”

Gail smiles. “Please, let me make this up to you?”

“No, Gail, it’s really not necc—”

“Dinner at my place sometime soon?”

“Really?”

She ducks her chin a little. “I—I mean, if you want?”

I grin. “That sounds great, actually.”

She beams. “Wonderful! Here—this is my number. Call me anytime, and let’s really do something soon!” She scrawls a number on one of the café napkins and slides it over to me with a grin. “And bring that adorable kitty!”

Outside, we hug tightly before she pulls away. “I am so thrilled I finally found you, Una. I’ve wanted to see how you were doing for so long.”

I promise to call her soon before I cross the street and get into the passenger seat of Castle’s Range Rover.

“Here, you want trust?” I shrug. “Fine. That was Gail Thompson.”

His brows shoot up. “Wait, as in *Doctor* Gail Thompson?”

“Oh, so you have pried into my private past.”

He rolls his eyes. “Give me a break, it’s part of my job.” He frowns as he glances at me. “Una, she worked *directly* with your father—”

“Yeah, which means she’s fully aware of what a piece of shit he was,” I spit. “We covered that. Anyway, we’re going to have dinner sometime. So, you can take that off to Cillian for some extra credit. Oh, and she’s not practicing anymore.”

He frowns, nodding slowly. “Dinner...”

“Yes, Castle. Dinner. You know, food. Evening meal. Is that a problem?”

He starts the car. Then he pauses and turns to me with a curious expression.

“Why did you tell me?”

“What?”

“You said before it was just an old friend. You could have stuck with that and never once mentioned that was Gail Thompson.”

“Yes, I could have, except—spoiler—I’m not the O’Conor spy you and Hades seem to think I am. So why the fuck *wouldn’t* I tell you who that was?”

He frowns.

“Trust is *EARNED*, Una,” I grunt in a deep voice, mimicking him.

“I don’t sound like that.”

“I’ve got sad news for you, pal.”

He snorts, shaking his head with a grin as he pulls out into traffic. “Great, just what I need. Another *mouth* like Neve and Eilish.”

“Oh, I’m way worse than them.”

He laughs as we drive off. I smile, turning to grin out the window as the city rolls past.

I’m starting to like this whole “normalcy with a family” thing.

A lot.

Maybe too much.

UNA

I PULL my eyes from the book in my hands and grin when I see that it's Eilish who's calling.

“Hey—”

“Knock-knock.”

There's an abrupt knock at the door, jolting me as my heart jumps into my fucking throat. Eilish makes a wincing sound that tells me my jumpiness wasn't exactly silent.

“Sorry. That's just me letting you know we're here.”

I exhale, forcing a small laugh as I hang up and walk over to the main door to the penthouse. When I unlock and open it, Eilish and Callie are standing there with Elsa Guin.

“Hey!” Eilish gushes. “Look, I'm so sorry if I—wow.”

The three of them blink, staring in awe past me. I turn, following their gaze to see what's caught their attention and realizing it's the whole penthouse.

“This place is *insane*,” Callie breathes.

“Wait, have you guys not been here before?”

Eilish gives me a curious look. “No. Cillian doesn’t bring anyone here. It’s like his refuge or sanctuary or something.” She makes a face. “Actually, I doubt we’re supposed to be here at all.”

“I’m quite positive we’re *not*,” Elsa says primly in her posh British accent. She turns to give me an all-business smile. “And how are you, Una?”

“I’m good, thanks. You?”

I haven’t seen much of her since she officiated at my wedding to Cillian. But for some reason, even though she’s so buttoned up and proper all the time, I really like Elsa.

Or maybe I’m just in awe of her. I mean the woman is only something like twenty-seven and was at one point ranked one of the top three lawyers—though I guess they’re called barristers or solicitors over there—in the UK. Now, she’s a partner at the super prestigious Crown and Black law firm here in New York, when she’s not moonlighting as the unofficial Drakos family counsel, that is.

And on top of that, the woman always looks *amazing*. Immaculately tailored skirts or pantsuits. *Perfect*, not-a-strand-out-of-place white-blonde hair always back in a severe bun, and *exquisitely* done makeup—never over the top, just completely hitting-the-mark professional.

It’d be so easy to casually hate on her if she wasn’t so *freaking nice*.

“I’m well, thank you,” she says crisply.

“We were on our way to the Banshee to go over some city contracts,” Eilish explains. “Which we need Elsa’s signatures on. But we wanted to stop by here on the way to see if you wanted to tag along!”

Elsa nods. “The place is coming along beautifully—*uh*, Callie...”

Callie's already stepped past me into the penthouse. Elsa frowns.

"Callie, I was being serious. I assisted Mr. Kildare in the purchase of this place, and I've heard him be quite clear about no one coming in—"

"Oh, no, really?" Callie murmurs with a dry tone. "Oops. Well, *anyway*." She giggles, stepping further into the penthouse. Her jaw drops as she looks around.

Eilish gives Elsa a shrug. "Don't worry. Cillian's more bark than bite sometimes."

Or both...

She steps into the penthouse after Callie, whistling. "Absolutely stunning." She turns to grin at me. "I can't believe you get to live here. Jeal-ous."

"I mean..." Callie frowns. "Some furniture might be cool?" Then she shrugs, turning to me. "Which room is yours?"

I stall, hoping to God the heat on my face isn't as obvious as I think it might be.

That's a good question. Up until a few weeks ago, my room was still the guest room. Then, the nightmare at Hope House happened, with the ghost of my father *speaking to me* through a phone line from Hell.

After that day, something changed.

It's partly because that was the night Cillian fucked me in his bed—the first time we were that close since that one brief encounter at Club Venom. But I know that's not the only reason I've been sleeping in his bed, and sleeping *with him*, every night, since then.

It's not just the primal sex that smashes through just about every single fantasy I've ever had and twists me in toe-curling ways I've never even

imagined. It's the fact that sharing a bed with Cillian makes me feel safe. Which is something I really need right now.

I know logically that ghosts aren't real. Just like I now know and accept that it really might have been stress and emotion making me only *think* I heard my father's voice on that phone.

But I still don't know if I could sleep alone. I think Cillian seems to understand that without me even having explicitly said anything about it. Which is why, without really ever discussing it, sleeping in his bed has just become the norm.

I realize I've been zoning out and not answering the question so long that Callie is grinning widely at me.

"Oh it's like *that*."

Eilish makes a face as it clicks. "Eww."

"Dude, they're *married*," Callie snickers. "Do I seriously have to start explaining the birds and bees to a twenty-one-year-old?"

Eilish blushes fiercely. "No, you don't."

"Well, I know with your *vast* dating and sexual experience—"

"Wow, hey, could we *not*?" Eilish groans, her face bright red as her mouth twists.

Callie grins, sliding an arm around her to hug her. "I'm just giving you a hard time. Also, I am the personification of the pot calling the kettle black on this one, okay?"

I laugh, shaking my head.

"I just meant..." Eilish glances at me, her face still red. "I mean, no offense, I

just don't need to hear about *my uncle's* sex life?"

Oh, Eilish, you have no idea...

"C'mon, you're not at least a *little* curious?" Callie teases.

Eilish buries her face in her hands. "Not in the fucking *slightest*. Could we *please* drop it?"

Callie grins as she turns to me. "He's a total freak between the sheets, isn't he?"

"*Callie!!!*"

I'm laughing so hard that tears are rolling down my cheeks. Partly because these two are hilarious. And partly because it covers the bloom of heat spreading across my face at the mention of Cillian's and my sex life. Which is...

Intense.

Primal. Vicious and exhilarating. Brutal and all-consuming.

Literally on a nightly basis, the man I'm married to unlocks every single hidden dark desire I have. Every fantasy. Every buried secret.

Or, almost.

There's one line he hasn't crossed yet. Because the truth is, I haven't told him about it yet.

Not in words, at least. Because I'm too terrified to say it out loud. Because even with Cillian, prince of darkness he may be, there's still so much shame and "wrong" wrapped up in this particularly dark part of myself that I can't figure out how to voice it out loud and open that door.

Or find out if I even *want* to open that door.

It's the idea of him taking what he wants, and doing what he will...

...Even if I say no.

Even if I scream at him to stop.

I know consensual non-consent isn't the *wildest* fringe kink out there. But for a whole host of reasons, in my head, it still feels beyond shameful. Probably a little because of society, and more than a little because of what happened to Finn and I at that foster house, with *him*.

Where no wasn't a recognized word. Where "stop" meant "I'll keep going until I'm done."

I shiver, shoving those thoughts back into their dark hole somewhere in the back of my mind.

Elsa clears her throat, glancing at a gorgeous watch on her wrist. "I hate to rush any of you, but we do have the licensing inspector coming in half an hour, and we're still in Brooklyn."

Eilish arches her brows at me. "Well? Wanna come with and see what being insane and buying an Irish pub looks like?"

I grin. "Definitely."

IT'S late by the time I get home, and after dark. But I'm grinning from ear to ear, and maybe slightly buzzed, too.

I've just spent the last four hours touring The Banshee, the soon-to-be-re-opened Irish pub that Neve, Eilish, and Callie bought a few months ago. Currently, they're in the process of renovating the seating areas upstairs, moving the bar to the other side of the space, and expanding into what was

just an unused storage room out back to create more seating. They're also excavating the basement to make it deeper, turning what was formerly something out of a horror movie into what's going to be a really cool lounge area, complete with a small stage for bands.

After that, they insisted we do a "tasting" of all the new whiskies and craft beers some of the liquor distributor reps dropped off.

Yeah, okay, I might be slightly more than "buzzed."

Grinning, feeling flushed, I fumble at the keypad to Cillian's—or I guess I should start calling it *our*—penthouse. But then something catches my eye. I frown as I pluck the little white card from where it's been stuck in the doorjamb.

There's just one word written on it in Cillian's distinctly precise and masculine handwriting.

Blue

I frown. *Okayyy?*

Inside, I flip on the lights, kick off my shoes, and drop my bag by the door. In the kitchen, I drink a full glass of water to try to balance out the drinks I had at the Banshee. I whip out my phone and send Cillian a message that I'm home, since he texted me earlier that he would be at a work thing late. I walk over to the couch to finish the book I was reading earlier.

I'm halfway there when the lights go out.

Cold, naked fear rips through me. A tightness in my chest has me gasping for air as I whirl, trying to peer through the darkness. Except it's pitch black. Even the blackout shades over the huge clock-face window are closed.

I'm completely lost in the darkness.

And the fear is *real*.

“Hello?”

I hear the slightest sound, somewhere to my right, which I *think* could be back in the direction of the front door, and my blood turns to ice. I whirl, panting heavily. I scrabble at my jeans pocket before realizing I’ve left my phone on the kitchen counter.

I go still, trying not to freak the fuck out as I strain to hear a single thing.

The slight noise comes again.

Like a...footstep?

I gasp, spinning again as devils and demons dance through my imagination, reaching out for me through the blackness.

“I...” I shiver. “Cillian?”

There’s no answer.

“Cillian, this isn’t fucking funny!”

The sound comes from behind me. I jolt, my throat closing as I stab my eyes into the gloom.

I stiffen.

Something’s *definitely* there.

“Cillian?”

I move forward slowly, feeling my way, torn between wanting to know what’s out there and being terrified to actually touch something. My breath comes quick and short, the hairs on the back of my arms and my neck standing up.

“Cillian, is that—”

I bump into the sofa.

The tension floods out of me with my breath as I shove my fingers through my hair.

“I’m losing my fucki—”

I’m grabbed from behind.

The hit comes so fast it’s like my body doesn’t even remember to scream. Or maybe I can’t, not with my heart crammed into my throat.

Strong, powerful arms wrap around me, gripping me and brutally shoving me down over the arm of the couch. Adrenaline and pure fear explode through my system as I choke, my face pressed into the leather of the couch cushions.

When I hear the jangle of a belt being undone, my eyes bulge. I scream, but the sound is cut off when a meaty hand clamps hard over my mouth. Another hand shoves roughly under me, and I scream and thrash as I feel it deftly pop the button of my jeans.

Holy God.

Screaming into the hand and drowning in adrenaline and fear, I kick back. But my attacker is far too strong, and I whimper as I feel a knee slam into the back of my leg, pinning it to the couch. He grabs the back of my jeans and my panties, and an agonizing scream wrenches from my throat as he yanks them roughly down over my ass and down to my knees.

“Scream for me.”

Everything goes still.

Holy. Fucking. SHIT.

The man roughly manhandling me and shoving me over the couch is *Cillian*.

I jolt as his palm slaps my ass hard.

“*Scream. For. ME.*”

And I do, shuddering and panting as I feel his hand shove roughly between my thighs.

...Where I'm soaking, *dripping* wet.

He laughs deep and gruff into my ear and shoves two fingers into me without warning. I moan, writhing and twisting in his grasp as he curls them deep.

“Such a fucking eager little slut,” he snarls into my ear. “Making a mess of this greedy little cunt, just waiting for me to fuck you any way I fucking please.”

His fingers pound roughly into me, and my cheeks redden at the lewd, slick, wet sounds that fill the room. When he pulls them out, I whimper. Then he spanks me, hard—like *really* fucking hard—and I cry out as the sting of it sizzles over my tender skin. He spanks me again and again and again, before suddenly reaching between my legs and pinching my clit.

Sweet fucking Jesus.

I shudder, the pleasure—and shame of *feeling* pleasure at such a rough touch—flooding through me. His fingers drive into me, the hand over my mouth keeping me pinned and bent crudely over the armrest of the couch, my bare ass high in the air and my jeans and panties tangled around my knees.

Cillian fingers me even harder and rougher, until my legs are shaking and a wave of something powerful and dark begins to crash over me.

Which is exactly when he slips his fingers from my pussy.

“*Bastard—*”

“What the *fuck* did you just call me?!”

I cringe at the unusually lethal, dangerous tone to his voice.

“*I—*”

“It’s fucking *yes, Sir,*” he snarls. “Is that fucking *clear?*”

He removes his hand from over my mouth as I whimper, nodding eagerly.

“*Yes—mmph!*”

Fingers slide into my mouth—the very same fingers that were just deep in my pussy.

“Now, clean that greedy pussy off these fingers while I fuck you like the horny little cock slut you know you are.”

I stare wildly as I suddenly feel the pulsing heat of his swollen head right against my lips. Then, in one brutal thrust, he buries every huge fucking inch deep inside of me.

I *scream* at the suddenness of it—at the sheer size of him filling me to the brim and stretching me out deliciously. It hurts, but it’s a good hurt—a *really fucking good hurt*. And I’m so wet from his manhandling of me, and the fucked-up way he’s talking to me and calling me a horny little cock slut that I can literally feel my juices dripping down my thighs as he rams into me.

I moan and whimper around the fingers in my mouth as he grabs a fistful of my hair and fucks me like an animal over the arm of the couch. His muscled hips pound into me relentlessly, bruising me, making me wince. But the pleasure in *un-fucking-real*.

I *know* it’s him, and I know I’m not really in any true danger...And yet, at the same time, there *is* an element of danger here.

Because there always is with Cillian.

The sadistic glint in his eyes. The gnawing idea that the things I've heard said about him aren't exactly exaggerations. The fact that this man is flat out *dangerous*, and more than slightly unhinged.

A killer.

A psychopath.

A sadist with an insatiable appetite for my screams and my submission.

But the part that brings a fresh shiver of fear and a rush of heat to my core is realizing that I haven't even come *close* to seeing his limits or the full depths of his darkness.

And suddenly, I *am* scared.

Deliciously so. Illicitly so. Like the rush of a drug hitting your bloodstream.

And that's when the silk tie slips over my head and tightens around my neck. That's when my eyes bulge as he yanks it even tighter, closing off my air a little more before he brings up my wrists behind my neck and wraps the other end of the silk tie around them, pulling tight.

I choke, my reality a spinning mix of delirious, hedonistic pleasure, pain, and fear as Cillian yanks the middle of the silk tie, extending my arms out roughly behind me as my throat closes even more. His thick cock fucks into me roughly and brutally, his heavy balls slapping my clit and his hard abs crashing into my ass over and over as I squeal and writhe and drool onto the couch as my world collapses around me.

Something wet and slick—his thumb?—presses against my ass. I choke out a sobbing whimper, barely able to even move as he fucks me like a rag doll against the side of the couch. I feel his thumb slide into my ass, and a

howling sound of pain and pleasure rips from my mouth as I scream in ecstasy.

The world blurs around me as overwhelmingly powerful sensations rip through me—the feel of him viciously pounding into me, the pressure tightening more and more around my throat until I can barely breathe, the way I'm so helpless and at his mercy.

He reaches around, roughly pinching and twisting my nipples as I cry out, shaking everywhere as the pressure throbs and builds, until there's no turning back.

When I come, it's transcendent.

It's catharsis.

It's screaming out all the bad and the pain and the horrors of whatever came before and claiming what *I* want, right here and now.

I sob into the couch, choking and shuddering—my toes kicking and scraping painfully across the floor as I explode like a bomb around Cillian's thick, merciless cock. The heat slams through me, turning me inside out and wrenching a cry from my mouth as I come harder than I've ever come in my life.

With a snarling grunt, Cillian pulls out of me. He rolls me over, so that I'm face up, arms still behind my back and my legs spread lewdly over the arm of the couch with my pink, swollen pussy right in front of him as he strokes himself.

His cock pulses, and I moan as the hot, thick ropes of his cum splatter all over my skin—dripping over my pussy and my stomach, my thighs, my breasts. I can feel his cum across my chin and my lips, and I whimper as I drag my tongue over them to taste him.

It uses the very last reserves of my strength. Suddenly, I'm collapsing into a trembling, shaking mess.

I can feel myself starting to roll helplessly off the couch, as if to drop onto the floor. But then muscled arms catch me. And lift me, holding me against a powerful chest as Cillian turns and marches down the hall to the bedroom.

Sweet merciful fuck. *We're just getting started.*

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UNA

THE DEPRAVED AND exhilarating becomes our routine.

Something I look forward to, all day. Something I meet with eagerness and, when he catches me by surprise, fear.

Like when he pins me roughly to the floor of a dark bathroom and fucks me within an inch of my life while he uses a little switch across my ass.

Part of it is, yes, the sex is *un-fucking-real*. Like, heart-attack real. But the other part of it is *catharsis*.

Every time he fucks me so brutally, I want so badly to see how far he'll go with me, in the hopes that I'll get a piece of myself back. I've never once used our safe word, which remains "blue".

I lost some parts of me years ago. I try not to think about it, because it's a nightmare. And I've spent years lying to myself, telling myself I'm fine. But I know deep down that I'm not. I know deep down that I'm still not right in places, after what *he* did to me in that foster house.

I hate, so much, that *he* still has this hold on me. I *hate* that while Cillian will pin me down and eat me for an hour straight, until I'm begging him to let me come, I can't do the same for him.

I can't even imagine taking his cock into my mouth without having a fucking panic attack. Which fucking *sucks*, because I'd really, *really* like to.

It's a random Wednesday night when I find myself sprawled across Cillian's bed—my head on his abs with my hair tousled across my face. I can hear his pulse thudding just as fast as mine through his skin from what we just did.

I wince, gingerly feeling the ache between my thighs that comes with the territory of our especially brutal brand of fucking. But I'll take it. I've even started looking forward to it. Because the pain that puts that ache there pushes me over the edge, every time.

I don't even miss the razor.

I don't need to do that anymore. Not for escape, and not for release.

And yet, as incredible and viciously hardcore of a fucking session we just had, something's bothering me.

“What is it?”

My eyes go wide, my pulse skipping when he asks the question. How is this man always able to peer right into my thoughts?

“You have a tell, you know,” he grunts with a small, dark chuckle—as if reading my thoughts *again*, dammit. “Your lips move a little when you're trying to figure out how to phrase something you're not sure about saying out loud.”

I turn my head, shoving my hair aside indignantly as my eyes lock with his.

“You couldn't even see my lips!”

“I could feel them against my stomach.”

I purse my lips, feeling my cheeks heat.

“So?”

I suck on my teeth before suddenly blurting it out.

“Why do you hold back with me?”

Cillian’s brow furrows just a little as his green eyes pierce into mine.

“I don’t—”

“You do.”

His jaw ticks. “Are you actually looking for me to be rougher with you?”

I lift a shoulder uncertainly. “Not...necessarily.”

I’m not even sure I could physically survive that, to be honest. I’m already perpetually covered in bite marks and bruises—all over my thighs, my ass, my abdomen and my breasts. Or worse, my poor neck, which has started to prompt me to suddenly become a silk scarf wearer.

Eilish thinks it’s *very* Parisian of me and wonders if I’m hinting to my husband that I’d like a holiday in France.

She will *never* know the real reason.

“Then what are you asking me?”

I chew on my lip. “I *love* what we do now...”

My cheeks flush when I admit that out loud.

“But...I know there’s more in you. I *know* there is.”

A shadow flickers over his face and he looks away. “Whatever else is in me, is not for you.”

I flinch, like he’s just smacked me.

“Wow, okay...”

He scowls. “*Easy*, Una. That came out wrong. I don’t mean it’s not for you because it’s for *someone else*,” he mutters. “It’s that it’s...” he exhales slowly and heavily. “Una, the well of my darkness goes down *very* much deeper than you ever need to see or know.”

“But—”

“*Una*,” he growls, sitting up. I shiver as he cups my face. “No buts on this one.”

“*Fine*,” I mumble petulantly.

He leans in and kisses me, making me whimper when he bites my lip hard.

“You’re a fucking animal, you know that?”

He shrugs, smirking as he slips out of bed to go brush his teeth.

It’s pitch black when I wake with a start. I turn, and frown when I reach over to realize the bed next to me is empty.

Again.

Because this is the other part of our new routine. Several times a week, some weeks almost every night, I’ll wake up to find him gone. Not just from the bed, I mean *gone* from the apartment entirely, only to slip—usually freshly showered—back into bed at some ungodly hour of the morning.

I asked him about it once, and he just said it was a business thing. But I’m not the only one with a “tell”. Whenever Cillian lies, his hand makes a quick motion for his cigarette case before he stops himself. He’s been slowing

down a *lot* with the nicotine. So it's probably a new tic of his that he doesn't even know about—his inner psyche reaching for the crutch of a cigarette. But now that I've seen that move, I never miss it.

I know he's lying.

“So, how often do you go to the club?”

It's morning, and Cillian and I are sitting on the couch drinking coffee and looking at furniture magazines.

We seriously need some more stuff in here.

He looks up from his Lillian August catalog, one brow cocked up at me above his glasses. Which is so...*ugh*. Completely unfair. Because I'm trying to pry and possibly accuse him of something, and he's got the fucking nerve to wear those goddamn black-rimmed glasses. Which somehow have the power, unbelievably, to make him even *more* mouthwateringly attractive.

“Take those off.”

“What?”

“The glasses. Take them off.”

He gives me a curious look before he slips them off. “What club?”

“Venom.”

Cillian eyes me, not saying anything as the seconds tick by and I squirm under his gaze.

“What are you asking me?”

“Nothing. Forget it.”

I go back to leafing through my Restoration Hardware catalog. Then I gasp as he plucks it from my hands and tosses it aside.

“What are you asking me, Una?”

“Nothing! I’m just...asking.”

He still goes there. Oh my fucking God he totally still goes there.

Part of me wants to rage and scream at him. The other part of me remembers...*this isn't a real marriage.*

We may be sharing a bed and fucking—and oh my *God* are we fucking—and technically and legally speaking, we are married. But we’ve never had any sort of discussion about what that means for “us”.

Like, “Are we a couple?” or “Are we exclusive?”

It’s that second one that has me...*snarling* inside, with a vicious fury that honestly scares me a little.

What are you, jealous?

“Look, seriously, just forget—”

I shiver as he grabs my legs, twisting me on the couch so that I’m facing him.

“There’s a darkness in me, Una,” he growls. “Something...” his eyes flicker with malevolent green fire. “Something monstrous.”

I swallow, my hand dropping to cover his as it rests on my knee. “Cillian, you’re not a—”

“This is more than you have *any* fucking idea about,” he hisses thinly, making me shiver. “And if I keep it bottled up, I’ll explode. So I have...”

avenues...to let it out.”

My mouth goes small. “Avenues.”

He nods.

“Like tying girls up at Club Venom and—”

His phone chooses that particular moment to go off. Cillian groans, pulling away from me and glaring at it. “Fuck, I have to take this.” His eyes dart back to mine. “Una—”

“Look, honestly, forget it. I slept weird last night and my head’s all crazy today—”

“We will continue this conversation later.”

I shrug, reaching for the Restoration Hardware catalog again and letting my eyes feast upon ridiculously expensive couches.

But “later” doesn’t come. Cillian’s on the phone for most of the morning. Then Castle stops by to pick him up and he’s gone for a few hours. He’s back later with sushi takeout for dinner, which is great.

Then he pins me to the bedroom floor and fucks the living daylights out of me with his hand around my throat and, which is even *more* great.

Then, we collapse into bed and I pass out, exhausted.

It’s late when I wake, startled from sleep. I turn, and I try not to seethe when I slide a hand over to feel the emptiness in the bed next to me.

Fuck this.

I’m about to go back to bed, when suddenly I hear quiet sounds from outside the bedroom. Frowning, I slip from the bed and tiptoe to the door. I open it and glance down the dark hallway to see Cillian slipping a lethal-looking

knife into a sheath at his hip before slipping on his black jacket.

Then he's out the door.

I don't even hesitate. I'm changed into leggings, a hoodie and sneakers, and bolting down the stairs of the building faster than I would have ever thought I could. Outside, I slip behind the planters next to the front door, ignoring the curious look the doorman gives me.

When I see Cillian's black GTO slip silently out of the underground garage like a shark, I make a move. I bolt to the road and raise my hand, hailing down the taxi that quickly pulls up to the curb to let me in.

"Follow that GTO, please! And just...try to do it so he doesn't notice, please?"

The driver arches a sympathetic brow.

"Chasing the husband, huh?"

"Something like that."

"No sweat, lady. Ain't my first husband-chasing rodeo."

Then we're off.

And I'm not sure if I'm excited, jealous, or just plain terrified of what I'll find.

UNA

THE DRIVER LOOKS unsure as we pull up in front of an especially seedy looking, dark building way out in East Brooklyn.

“Lady, whatever this is, I don’t think you should be going out—”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

I give him the cash for the ride and open the door.

“Sweetheart—”

“I’m not a sweetheart.”

I shut the door with a *thunk* and watch the cab pull a hasty U-turn and slip away into the night.

What the fuck are you doing?

I glance over to where Cillian’s GTO is parked and then peek down the side of the dark building in the direction I saw him head about four minutes ago.

Based on where we are, I’m willing to bet that my ragingly jealous ideas that Cillian’s going out to meet some other girl are probably *very* incorrect. But he’s here for a reason, and I’m not leaving until I find out why the fuck he’s been sneaking out so much late at night.

I have to know. I'll go insane otherwise.

I creep down the side of the building. With every step, I frown as some kind of dull, quiet *thwacking* sound fills my ears. It gets louder the closer I get to the far corner of the building, and suddenly I shiver when the sound is punctuated by a cry of pain.

My head peeks around the corner of the building...

...And my world goes still.

Cillian is moving like some sort of demonic creature of the night. The man in front of him cries out as something glinting and metallic flashes in Cillian's hand. When the geyser of red explodes out of the man's throat, I gag, pulling back and retreating around the corner, slamming a hand over my mouth.

Holy fuck. Holy. FUCK.

I hear the dull thud of a dead body hitting the ground. Then another man's snarl. Steeling myself, I peek around again, and my eyes go wide as I fully drink in the scene.

There are two bodies lying lifeless in rapidly-spreading puddles of blood. A third man groans, trying to claw and drag himself across the filthy ground, his legs broken and limp, trailing long streaks of red behind him.

Cillian grins like a maniac and hisses like an animal as a fourth man charges him, brandishing a baseball bat. In one fluid motion, Cillian catches it on the downswing, wrenches it out of the man's hand, and then shoves the blade in his other hand up *hard* into the man's belly.

Bile swirls in my stomach as I watch the man I've been sharing a bed and my body with jerk his arm violently. The man impaled on his knife chokes and gurgles as Cillian literally *disem-fucking-bowels* him right there in front of me.

Holy fucking Christ.

I whirl, trying to clamp my mouth shut. But there's no stopping the vomit.

There's no stopping the sound it makes, either.

I bend forward, hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath. I go to peer around the corner again...

...and fucking *scream* when I come face to face with Cillian—grim, brandishing the knife in his hand, blood that clearly isn't his soaking the front of his shirt. Dripping off his hands. Spattering his shoes.

Speckling his jaw.

“*Una,*” he chokes, his eyes flickering as the malevolence I just saw in them morphs into something more familiar but still cataclysmically furious. “What the *fuck* are you doing here?”

“I—I—!”

My eyes dart past him to the three dead men. To the fourth, who looks like he won't last another five minutes.

“*What the fuck—*”

“*This is who I am,*” Cillian snarls viciously. I shudder, whimpering as he grabs the front of my hoodie and yanks me close to sneer down into my stricken, terrified face. “You want *darkness*, Una?! You think what's inside you comes even *close to* resembling the poison in me?”

I quail under the snarled words and cold look.

“*Here!*”

I shudder when he shoves the hilt of the knife into my numb hands. Suddenly, he's pulling me out of the shadows and over to the mayhem.

I've seen blood. I've seen death. My father made sure of both of those things. But this is...something else.

This is beyond horrific.

Cillian storms us over to the guy whimpering and dragging himself across the filthy ground, then yanks him up and shoves him back against the brick wall next to us.

"Please..." the man chokes and gurgles, his eyes pure terror as blood trickles from his mouth. *"Please...don't..."*

"This is it, Una," Cillian snarls.

I choke as he grabs my hand holding the knife and suddenly yanks it close to the man. The guy sobs as the point of the knife presses against his jugular, a hair's breadth away from piercing the skin.

"Cillian..."

My pulse is roaring in my ears so loud it's almost all I can hear. My vision tunnels, my skin crawls, and then all I see is me, Cillian, the man, and the knife in my hand that Cillian is pressing into the guy's throat.

"This is my darkness, Una," Cillian growls, making me shudder as he pushes the knife even harder.

Then, he lets go. My hands shake, but they don't remove the knife.

"There. That's the fucker who hurt you."

I blanch, shivering as my head shakes side to side. *"He's not—"*

"But he can be. He can be whatever monster won't let you go."

My world narrows to a point, until all I can see is Cillian's bloody hand holding mine. And the knife, with the tip of it pressed against this man's

throat, just piercing the skin now.

“This piece of shit’s a murderer and a child rapist,” Cillian hisses. “So you can lose whatever guilt you might have.”

He leans close, his eyes stabbing into mine as my breath comes fast and shallow, my gaze locked on the prick of red just under the tip of the blade at the man’s throat.

“*Do it,*” Cillian snarls. “If you want to know the monster living in me, then fucking *do—*”

That’s when I break. I choke out a sob, my body shuddering and convulsing as the tears flood my face.

“*I can’t!*” I cry. “*I can’t because I’m not you!*”

I gasp the second I say it, my free hand slamming over my mouth as my eyes dart, horrified, to his.

But whatever devil was there before, snarling at me so full of viciousness and venom, all I see now is *him*—the Cillian I know.

“*I know you’re not,*” he murmurs softly, pulling my hand and the blade away from the dying man’s neck. “*Come with me.*”

I’m crying and shaking as he gently leads me away until I’m leaning against a brick wall about ten feet away.

“Wait here.”

“Wait, Cillian—”

Without blinking, Cillian whips around, strides back over to the pleading, screaming man, and grabs a fistful of his hair at the front. My eyes bulge in horror as he yanks the man’s head back. With one clean stroke, the blade

slices open his larynx.

He does it all with the ease, practice, and nonchalance of ordering a turkey sandwich on rye.

Holy fuck.

Cillian drops to his haunches, neatly wiping the blade clean on the man's shirt before he slips it back inside his own jacket—all while I debate if I'm going to run until I can't run anymore.

That is, if I can even move at all.

Then he turns, and I'm pinned to the wall by those piercing green eyes. A wrenched sob escapes from my lips, and I flinch as he strides right up to me and suddenly grabs my chin in his hand, jamming me against the wall as he forces me to look at him.

"I—I won't tell—"

"This is ME, Una," he rasps darkly, his voice like steaming ice as his eyes eviscerate me. *"This is the me no one needs to see. The me you don't want to know."*

I'm still shaking with fear. But when I look into his eyes, even behind the monstrous mask twisting his face right now, I see *him*.

The Cillian I know.

"What if I do? Want to know that version of you, I mean?" I croak.

Cillian's eyes narrow to mere slits. *"Careful—"*

"I asked you a question," I spit, grabbing his wrist.

"And I told you to be ca—"

He flinches briefly when my hand reaches up and cups his face gently. I swallow, a tear tricking down my face as our eyes lock.

“I want to know you. *All* of you.”

“I promise you,” he growls. “You do not.”

“*Try me.*”

I shudder as his eyes burn with a green fire that both terrifies and captivates me.

That both scares me away and brings me running back for more, every time.

“You’ll regret this,” he murmurs.

“Let’s find out.”

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CILLIAN

“I WAS BORN THIS WAY.”

Back at our place, Una sits on the floor against the back of the couch, wrapped in a blanket and holding a steaming mug of herbal tea. I’m by one of the windows which is open a crack, flicking the silver Zippo in my hand open and shut as the tip of the cigarette glows red.

We haven’t spoken much since she walked in on what she saw earlier.

Not my best moment.

Hardly my worst.

I know something hangs in the balance here. She’s looking at me like she still sees the me that she knows—the man I can appear to be. But the mask has slipped. The façade has cracked. She thought she knew the darkness in me before, but now, she’s seen the true devil that lives under my skin.

No one has ever looked right at that and stayed afterward. Not even my uncle Lorcan.

I take a slow hit of nicotine, gritting my teeth as I drag my gaze back to Una.

“I’m...different, Una. I know you see a monster—”

“I don’t—”

“Yes, you do. Because that’s what I *am*,” I growl quietly. “I wasn’t the son my father wanted. But I was the one he *needed*, to have someone to ascend his throne, since that wasn’t in the cards for my older half-brother.”

I look away, eyes gazing into the middle distance.

“At first, they didn’t really know what was the matter with me. I was charming and made friends, but then I’d also hurt or steal from those same friends, seemingly without feeling a single shred of guilt or remorse. My father, cruel tyrant that he was, was proud of this behavior. He said it was proof of my ability to be king, and that I’d be a strong leader. But later, as I got older and the violence in me became harder to contain, he didn’t know what to do with me. Nobody did.”

Una’s brow caves a little, her eyes locked on me as she takes a sip of tea.

“That’s when Lorcan, my mother’s brother, stepped in. He saw pretty quickly what I was—or at least thought he did. And he helped me channel it constructively. Boxing, hunting...anything he could think of to give me an outlet to release the darkness inside me.”

Until he saw too much, that is.

“Is he...” she swallows. “Is he still alive?”

“No.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. But we hadn’t spoken in a very, very long time when he died.”

Her brow knits. “Why not?”

My jaw tightens as I look away. “Because he’d seen the real me. He thought

he knew how bad it was, but then he got a good look at the true depths of how different and broken I was.”

“What happened?” She flinches as soon as she says it. “I’m sorry, that’s not my business—”

“Do you want to know?”

She blinks, staring right at me as she nods slowly. “If you want to tell me, yes.”

I don’t know why we’re talking about any of this. *No one* knows these things about me. Not Neve, not Eilish, not even Castle.

But we’re here now. She’s already seen a monstrous side of me that few ever really have. Castle’s seen me *bad*. He’s been with me when the savagery has come out. But Una saw a part of me tonight that I keep hidden even from Castle.

The *joy* of it all. The sheer thrill of the kill.

I know how exhilarating it felt to destroy those pieces of shit in that alley tonight. I know the feeling of release, and the almost sensual thrill of committing acts of violence that brings a savage smile to my face.

Which she saw.

This woman didn’t see me “angry” or “being crazy”.

She saw me at my most *sociopathic*—blood dripping down my hands and face, glee in my eyes, cloaked in death.

And fucking *enjoying it*.

And yet, she’s not jumping on a plane and getting as far away from me as she can, like Lorcan did when he found me that one night. She’s not screaming or

cowering from me.

She's still sitting here. She's looking right at me. She *wants* to know this part of me.

“There were these two boys at school who were spreading vicious, disgusting rumors about my sister.”

She frowns. “You have a sister?”

“*Had*. Saoirse. She...passed away young.”

Una's face crumbles. “I'm so sorry, Cillian.”

I nod. “Anyway, these two pricks were spreading lies about her taking money for sexual favors. It was just stupid teen boy bullshit. But it...” I shake my head. “It *got* to me. It festered. I did give them a chance. I asked them to stop. But when they doubled down and it got worse...”

I turn to look out the window.

“Cillian...”

“I stalked them home one day, caught them together in one of those pedestrian tunnels under train tracks, and I...”

Cut out their tongues and eyes with a pencil, and then decapitated them both.

“Killed them.”

Some details nobody needs to know.

“Lorcan found me right after it happened, and it pushed him past his limit with me.” I frown. “It was...*messy*.”

Una swallows.

I stub out my cigarette and then cross the penthouse to the kitchen. I'm

washing the smoky smell off my hands and face when I hear her come up behind me.

“You mentioned learning to channel it. That anger in you.”

I turn, toweling off my chin and hands as I lean against the counter.

“How do you? Channel it, I mean?”

“The club, for one.”

Una bristles, her mouth thinning.

“You did ask me about that before.”

She looks away. “Yeah, well, I don’t need to know—”

“You’re the first, actually.”

Slowly she turns to look at me. “What?”

“You asked me about going there and tying girls up. I’ve been to Club Venom once in a while since I moved to New York. But I’d never taken anyone to a private room before.”

“*Why me?*” she whispers hesitantly.

“Because you looked like prey.”

She looks down at her feet.

“And because I saw at least a flicker of my own monster and darkness in you,” I growl quietly.

Una takes another sip of her tea.

“What else do you do? As an outlet?”

My jaw clenches.

“You hurt people, for one...”

When I still don't answer, her mouth tightens.

“My father hurt—”

“I am *not* your father,” I hiss. “I'm *not*. The people I hurt...” I look away. “The people I hurt deserve it.”

“Says who?”

“*Me*,” I snarl. “Those men tonight? Besides being fucking serial raping, child abusing trash, they were also bomb makers. I was looking into what happened at the wedding reception.”

She shivers, pulling the blanket around her shoulders a little tighter.

“Some people deserve to be hurt, Una,” I murmur. “And yes, to die. There are monsters, and then there are *monsters*. We all have a little of the first in us. Some,” I growl, “more than others. But the latter?” My teeth grind. “The latter have *no place* in society.”

I take a slow breath, looking right at her.

“My father was the latter. A true remorseless monster.”

Why am I telling her this?

Not even Eilish and Neve know about this part of my past. Neither does Rose, Saoirse's daughter that she was forced to leave with the nuns. Rose, who grew up shielded from the world and the Kildare family because I wanted her safe. She and I aren't close, but we've reconnected now that she's grown up and married. But even she doesn't know the real, full story of her mother.

No one needs to know this story. And yet, it just starts to tumble from my

mouth to Una. Like I feel compelled to open every dark corner of my past up to her.

Like I want her to know *everything*.

“My father was a *fiend*.”

She stiffens. “You don’t have to—”

“He sexually abused my sister her entire teen years. She finally, *finally* got out and ran off with some guy. But she was back nine months later, pregnant and alone, when the piece of shit abandoned her. My father made her give up the baby, and it was the last straw for her.”

My gaze drops.

“She slit her wrists in the bathtub. And when I got back from the hospital, where I’d taken her in the vain hope she could be saved, I found my mother, dead at my father’s hands.”

Una’s face goes white. She puts her mug down, and steps toward me to take my hand in hers.

“I’m...Cillian...I’m so fucking sorry.”

“We all die.” My gaze hardens. “But it wasn’t her turn yet. So, I made it *his* turn. Slowly.”

Her hand drops from mine, the horror obvious on her face.

And just like that, once again, someone has looked too deep. Someone has peered too far into the darkness.

Gritting my teeth, I begin to walk away—to give her the space I’m sure she’s craving between her and the monster she’s truly seen now.

But I’m stopped when small, lithe arms wrap around my middle. When her

tiny frame presses to me, and her soft lips kiss my back.

“I don’t think you’re a monster.”

“Then you haven’t been listening.”

“Do you feel things? Emotions?”

I’m quiet for a minute before I turn. Her arms stay close around me.

“I feel them differently than other people. When I hurt people. When I *kill* them”...my eyes gaze deeply into hers...“there’s no regret. I don’t feel what a human being *should* feel when they take a life, even a bad life.”

Una chews on her lip thoughtfully. “What about other emotions?”

“Like what?”

“Like...” Her cheeks tinge with pink as her gaze drops. “Like what do you feel when you look at me?”

“*Several* things,” I rasp darkly.

She shivers. “Like...?”

“Like...I want to shield you from the world. Like I want to *hurt* people who wish to harm you.”

Una’s face flushes as her eyes raise to mine.

“Like even the idea of anyone laying their hands on you makes me see *blood*,” I snarl.

She shivers. “Do you want to hurt me?”

“I want to *free* you.”

“No, I mean...” She shifts, her eyes darting over my face. Searching. “I mean

do you want to *hurt*-hurt me.” Her eyes hold mine. “Do you want to inflict your anger on me?”

There’s no hesitation.

“No. Only in the ways you want me to hurt you.”

“Good hurt?” she whispers.

I nod.

“Do you want to chop me into a million little pieces?”

The corner of my mouth lifts. “No.”

“Good.”

She smiles.

So do I. When she reaches up to cup my face, I don’t flinch quite so hard this time.

“I guess you’re not a monster after all.” She shrugs. “Sorry to burst your bubble.”

I grin as I lower my mouth to hers and lose myself in her lips.

CILLIAN

EXCEPT, sometimes, I *am* one.

A necessary monster. An avenging angel of death. A corrective force of nature.

Like tonight, when I'm Kevin Halcott's grim reaper and worst nightmare.

"Please...I..."

"I think you know why I'm here, Kevin."

I glare down at the portly man in his underwear that I've just dragged from his bed. The man with blood pouring down his chin, horror in his sobbing eyes, and *no teeth*.

...As of about four minutes ago, when I smashed them all out with a hammer.

"Please..."

"How many, Kevin?"

He sobs, his underpants soaked with his piss, more of it pooling at his knees. And for some reason, that fucking angers me even more. He chokes, screaming and gurgling blood as I grab him by a handful of his greasy, graying hair.

“*How. Fucking. MANY?*”

“I—I don’t know!” he sobs. “I don’t know what you’re talking—”

“How many children, Kevin?”

There. There it is. I watch with a sick hunger as the light bulb goes on. As he looks at me with a fresh wave of horror, realizing this isn’t a nightmare, or a case of mistaken identity, or a robbery.

That look is Kevin realizing the sins of his past are about to come back and kill him. Tonight, right here on his living room floor covered in blood and piss.

Monsters like to hide in plain sight. This particular one positioned himself as a caregiver. A nurturer. A selfless humanitarian, taking in wayward teens abandoned by the system, into his licensed foster home in Denver. The motherfucker’s even been recognized as a local *hero* for his lifetime of service helping teens in need.

The actual horrific truth is that Kevin used his position of power and his standing as an unimpeachable pillar of the community to guarantee himself a steady flow of innocent victims.

Including Finn and Una.

I’ll be killing Kevin’s reputation tonight, too. I will burn his legacy to the fucking *ground* around his corpse.

When he doesn’t say anything, I sigh and shake my head. “Kevin, monsters like you *always* know the number. Because to you, it’s a power thing. To pieces of shit like yourself, hurting children makes you feel strong. Like a big man. Doesn’t it, Kevin?”

“*P—please!* I never meant to hurt—”

I laugh coldly. Then I pull out the burner phone from my pocket, open the video camera, and start filming.

“I’m going to ask you again. How. Many.”

Kevin squeezes his eyes shut as he starts to cry.

“Tell me, and perhaps I’ll let you live.”

Oh, the lies we tell...

He looks up at me, a spark of hope flaring in his eyes. “R—really?”

“Of course. Just tell me. And, please, smile for the camera, Kevin. How many children did you sexually abuse in this foster ‘home’ from Hell?”

He starts to weep, realizing that I’m filming.

“*Please!* I—I’m a good man—”

He screams bloody murder when I kick him as hard as I can in the balls, making him double up and vomit as he falls into the puddle of his own urine soaking the carpet.

“HOW. MANY.”

“Th-Thirty-six!”

I flinch. Even *I* flinch.

Jesus fucking Christ.

I’m shaking. And the violence I feel surging up inside of me is so fucking raw and so fucking big I’m legitimately afraid of the monstrosity that might explode out of me.

But only for a moment. After that, the fear turns to *delight*.

I'm going to enjoy this. And I'm going to take my time.

"Say it again," I snarl. "Right into the camera, Kevin."

He's sobbing and writhing on the ground. "*You swear?* You swear you'll let me live if I—"

"It can't hurt your chances, can it?"

He swallows, nodding as blood drips from his shattered mouth. "Okay! Okay! Thirty-six kids!" He starts to cry as he stares into the phone camera.

"Now, tell us your name, age, address, and your foster home's license number."

He lists it all, crying and begging for forgiveness. But he'll find no forgiveness here tonight. Not from me.

When I have everything I need, I stop recording and put the phone away. I'll find a program to edit out or mask my voice later, before I send this to every local and national news outlet I can.

Slowly, I turn and take my jacket off, draping it across the arm of Kevin's couch.

"Y—you...you said you'd let me—"

"I did," I nod, quietly taking a cigarette out of the silver case and lighting it.

"Yes, I did say that."

Then I turn and walk over to the console along the wall, where I've already laid out a few things from Kevin's kitchen.

Mostly knives.

"Thirty-six..." I growl quietly. My skin fucking throbs with hate and violence.

My blood sizzles like molten death as I finger a few knives and then pick up the cleaver. I heft it meditatively in my hand, my back to Kevin.

“That’s a good number, Kevin.” I turn to glance at him over my shoulder, relishing the confused look in his face. “A really good fucking number.”

“I...I don’t—” His eyes land on the cleaver in my hand as I turn, twirling it in my fingers. “NO!” He screeches. “No! You promised!! You prom—!”

“Thirty-six is the number of pieces I’m going leave you in, Kevin.”

“No—”

“But don’t worry. I won’t let you miss any of the fun. I can guarantee you’ll still be alive until at *least* number thirty.”

I could gag him. But the neighbors are far enough away, and I’m not too concerned. Also, I’m going to relish each and every one of the screams.

It’s just over two hours later when I finally walk out the back door, turning to toss the flickering matchbook in my hand back into the kitchen. The gas I’ve poured all over the house catches quickly, and I exhale slowly, lighting another smoke as I watch the thirty-six pieces of Kevin Halcott and his house of horrors explode into ash.

I frown, suddenly remembering one last thing. In my pocket, I pull out the bloody wad of tissues containing Kevin’s ring finger. Deftly, I pull off the stupid fake Super Bowl ring, drop it back into my pocket, and then chuck the finger into the flames.

Now, it’s the thirty-six pieces of Kevin.

I watch the raging inferno for a moment.

Then I’m gone.

It's first light when I step back into our apartment. In our room, I watch Una sleep quietly and soundly, a small smile curling my lips.

What have you done to me, Una...

I leave the ring on her bedside table. After a quick shower, I slide into bed next to her, wrapping her in my arms. She stirs a little, twisting and sleepily opening her eyes to look at me.

"Hi, you."

I lean in and kiss her softly.

Una smiles and then stretches lazily. "Are you just getting to bed?"

"There was something I had to take care of. Go back to sleep."

She grins as her eyes close again. "What time is it?" She twists in my arms to glance at the clock on her bedside table.

She goes still.

I wait, letting the seconds tick by before she slowly turns in my arms. Her face is white, her lips quivering as her eyes search mine.

"Cillian..."

"It's done," I murmur.

She holds my gaze for another quarter second, before suddenly she's wrapping herself around me, hugging me tightly as she cries into my chest.

"You didn't have to."

"But I always will."

Her lips crush to mine as my arms circle her tightly.

Yes. I *always* will.

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UNA

PSYCHOPATH.

I feel almost dirty Googling it on my phone, as if even reading the definition, for the reasons I am, is a breach of trust or a betrayal of some kind.

But I have to know. I have to know what he truly is. I mean the word has been bandied about alongside his name countless times—that was clear even before I did some digging into him in preparation for setting foot in Club Venom. He was described once as “the sort of man who wants to watch the world burn because he enjoys the smell of the smoke.”

But that would make Cillian more an agent of chaos or anarchy. And he’s not. He’s *meticulously* precise. Neat. Ordered. I think it might be less that he’d watch the world burn just to smell the smoke, and more “he’d watch the world burn because it wronged him.”

Or me.

I shiver, replaying the calm look in his eyes that night he came home so late with that fake Super Bowl ring that I’ve since thrown away. How he watched so nonchalantly, saying nothing three days later when the news circuit was going wild about the recently-discovered truth about the predator who’d run a foster house in Denver for so long. About the confession tape he’d made, on

his knees, while covered in blood.

About how his remains had been found in his burned-out house in *thirty-six* different pieces that detectives are saying were cut surgically.

During the whole newscast, Cillian just quietly drank his coffee, not blinking once.

Part of that scares me. But not enough to run. Maybe because I don't fully understand what being him really means. Which is why I'm looking it up now.

Psychopath: a person affected by chronic mental disorder with abnormal or violent social behavior.

I swallow.

Another site gives the definition as: “a person with a psychopathic personality, which manifests as amoral and antisocial behavior, extreme egocentricity, and failure to learn from experience. Lack of ability to love, or establish meaningful personal relationships.”

Hmm. That's...*sort* of him. But sort of not. Amoral? Maybe. But everything I've seen suggests it's less “amoral” and more just that he has his *own set* of morals and codes. Antisocial? I smirk. At times, sure. But that's also me, too.

Extreme egocentricity? Well, again, he has his moments there. But “failure to learn from experience” doesn't sound accurate. If anything, Cillian *immediately* learns from a situation and tailors his actions accordingly, with almost machine-like precision.

It's the last part that has me *really* frowning, though.

“Lack of ability to love or establish meaningful personal relationships.”

I don't know about love. Aside from my sibling, twin-love for Finn, I've

never known what love even is.

I mean, I enjoy Cillian. I like being with him. I look forward to seeing him again when we're apart, and usually think about him constantly. I'm enjoying learning what makes him tick, what he likes and doesn't like.

I like the things we do, the way he touches me. And the way that even the non-sexual or aggressive touches seem to make something click inside my chest and make my heart swell.

Is that what love is? I don't know.

I know what this marriage is, though. Just as I know we have an expiration date in place in just a few months, where I'll have to leave all of this new life and this new family behind and disappear once again.

At least, that was the initial deal. It was my own *idea*, for fuck's sakes. Now, that plan sounds horrible.

I don't really know what that means, either.

But I *know*, however you would describe Cillian and I's relationship, it's "meaningful" if nothing else. At least to me.

So take that and fuck you, Mr. Dictionary.

Maybe Cillian *is* a true textbook psychopath. Or maybe he's just severely damaged and has learned to deal with that damage in violent ways. But even if he is a psychopath, there's a thin sliver of humanity running through him. I know it, because I've seen it, and felt it.

So that's where I'll stay. Safely cocooned in his darkness.

"Ready to go? Don't want to be late when Dimitra's hosting family dinner."

I jump, gasping in shock as he startles me. I quickly close the browser tab I

had open, hoping to God he didn't see what I was looking up. "Sure. Let's roll."

"I'm capable of personal relationships, by the way."

I cringe, my face scarlet.

"I'm...I'm sorry, I wasn't—"

"You were curious." He lifts a shoulder. "That's fine, I get it. I've looked at every definition myself. Talked to about fifty shrinks. Most of them do classify me as psychotic, to some degree at least. But..." He shrugs again, his eyes burning hotly into mine. "I *am* capable of personal relationships."

I smile. "I know. I see how you are with Neve and Eilish, and Castle, and—"

"*You.*"

I blush as I look up at him. My lip catches in my teeth, before slowly, my eyes drop to the front of his pants, dead level with where I'm sitting on the couch.

Something...*dirty* flits through my head. Something that makes my pulse thud, and my thighs squeeze together.

Something I've been wanting—really, truly wanting—to try since the night he went out to slay the monster from my past. Because with that piece of shit gone...it feels almost like the block inside of me is crumbling.

I have to know.

I have to know if I'm forever broken in this particular regard.

I quickly flick my eyes to his as my hand raises to hook my fingers into his belt buckle. His brows arch as he glances down at me.

"What, exactly, are you doing?"

Heat pools in my core, along with a nervous anxiousness. I start to undo his belt, then the button of his black trousers. Then I start to pull on his zipper.

His hands land on mine as I start to peel his pants down.

“Una...”

I swallow as I look up at him. “Let me do this.”

His brow furrows. “You have nothing to fucking prove to—”

“Maybe not to you. I have something to prove to myself.”

He frowns. “Una, you really don’t have to do this.”

“But I *want* to,” I hiss, adrenaline and desire running through me as I start to push his pants down. The ominous bulge in his briefs makes my pulse skip, my fingers shaking as they slip into the waistband.

I gasp as he cups my jaw, lifting my face to his. “*Listen* to—”

“That fucker took something from me,” I spit, teeth flashing. “And now, he’s fucking gone. Forever. And I *want it fucking back*.”

Something changes in his face. He sees the darkness swirling in my eyes, sees the hunger and the raw need to push past this. Slowly, he nods.

“With you, I know I can stop at any time if I have to with our safe—”

“No safe word,” he growls thickly. “Not with this. Stop means we just fucking stop. No games.”

I bite my lip, nodding. Then my gaze drops back to his briefs. Heat throbs inside of me as I start to peel the waistband lower, and lower, and lower, revealing the trail of dark hair down his grooved abs.

Then the thick base of him. And then, with one last tug, his heavy cock

springs free, bobbing right in front of my face.

And I am not afraid.

It's a thrill—a rush from the realization that I can do this. That I can take this back.

I reach out, almost trembling as I curl my fingers around his cock and slowly lean in. I wet my lips, looking up at him as I slowly kiss his swollen crown. Cillian's jaw clenches, his eyes on fire. I push myself more, letting my mouth open as I let the velvety head slip into my mouth. My tongue dances across the tip, tasting a salty sweetness.

I like this.

I like this *a lot*.

I moan as I open my jaw wider, taking him deeper into my mouth. There's no flashbacks like I was worried about. In fact, there's nothing but him and me, and this intimacy. I whimper, tonguing him as I move my head up and down, my cheeks hollowing. The sensation of his big dick swelling and stretching inside my mouth is beyond thrilling.

I pull away with a wet pop, stroking him as desire roars through my veins. I look up at him, burning from the ferocity in his eyes.

"I..." I blush.

Cillian lifts a brow. "Tell me."

"I...could you, I mean..."

"We can stop any—"

"Would you fuck my mouth?"

The room goes silent but for the thudding of my pulse. I'm almost afraid I'll

see judgment or scorn in his face. But when I finally force my gaze back up at him, I don't.

I see hunger. Raw desire. A primal, aggressive lust.

“*Una...*”

“I know you've seen my search history. You know the darkest parts of me. And I'm telling you, *please*, this is what I want. I want you to—”

“You want me to *fuck* this pretty little fuck-hole of a mouth until I empty my fucking balls into my good little cum slut?”

Oh. FUCK. Yes.

He knows what I crave. And I love that he knows. Just as I love that he knows I don't want a PG, Disney version of aggressive or hard.

I want it *vicious*.

His hand slide into the back of my hair. I shiver with anticipation. He grips it tightly, and I moan as I watch his cock swell even more.

“Be a good girl and *swallow* my fucking cock.”

He thrusts, pushing the bulging head past my lips as I whimper. Adrenaline and explosive lust roar in my ears and tingle over my skin as Cillian roughly shoves his huge dick deep into the back of my throat. I gag, but when he pulls back, I reach up and dig my nails into his hips, stopping him.

“*Bad girl...*”

I moan as he pulls back only to fuck his way roughly back inside. His hips pound, his swollen cock thrusting past my puffy lips and over my tongue to bury itself in my throat. My eyes water, drool and precum dripping down his cock and my chin as I look up at him.

Letting him *use me*.

Wanting him to. Craving it.

Unbelievably *wet* because of it.

“Spread your fucking legs.”

I whimper as I do it.

“Now show me how a greedy little cum slut plays with her messy pussy while she gets her mouth fucked.”

It’s embarrassing how quickly my hand shoves between my legs under my skirt and burrows into my panties. I shudder the second my fingers find and roll over my clit, already *so close*. I whimper, choking and sputtering as I drool over his dick, shamelessly playing with myself as the lewd wet *glucking* sounds fill the room.

Cillian’s abs flex, his cock pulsing as he groans. He grips my hair tight in both hands, thrusting aggressively as he takes what we *both* want from my mouth.

I’m getting even closer, my fingers a blur on my clit. And when he groans that he’s going to come, I lose all control. I’m still rubbing myself as I pull my mouth away from him, stroking him fast as I look up into his eyes with a face of pure lust.

“*Come for me, Sir,*” I whimper, watching the venomous green in his eyes turn to emerald fire. “Come in my mouth. Come on my face...*Sir.*”

With a snarl, he grabs my hair and buries his cock deep in my throat. He thrusts once, twice, and then suddenly, he’s roaring. I whimper, eagerly swallowing the hot spurts of his cum that flood my mouth. Then he’s pulling out, and stroking himself, and I’m suddenly coming myself, rubbing my clit

as his cum splatters down my lips, my chin, and my cheeks.

I've barely caught my breath before suddenly Cillian's shoving me down across the couch. I whimper as he rips my blouse open, scattering buttons. He yanks my bra down, and I cry out as his mouth descends to my breasts, his teeth biting and raking over my sensitive nipples.

He roughly shoves my thighs apart, and I jolt when I feel the cold metal of a blade near my thigh. The knife slices through my panties, shredding them away before suddenly, I feel him hot and hard and big right at my opening.

His mouth crushes to mine, heedless of the cum still at the edges. And in one swift move, he fills my eager pussy with every inch of his cock.

I scream, clawing at him, my legs locked around his waist as Cillian proceeds to fuck me like a *rag doll*. His hand wraps around my throat, squeezing as he brutally fucks me within an inch of my life.

"I might be broken, Una..."

The words rasp in my ear as I lose myself in him, feeling him utterly take control, claiming every part of me.

"But I've never felt more fixed than when I'm with you."

Our eyes lock, lips an inch apart. Breathing in each other's air. Drowning in the intimacy.

Damaged and broken together.

When I start to come, my lips hungrily find his. I can feel him crashing over the edge with me, snarling into my mouth as his perfect cock rams into me as brutally and as viciously as I crave, until I can feel his hot cum spilling into me.

"I've never felt more fixed, either," I whisper into his ear as my arms and legs

wrap tightly around him.

Maybe he's a monster and a psychopath. Maybe we all are, a little.

But maybe two broken pieces can fit together to be whole again.

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UNA

“UM, YES, HI.”

Callie is waiting for us when the elevator doors open onto the glamorous front entryway to the Drakos estate. I’ve seen some wealth in this city. I mean Cillian’s clock-tower penthouse has to be in the realm of mid eight figures. Not to mention the stunning five-story brownstone on the Upper East Side, or Neve and Ares’ gorgeous all-glass penthouse on the west side.

But they all pale against this place: an actual, honest-to-God Georgian-style English Manor, moved *brick-by-fucking-brick* from the English countryside to the top of a forty-floor building on Central Park South. Twelve bedrooms, twice as many bathrooms, even *grounds*, complete with two pools, manicured gardens, and a tennis court.

It’d be obscene if it wasn’t so damn tastefully and gorgeously done.

As we get out of the elevator, Callie’s grinning at me with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes, Calliope?” Cillian mutters, his arm around my waist. “What is it?”

“Well, it’s just that dinner started ten minutes ago.”

“There was traffic.”

Callie's eyes drop to the scarf around my neck.

"Great scarf, Una."

I blush deeply. She grins. "*Well then,*" Callie giggles. "Dinner is this way."

We head through the opulent home until we approach the sounds of laughter and conversation coming from the formal dining room. Just before we step in after Callie, though, Hades slips out. He clears his throat and shuts the door behind him.

"Could I, uh," he frowns, glancing at Cillian. "Could I borrow Una for a second? Alone?"

"No."

I bite back a grin at the ferociously snarling possessive note in Cillian's voice.

Hades smirks. "C'mon, Cill, it's not like that. I just need to tell her—"

"Then what are you waiting for?"

I giggle as Hades sighs. "Fuck it, fine. Stay, for all I care."

"I'm glad we're on the same page."

Hades rolls his eyes and turns to me. "I just wanted to say, I've been a little prickly to you."

I mean, he has, yes. But it's fine. I'm an outsider, and yeah, my father almost killed his brother. I get it.

"Hades," I reassure him. "It's all good."

"No. I mean, I can be a dick. Okay, I *am* kind of a dick."

"*Kind of...?*" Cillian mutters.

Hades ignores him, shoving his dark hair back from his piecing blue eyes. “I was angry before, when that fucking thing went off almost in Neve’s face at the reception. And because of that, I spoke out of turn.” He smiles wryly. “You’re not your father, Una.”

I reach out and squeeze his hand, ignoring the tight-jawed growl from Cillian when I do.

“Let’s start fresh, yeah?”

Hades grins. “Perfect. I swear, I’m not a dick *all* the time.”

“That’s to be debated,” Cillian murmurs grimly, yanking my hand back from Hades. “Now, *if* we’ve all kissed and made up...I think we’re all probably starving.”

IT’S ACTUALLY my first “family dinner” at the Drakos house. But despite my nerves, and maybe partly because of Hades clearing the air beforehand, the whole thing is perfectly *lovely*.

I laugh and drink wine with Neve, Eilish, and Callie. We crack up at a story Ares tells us about Hades keeping snacks under his pillow when they were kids. Dimitra, as *super* intimidating as she is despite her small stature, makes a grand toast to Cillian and I, involving both a Greek proverb about wine and honey and something about “love and babies.”

Yeah, easy there, Dimitra.

She even comes over to hug me, and to tell me how glad she is that I’m part of this family now, which when I think about it is maybe the first time I’ve ever heard that in my life.

I lean my head against Cillian's shoulder, our hands clasped together on his lap, and I smile at all the love and family around me.

Life is pretty fucking great.

ALL THE SIBLINGS, and Castle—who really might as well be a Kildare sibling—ride the elevator down with us after dinner. We're all still laughing about a joke Hades has cracked when we tumble out the front doors onto Central Park South.

Ares huffs, turning to glare up at the building across the side-street from the corner the Drakos' building sits on. The other building has a huge crane on top of it, complete with a giant wrecking ball, as well as scaffolding and bare iron beams.

“All this shit was supposed to be finished three months ago,” he mutters, angrily gesturing at the construction. “I mean Ya-ya doesn't need to hear this bullshit day in and day out.”

Neve's freaking *gorgeous* Aston Martin pulls up at the corner, and a valet driver leaps out with a quick nod.

Callie grins, whirling on Neve. “Okay, first, you can totally say no. But—”

“Yes, Callie,” Neve laughs. “You can drive it. Take it for a spin around the park or something.”

Ares groans as his little sister squeals and hugs Neve fiercely. “God help the pedestrians and other drivers.”

The rest of us are still talking and laughing as Callie bounces over to the car parked on the corner.

Everything after that happens in slow motion.

I hear a dull, faraway *pop*. I'm vaguely aware of Castle roaring and shoving past everyone, pelting toward where Callie is grinning and doing a little victory dance next to the open driver's side door of the Aston Martin.

There are screams as he slams into her, grabbing her around the middle and yanking her off her feet as he rolls onto his back, slamming against the hood of a taxi that screeches to a stop.

...Just as the wrecking ball that was hanging from the crane above not forty seconds ago smashes Neve's car into the street with the sound of a bomb going off.

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CILLIAN

“NEW YORK CITY is reeling today from a mechanical failure at a midtown construction site that left bystanders shaken and one luxury sports car flattened under a wrecking ball. FBI New York City Regional Director Shane Dorsey has released a statement that, while the Bureau is looking into reports of an explosion that may have sent the nine-ton ball crashing down onto Central Park South, he does not believe this is an act of terrorism. Director Dorsey also mentioned in his statement that while the accident did occur in close proximity to the home of the notorious Drakos family, the Bureau is considering this an isolated event unconnected to that particular family or its alleged criminal connections. Director Dorsey went on to assure New Yorkers that the crane failure that caused the wrecking ball cable to sever was the result of poorly maintained machinery, and nothing more. No one and nothing, except the luxury car, was hurt during the event.”

I switch off the TV with a jab of my thumb on the remote, my jaw grinding. The important thing is, no one was hurt. Or at least, not badly. Castle’s going to find it difficult to bend down for a bit with the hit he took to his back against that cab. But he’ll be fine. Callie is fine, too. Everyone is.

Honestly, not to discount Castle’s fucking Captain America super-speed and situational hyper awareness, it’s a miracle no one got hurt.

Especially because there's no goddamn way that was an accident.

The crane was far too over-extended, jutting all the way out over the street so it could be right over that corner. There was a popping sound, like a small explosion, that obviously severed the cable and the safeties.

And the ball was *much* too precise in landing directly onto Neve's car.

For all those reasons, I'm seeing fucking *red*. Yes, everyone's okay. But I'm done waiting around to see who gets hurt next.

In my office, I turn to Dorsey. It's good to have friends in high places, I'll say that.

"Thank you."

He nods. "Don't mention it."

That was my "nice" card. Now comes the harder one.

"Who the *fuck* is coming after my family, Jack."

He exhales slowly. "I don't know. But I've got a team—"

"Is it *him*."

He holds my cold look. "Cillian, I'm telling you. Seamus is fucking *dea*—"

The door to the office opens abruptly, and Hades stomps in.

I glare at him. "Can I help you?" I hiss icily through clenched teeth.

"Yeah," he snaps. "That was my fucking *sister* who almost just got turned into a fucking pancake. So yeah, Cillian, you can *help me* find the motherfucker who's responsible for it, so I can rip his fucking head off."

I smile darkly and nod at a vacant spot on one of the couches. "Have a seat, God of Hell."

When he does, I turn back to Dorsey. “You were saying?”

He sighs. “Cillian, Seamus is *dead*.”

“Then *who the FUCK* is trying to kill my fucking family!!!” I roar, slamming my fist down on the edge of the desk so hard that the bottles on the bar cart across the room jangle. “That was Neve’s car. *She* was the target. Just like she was the target at the reception, when that fucking O’Conor-themed cake with the blood red frosting, and—in case you’ve forgotten—a replica of his goddamn *tattoo* blew up in her face. And today, this violence almost got Callie killed, possibly Castle too.”

“Look,” Dorsey grunts. “We’re aware that Seamus had followers and groupies—both before and while he was incarcerated. Fans. Women who wanted to fuck him. I mean, we’re talking some serious Charles fucking Manson shit. But, guys,” he growls, giving each of us a hard look in turn. “Facts are facts. The guy’s as dead as dead gets.”

Hades drums his fingers on the side of the couch, grinding his teeth. “Then who the *fuck* did Una hear on the phone?”

Dorsey shakes his head. It’s a *ghost*, kid. He’s fucking dead and buried—”

“Then let’s dig the fucker up and make sure.”

Both Dorsey and I turn to Hades. Dorsey looks confused and maybe a little worried. I’m just smiling, because, well, I’m a psychopath, aren’t I?

“You’re not serious.”

Dorsey turns to look at me, expecting me to be on his side with this. Instead, I just shrug.

“You heard the God of Hell. Where’s this fucking grave?”

ON THE OUTSKIRTS of ritzy Montclair, in New Jersey, Dorsey is shaking his head as we all stand in the pristine white medical examination office of the FBI facility. We're staring at the metallic box on the autopsy table in front of us containing the remains of Seamus O'Connor.

Or at least it fucking *better* be containing his remains.

All we saw inside were mottled remains that were mostly bones—which was curious, considering Seamus has only been in the ground a few months. Bodies don't decompose *that* fast.

But then Dorsey explained that although a burial is FBI policy, it's not exactly a *nice* burial. The metal coffins have slits in the sides, and the bodies are wrapped in cloth soaked in a chemical acid—both of which are meant to speed up the rate of decomposition.

“How much longer?”

Dorsey turns to me and then checks his watch. “Not long.” He nods through a glass wall to where two technicians, in all white lab gear, are running some DNA tests on samples they just took from this box.

As if on cue, a light turns green in the other room. The technicians walk over to the machine and start poring over a data printout.

“See?” Dorsey nods. “Dead as a fucking—”

One of the technicians suddenly hurries over and opens the door between the exam room and the lab. He pulls his biohazard mask off, his face flushed. His brows are furrowed in confusion.

“How're we looking?” Dorsey grunts.

The man frowns. “I’m sorry, Director, but I think there must be some mistake.”

My pulse begins to thud. My jaw clenches.

Dorsey arches a brow. “Excuse me?”

“Are we sure we have the right casket, Director?”

Jack glances at me nervously before turning back to his technician. “Of course we fucking do.” He jabs a finger at the metal box, which has both Seamus’ full name and his burial plot number stenciled on the side of it. “See?”

“Doctor Lee,” Dorsey frowns. “I’m confused what—”

“What the fuck did your fucking test say?”

The doctor glances at me nervously, then at Dorsey, who swallows and nods quickly. Dr. Lee clears his throat.

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you, but this isn’t Seamus O’Conor.”

The floor drops out.

Oh fuck.

“It’s not even a male cadaver.”

So where the fuck is Seamus O’Conor?

UNA

“WHERE ARE you guys going for dinner?”

I shiver as Cillian walks up behind me in the dressing room mirror and leans down to kiss the back of my neck.

I’m getting dressed to go have that dinner with Gail, formerly Dr. Thompson, that we talked about when we ran into each other a few weeks ago. I know there will be some painful things that come up—my father, Finn—but I’m excited anyway.

“Her place, actually.”

“And where’s that?”

I smile indulgently, turning in his arms. He’s been more reserved and brooding than usual the last few days, ever since the horrifying accident outside the Drakos’ building.

“Is there something going on, or are you just particularly possessive this week?”

Cillian grunts, his brow furrowed. His lips curl slightly. “People I love almost got turned into pancakes the other day. I’m still thinking about that.”

People I love.

I bite my lip.

I wonder if I'm part of that group.

"She's in SoHo. Nothing sketchy. Number three-oh-three Greene Street, if you want to have it watched," I giggle.

He frowns, the gears turning in his head. "I think I actually know that building."

"Seriously?"

He nods. "Yeah. Dominic Farrell's construction company did that place." His brow cocks. "That's a *nice* building."

"Well, I guess Gail has good taste."

"That's an *expensive* building."

I roll my eyes. "I'm sorry, are you accusing her of something?"

He grins, shaking his head. "Just making observations, that's all." He kisses me languorously before he turns to stride away. "Oh, was there anything left in the guest room you wanted to keep? I thought I'd clear the rest out and give it to Goodwill or something."

I resist the urge to smirk at the notion of a literal murderous psychopath giving things to charity.

Obviously, I sleep permanently in Cillian's—*our*—bedroom now. Just like I have my side of the walk-in closet, where I keep all my clothes. But there's a few things that came over from my old apartment, and some other clothes Cillian got me when I first arrived here—random hoodies and sweatpants mostly—that I just don't wear or need anymore.

“Nah, it’s fine. Anything in there can go.” I bite my lip before I turn. “Hey, actually, Cillian?”

He pops his head back around the corner. “Yeah?”

“I wanted to ask you about something.”

He frowns and steps back into the closet. “Yeah?”

“That sketchbook of Finn’s,” I say quietly. “Do you remember the drawing that had my name on it, like, he drew it for me?”

Cillian smiles quietly, stepping closer to cup my face. “I remember it. With the dragon and waterlilies with *What does not kill you* at the top.”

I nod, swallowing my nerves. “Yeah, that one. I’m thinking about getting it as a tattoo.”

His brow arches. “Oh?”

I nod.

“Where?”

“My back. Like, my whole back.”

I watch his mind churn as he thinks about it. “Over your scars.”

“*Yeah.*”

He’s never asked me about them, and I’ve never told him how I got them. But from the way I catch him looking at them with anger in his eyes sometimes, it’s obvious he knows they’re from my father.

“Your scars are part of what makes you *you*, Una,” he murmurs softly.

“I know.”

“When I look at them...” his eyes darken. “I know they’re from him.”

I close my eyes. Cillian cups my face, kissing the top of my head with a strange sort of tenderness.

“*That’s* why I scowl at them,” he growls. “Not because I think they mar you or your beauty in any way. But because they make me think of a time when you were hurt, and I wasn’t there to stand in front of you.”

I lean up on tiptoes, kissing him first softly, and then much harder, before pulling away.

“And I love you for that—” My mouth clamps shut. My eyes go wide with horror. “I—oh—that’s not what I meant—”

“Do you?”

I swallow, looking away. “Cillian, I didn’t mean—”

“Do you.”

Fuck it.

“Yeah,” I snap, whirling back on him and shrugging “Yeah, I love you. And I get that’s not part of the freaking plan, and I get that you don’t—”

My words are silenced as his mouth crushes to mine, stealing my breath away as my pulse explodes in my ears. I melt against him as he kisses me slowly and possessively, until he pulls back with a slight nip to my bottom lip.

“I fucking love you too.”

“UNA!”

Gail beams, throwing the door wide and giving me a big hug. When we pull apart, she welcomes me into her—frankly—*stunning* apartment. I mean it's not Cillian's place, or Neve and Ares' crystal box in the sky. But it's gorgeous all the same.

Modern, light-filled, and *huge*. I mean, especially with it being in SoHo, where most closet-sized studio apartments in basements would run you three grand a month, easy. Modern and Neo-classical paintings adorn the walls, with a few Greco-Roman style statues on pedestals here and there.

Gail sighs, rolling her eyes.

“Okay, okay, full disclosure. I have family money. I gravitated to science and psychiatry because the mind fascinates me. *Not* for the criminally low paychecks.”

Her gaze drops to the little cat-carrier I've brought Bones in. “Ooo!” she squeals. “And this is the handsome boy himself!”

“I can keep him in this—”

“Oh, no, please! He can scamper around. I love cats, but I can't have one here. The co-op board in this place are tyrants, and the president is allergic, which means she banned all cats from the whole damn building.”

“I won't tell if you don't.”

She laughs. “Perfect. Can I get you some wine?”

“Sure!”

I let Bones out, who immediately runs off to find, I'm sure, a toilet to sit on top of. Then I follow Gail through the apartment into the kitchen. As we round a corner, though, my nose wrinkles suddenly as an awful scent accosts my senses.

“*Ugh*,” she groans. “Don’t get me started. That’s my upstairs neighbor. I have no idea what she cooks...or *brews*...up there sometimes, but it smells terrible, doesn’t it?”

I make a face. “It does have a smell almost like *death* to it.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “Well, it’s especially bad right here in the hall by my office. C’mon, let’s go get that wine.”

I follow her, a grin on my face.

A bounce to my step I’ve never felt before.

A fullness in my heart I’ve never once experienced. And another completely new feeling that’s been taking hold in me the entire drive over to this place.

Hope.

He loves me.

I grin like an idiot.

And I love him.

“Red or white?”

“You know what, Gail,” I shrug as I step grinning into the kitchen. “I don’t even care. Surprise me.”

CILLIAN

“FUCKIN’ bed rest, man.” Castle shakes his head, a deep scowl on his face. “Total fucking bullshit. I’m *fine*.”

“Yeah?” I walk across the floor of the spacious bedroom Castle has in the Upper East Side brownstone and pluck a football off of a little gold trophy stand on one of his shelves. I toss it up and down in my hand nonchalantly as I turn to him. “Want to go play a little catch out back?”

Much as he might want to, of course he can’t. Castle’s under strict doctor’s orders to stay in bed because of a fractured rib and some torn muscles in his back from when he yanked Calliope out of the way of being crushed alongside Neve’s car. But that doesn’t stop him from glaring at me.

“No,” he mutters. “But only because that’s a fucking collectible. Put it down, by the way.”

“It’s a used football, Castle.”

“Yeah, *used* by Emmitt Smith for the last few yards of his record-smashing eighteen-thousand, three-hundred-fifty-five career rush yards. Put it *down*, please.”

“The fuck is a rush yard?”

He rolls his eyes. “We really need to get you into watching American football.”

“Yeah, we really don’t.”

He sighs. “Okay, fuck this. I’m getting up. I’ve got shit to—”

“Catch.”

Castle lunges to the side, reaching for the football I’ve just lobbed his way. He makes it, but the look of bitten-back pain on his face and the groan he makes are unmissable. And he knows it, too.

“Prick.”

I grin, lifting a shoulder. “Stay in bed. Get healed. Nice flowers, by the way.”

I nod at the tasteful bouquet of yellow roses sitting in a vase next to his bed.

“Thanks. Callie sent them.”

I arch a brow.

“For fucking *saving her*,” he sighs. “Chill.”

“Women do love a hero.”

He rolls his eyes. “Shut up. She’s like twenty.”

“Says the man who’s all of thirty-two.”

“*And* in an arranged engagement with Luca fucking Carveli, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“I’m sorry, are you trying to convince me or yourself right now?”

“Cillian?” he growls. “Seriously. Drop it.”

I chuckle. “Pity they didn’t prescribe anything for that crankiness.”

“Yeah, nothing to do about that, unfortunately.” He grins. “So, where’s Una tonight?”

“Dinner with that doctor she bumped into with you.” My eyes narrow. “Look, I know you already looked into her...”

I have, too.

“...but?”

I tip my head back and forth. “Anything strike you as...off...when you saw her and Una?”

He shakes his head. “She’s a pretty open book, Cill. Smart, driven, had a great career as a well-regarded criminal psychiatrist before retiring. Married once, just for a short time. No kids. She was divorced before she ever even met Una and her brother.”

“She come from money?”

He shakes his head. “Nope. Her mother was a single mom who worked double shifts at a diner to get the kid into med school.”

My brow furrows. “The ex-husband?”

“Tax actuator in Missouri. What are you looking for, Cill?”

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

He eyes me. “You don’t like it when she’s off somewhere, do you?”

“Let’s skip the psychoanalysis, shall we? I promise, you wouldn’t like what you found if you took a skip down the path of *my* head.”

He chuckles. “Fair enough. But I guess you could say things are getting fairly serious with your wife?”

“Very funny.”

“I only half meant it as a joke.”

I clear my throat, turning to look out one of the windows.

“She makes the chaos in my head...” I shrug. “Slightly less chaotic. That thing in me—the violence. It’s quieter with her.”

For once, Castle doesn’t crack any jokes. I think he’s fully aware that this is some of the most emotionally open I’ve ever been with him. Possibly with anyone.

“Then I’m happy for you, Cillian,” he growls quietly. “I truly mean that.”

I smile out the window. Just then, my phone goes off.

“Hey, you home?”

It’s Hades.

“At the brownstone, I mean. I’m outside. You need to hear this.”

I frown. “Yeah, sure, come on up. We’re in Castle’s room.”

My men guarding the front door know Hades, obviously, and he’s on the green list. Not even a minute later, there’s a tap on the door, and it swings in.

“Go ahead,” Castle grunts. “Get in the bed rest jokes while you—”

“Yeah, I’m not here to make jokes or bust balls, actually.”

My jaw grinds. There’s a darkness and an urgency to Hades’ tone and in the grim look on his face.

“What is it?”

“You know how they say you’re supposed to let sleeping dogs lie? Well, I’m

shit at that. And this whole thing with Seamus has been bothering the fuck out of me.”

I can see why it would be *bothering him*. There are some slightly more disturbing theories that Dorsey’s floated out about why Seamus’s body is missing from the FBI burial plot.

Grave robbery. Fucking *corpse worship*. People who idolize serial killers have been known to steal parts of their bodies, or even their *whole* bodies, because of their fascination with them. There’s even a black market for this shit, and people *pay*. Dorsey said the FBI busted some guy selling the Ashville Axe Murderer’s dick on the dark web for a hundred grand.

And people call *me* unhinged.

“Look, Dorsey said all that weird graverobber shit has happened before, especially with high profile cases like O’Conor. Supremely sick, but not unusual.”

Hades nods. “Maybe. But it’s been bugging me, so I started digging into some other stuff with this Coal Creek place and called in a few more favors.” His mouth thins. “So, this Dr. Thompson... She gets permission from the DOJ and the FBI to do these little off-the-record psych evaluations of O’Conor. For her book, yeah? But the book was never published.”

Castle frowns. “Dorsey covered that. Bureaucracy, man. Someone new gets elected, who puts in a new FBI Chief, and things get shuffled around. They cut the program.”

Hades nods. “Well, then I looked into the good doctor’s assistants. There were three of them at Coal Creek.”

My brow furrows. “And?”

“They’re all dead.”

A dark energy starts to throb deep in my chest.

“One from cancer, so that’s above board—”

“Hades...” Castle frowns. “I’m a skeptical guy myself. But what are you talking about, a conspiracy of some kind?”

“Well, the second assistant was pushed out of a ten-story window in a robbery where nothing was actually stolen. And the *third* one committed suicide with a Magnum to the chest. So... You tell me.”

My mouth draws to a line and Castle’s face goes dark. “That’s a big fucking gun to shoot *yourself* in the chest with.”

Hades nods. “It’d be hard. I’d call it damned near impossible if you’re a hundred-and-two-pound woman, which the victim was—”

“Where are you going with his?” I growl, my heart thudding, my hand twitching restlessly by my side.

“Dorsey mentioned Seamus had conjugal visits, even after the whole psych thing got shut down.”

“And?”

“And I dug up—” he smiles and corrects himself. “Well, the middle-management DOJ agent, who *very much* doesn’t want his wife seeing the video I have of him and two extremely friendly male escorts, dug them up. But, here.” He unlocks his phone and shoves it towards me. “Conjugal visitation records from Florence ADX.”

“We’ve seen these.”

He shakes his head. “We saw the records of O’Conor’s visits from *before* the Coal Creek observations. These are from during and after.”

I frown at the black bars over the photocopy of a sign-in sheet. “With the names redacted?”

“My guy swore that’s nothing he could get around. Standard practice, I guess. Maybe there was a new bureaucrat at the prison. But look to the left.”

My eyes slide over to the column of dates and then times running down the side.

“What the fuck am I supposed to be looking at here?”

“The check in times.”

“They’re all the same.”

He nods grimly. “Same check *out* times, too. Which is less weird once you know that Florence has strict time-slots. You only get an hour and a half to get your fuck on during a conjugal. But it’s that same check-*in* time for every one that got my attention.

“Could be when visiting hours start,” Castle grunts.

“That’s what I thought, until I checked. The visitation window starts about two hours *before* those two-fifteen check-ins.” His jaw tightens. “And look at the blocked-out names. Every censor bar is the same length.”

“*Same name,*” I hiss.

Same time. *Every* time.

He nods grimly. “Cillian, those aren’t random conjugal visits from psycho fans. Those are *dates*.” He takes his phone back and brings something else up. “This is the best shot my guy could scrounge up. It’s from a security tape of whoever this chick was that kept visiting O’Conor.”

He shows me the clip. Yeah, we’re not getting shit from it. It’s blurry, and the

woman in question is wearing a brimmed hat, a high-collared jacket, and sunglasses. Castle nods his chin at me, and I pass him Hades' phone with the video clip on loop so he can see.

“Oh, and this Dr. Thompson?”

“We've been through this. Castle's totally looked into her. She's clean.”

Hades frowns. “Not really.”

I go still. “Explain.”

“I mean yeah, she's not a bank robber or anything. But, she's not *clean*. She was stripped of her medical license four years ago.”

Alarm bells begin to sound in my head. I glance sharply at Castle, who looks equally on edge.

“She retired, Hades. I looked into her—”

“*Castle*. I just paid an admin at her last position to unseal the fucking records for me. She didn't retire, she was fired. She also had her medical license revoked after a ‘psychiatric episode’ following a disciplinary hearing in regard to prescription drug theft.”

What. The. *Fuck*.

“She tried to sue them, and they agreed to drop criminal charges and seal everything if she backed the fuck off, which she did.”

My pulse is on fire as I yank my phone out of my pocket and dial Una's number. It rings and rings and rings, and then goes to voice mail. I try again, and the same shit happens. *Fuck me*.

“Oh, and I almost forgot.” Hades looks grim. “Coal Creek wasn't the first time Dr. Thompson observed O'Connor in a professional setting.”

“*What?*”

He nods. “He picked up a minor assault and battery charge something like thirty years ago. The mob paid for his lawyer, so he got it pled down. But he did do a stint in court-mandated psych evaluation. And take a big ol’ guess as to who his shrink was.”

“That’s impossible. They’d never okay Thompson at Coal Creek given that kind of history with—”

“Except she *wasn’t* ‘Doctor *Thompson*’ back then,” Hades growls. “She still had her maiden name. McCurdy.”

Every fucking alarm bell in the world is going off in my head as I smash the button to call Una one more time.

Then the floor really drops out.

“*Oh fuck.*”

I whip my gaze over to Castle, who’s still staring at the surveillance video on Hades’ phone.

“Castle—?”

“*Fuck me, that’s fucking her.*” He taps the screen, his face white as he turns it to me. “Cillian, that’s Gail fucking Thompson.”

Seamus’s shrink. Whom he knew before prison. Who started visiting him on a routine basis *in* prison.

Whom Una is having fucking dinner with right fucking now.

“Holy shit,” Hades breathes. “I don’t think she was just his shrink. I think she was in love with—*Cillian?*”

I’m already out the door, bolting down the stairs.

I think I just found Apostle.

I'm jumping behind the wheel of my GTO down in the garage when my phone goes off.

Una.

Thank. Fucking. God.

“Una, you need to—”

“Hello, Cillian...”

I go stiff. The voice is metallic and rasping, off-kilter and mechanical from the voice changer it's being spoken through.

“I swear to fucking God,” I snarl. “If you've—”

“She's fine, Mr. Kildare. They're all just fine. *For now.*”

All.

Who. The. *FUCK.* Is. “*All*”?

Blood roars in my ears, and my jaw clenches so hard it feels like my teeth are about to fucking shatter.

“*Listen to me,*” I rasp. “Who—”

“If you'd like them to stay fine, I think you know where to find me.”

“I'm on my—”

“Oh, and Cillian?” The voice makes a cold, robotic coughing sound. “Be prepared.”

“For what?”

“To die. Be prepared for everyone responsible for the death of my love to

meet their final reckoning at the gates of judgement tonight.”

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UNA

“YOUR ART COLLECTION IS *INCREDIBLE*, GAIL.”

I stare in awe at what is clearly a Warhol original hanging on her living room wall above the mantel.

Gail rolls her eyes. “I know, I know. It’s a bit showy. But, I always loved his work growing up. Something about the madness and the focus behind it. And now?” She shrugs eloquently. “Sometimes, you gotta treat yourself, right?”

“Right,” I grin, taking another sip of the fantastic Bourgogne she opened earlier.

“So...” she frowns. “Finn.”

I take a deep breath. “Yeah. He...had a lot of demons.”

“How was the service?”

I wince, looking away. “There wasn’t one. Or at least, there was a small one at the halfway house he was living at when he died. I...” I swallow back the tears. “I wasn’t there. I was still looking for him when it happened. I actually just found out a few weeks ago that he had even died, I had no idea.”

Gail’s face falls. “Oh my God, honey.” She puts her wine down, moving

from her seat in the chair across from me to hug me tightly. “I am so very sorry.”

I pull away, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. “Thanks. I might have one, actually. A service, I mean.”

It’s something I literally just thought of. But suddenly, I know it’s something I want to do.

“I think that would be lovely. I’ll be sure to come. He was such a sweet boy.”

I exhale slowly. “Yeah, he really was.”

Gail sighs, draining the last of her wine before she glances at my mostly-empty glass. “Can I top you off?”

“I…” I grin. “Sure. Thank you.”

“Excellent,” she beams, watching me kill the glass before taking it. “I need to go check on dinner anyway. I hope Shepherd’s Pie is okay?”

I chuckle. “I mean I’m Irish, so, absolutely. Our housekeeper growing up was like off-the-boat Irish, too. She made it all the time.”

Gail smiles. “Same. I mean, not the Irish housekeeper, but the Irish blood and appetite for Shepherd’s Pie, one hundred per cent.”

“I had no idea you were Irish!”

She laughs. “Full on. My maiden name is McCurdy and everything.”

“Wow, I also didn’t know you were married.”

“Divorced. Long before you and I met in Colorado.” She sighs. “All right, give me five. I’ll go refill our wine and check on dinner.”

I grin. “I’ll go find Bones and make sure he’s not pooping on one of your

priceless rugs somewhere.”

She chuckles heartily. “Oh, I’m sure that good boy is doing just fine.”

When she waltzes out of the room toward the kitchen, I get up and head out the other doorway into the main hallway of Gail’s gorgeous apartment.

“Bones?” I frown, peering into the guest bathroom and finding it empty. “Bones, where are you, you little dick? You’ve got her fooled into thinking you’re a good boy, but we both know that’s bullshit. Where are ya? I swear, if you’ve pooped on Dr. Thompson’s floor, we’re going to have some serious words.”

There’s still no answer. I check the formal dining room, the entryway, the guest room, and the bathroom again just to make sure. Nothing. I even gingerly approach what’s clearly the door to the master bedroom. Thankfully, the door is firmly shut. And while Bones does have a way of using his head to butt doors open, this one clearly stood up to the assault by his fuzzy little dome.

“Dude, *c’mon*. Where are ya?”

I’m heading back down the hall to the living room when I pause, my nose wrinkling horribly.

God, that smell is *really* foul—way worse than when I walked in. Like, I’m almost concerned for her upstairs neighbor, it’s so bad. I’m about to head back into the library when I glance to the side and frown.

“Dammit, Bones.”

The door to Gail’s study, which was closed when she invited me in earlier, is now ajar. Unlike the bedroom door, this one seems to have yielded to Bones’ patented head butt move.

Gingerly, realizing this is someone's private space, I push the door wider and step inside.

"Bones?"

I almost retch. The smell is almost overwhelming in here. Like rotting food, or spoiled milk. I gag, covering my nose with the crook of my arm as I peer into the dimness of the room.

There's a desk to one side in front of the windows, their shades closed. A table, a bunch of gorgeous hardwood and brass shelving. And, oddly, an ornate curtain drawn across the far wall, covered in Celtic-inspired designs.

"*Bones!*" I hiss. "Come on! We can't be in here! This is someone's private space, not your fucking litter box. And besides, there's no way either one of us should be breathing this air. Jesus."

On my knees, I crawl-walk over to Gail's desk and peer underneath it. "Bones?" Still nothing. Fuck. I start to stand. "Goddammit, you fuzzy fucking—"

Something glitches. Something chokes the air from my lungs as my mind tries to process what the insane fuck I'm looking at on Gail's desk.

Photos.

Of me.

Of Cillian. Of the two of us together—holding hands. Kissing. Each candid shot obviously taken through a telephoto lens from far away.

It's not just us.

There are other shots too, of Neve and Ares, both together and separately. Of Eilish, and Castle. Of Hades, Kratos, Callie, and Dimitra.

“What the fuck...”

A meowing sound behind me almost gives me a heart attack.

“Bones!” I hiss, whirling as my eyes stab through the dim light in the room, trying to find him. With the blinds all down, the room is bathed in shadows. “Bones, we have to get the fuck out of here, *now*. Where—”

I freeze when my gaze lands on a table next to the desk.

A table with a handgun lying on it.

A remote control of some kind.

A package of red cake frosting dye.

My pulse starts to race, my mouth going bone dry as I ignore every voice screaming in my head to run, and approach the table instead. My head swims as my gaze slides over the gun, and the remote control, and more pictures of my new family and me, and *a half dozen disposable flip phones* charging from a power strip, until it finally lands on the mask.

A numb feeling gnawing in my gut, my hands reach out, shaking, to pick it up. The top half is black, with two opaque mirrored lenses over the eyes. The bottom half is metallic, with what looks like a speaker over the mouth area.

What the fucking shit is this.

And what the FUCK is that smell?!

Something brushes my leg. I jolt, dropping the mask to the floor and slamming a hand over the scream before it bubbles out. I look down, my heart in my throat.

“You *absolute asshole!*” I hiss at Bones, who’s looking up at me, licking his lips. “*You scared the shit out of me!*”

Bones nuzzles the mask at my feet.

“Ew, don’t touch that,” I mutter. “It’s creepy.”

Bones meows. Then he sticks his face *inside* the creepy mask.

“Bones, *please*—”

I almost scream again when he meows once more.

Through the mask.

Through the speaker over the mouth that turns his sweet little meow into a cold, metallic, rasping sound.

Holy Christ.

Suddenly, I have a revelation, like I’m looking past the blinders for the first time. And it feels like a cold knife being dragged down my spine.

This isn’t Gail’s office.

It’s Apostle’s.

Bones pulls his face out of the mask and meows as I quickly reach for him.

“We need to get the *fuck* out—*BONES!*”

He darts across the floor to the curtain and bats at it, meowing.

“Get over here!” I hiss. “We have to leave, *NOW!*”

But he keeps meowing and playing with the curtain. And my head keeps spinning. And my mouth keeps growing drier.

And that *smell*...

“Bones!”

I'm getting tired.

Why the fuck am I getting tired?

"Bones! Come here!"

But he keeps batting and meowing at the curtain, over and over, until suddenly, he slips under it.

Fuck.

I lurch, terror clawing at me when I realize my feet aren't working like they should. But I grab onto the desk and stagger along the side of it, then the shelving, until I'm standing unsteadily in front of the curtain, where the smell is overwhelming.

"*Bones...*" I mumble. "*Bones, we...come here...*"

I grab the curtain. And with an effort that it shouldn't take me, I yank it open.

This time, I really do scream.

I scream a scream of pure, abject *horror*.

Because I'm face to face with the rotting corpse of my father, pinned to the wall.

"I'd hoped we could have a little family reunion."

I whirl, staggering as the floor rolls underneath me. I blanch and sob as I start to vomit. I lift my heavy head up, trying to wipe my mouth on the back of my hand as my bleary eyes lock onto Gail's.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," she says through the glazed smile on her face. "I hope this doesn't damage our relationship. I *am* your stepmother, after all."

I blanch again, heaving as I drop to my knees.

“*What the...fuck...*”

“Just some drugs to help you relax, honey, don’t worry!” she gushes. “Just to calm you! I know family reunions can sometimes be a lot.”

“*Please...*”

“You were such a good sport, doing all of those things I asked you to, Una.”

My gaze drifts blearily to the mask on the floor.

“I—I never wanted to be cruel, of course. But justice must be served. The people who slandered, and hounded, and killed your sweet father—my dear, *dear* Seamus—must be held accountable. And once they are...Una!” she squeals. “We can be one big happy family! You, and me, of course...”

She nods past me at the horror-show of the decaying corpse of my father on the wall.

“And your *dear* father. We can be a family again, Una.”

“*Gail...*”

“Oh, *come on*, Una!” she laughs. “It’s just Mom, now!”

The room starts to swim and fade in and out of focus. My pulse feels so, so fucking slow.

“Take a little nap, sweetheart. Pretty soon, they’ll be here. They’ll all be here. Then, once they’re—”

“*Who...*”

“Why, his killers, of course. Neve...”

Oh God.

“And that *horrible* Ares.”

Please no. Please don't come for me.

“And of course, that monster of a husband of yours, Cillian.”

A single tear drips down my face as my body starts to succumb to the blackness.

“They...won't...”

She laughs. “Oh, but of course they will! I guarantee it!”

I feel her hand jam into the back pocket of my jeans and yank my phone out. She holds it up to my face, and I flinch and go to shut my eyes, but it's too late. The phone unlocks.

“Now, give me a sec, sweetheart. This reunion is missing just *one* last thing.”

She touches something on the phone and brings it to her ear. “Oh, hi!” she chirps. “Is this Neve?”

“No...”

Oh my God, Neve...

“Hi, Neve. I'm a good friend of Una's, and I think she's having a few stomach problems. We were having dinner at my place and...yes, exactly.”

“You're...a monster...”

My voice is barely more than a breath as everything shuts down.

“Look, she can obviously stay here as long as she wants, but I'm afraid I don't drive, and I wouldn't want to put her in a taxi in her condition...Oh! *Would* you? I'm sure she just needs a hot bath and some rest. Of course. Let me give you my address.”

I start to cry as the grin widens on Gail's face.

“Excellent. Okay, Neve—oh, no, not *at all!* Of course, I’d *love* to meet your husband as well. I’ll see you both soon!”

She ends the call. Her gaze swivels to where I’m quietly sobbing on the floor as the darkness threatens to engulf me.

“Don’t you want to know what our little reunion is missing?” Her lips curl into a snarl. “A blood sacrifice.”

My heart wrenches as my vision dims to nothing.

“They’ll all come, Una,” she sighs quietly. “And then they’ll die.”

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CILLIAN

THE DOOR to Gail's SoHo apartment is already cracked open when I approach. Gun out, my pulse boiling like napalm in my veins, I ease it open with my foot.

The smell hits me first.

Rot.

Poison.

And death, hanging in the air like a thick, toxic fog.

But I ignore that for now as I move on. I walk slowly, trying to keep myself focused—trying to keep myself from wondering if Una is still alive.

She has to be.

She fucking *has to be*.

I clear the entryway, then the light-filled, windowed hall beyond before it empties into a tasteful living room with a huge art collection on the walls, complete with what's pretty clearly an original Warhol above the mantel.

My jaw grits.

Yeah, I think I know now whose money paid for all this.

Seamus’.

When he was in his prime as the Irish mob’s top hired gun, the man was making bank hand over fist. Dorsey even mentioned to me once that tens of millions were wired into offshore accounts and friendly foreign banks the minute O’Conor was picked up by the police. Hardly any of it’s been recovered.

Apparently, some—or a lot—of it has.

She loved him.

Gail, the brilliant young criminal psychiatrist who sat down with Seamus O’Conor in his court-appointed sessions, fell the fuck in love with him.

Gail, who years later petitioned the DOJ and the FBI to let her study him at Coal Creek.

Not to write a book.

To be *with* him. To do his bidding. To use her position to bring his fucking children to that place. So he could mold them, and train them, and abuse them.

That same Gail who channeled her fervor for the late monster Seamus O’Conor to become his avenging angel named Apostle.

Given that Seamus was an *insane* religious zealot who legitimately thought his methods of brutally killing the innocent somehow washed away the sins of the wicked—or who he decided was “the wicked”—Gail’s decision to pick the term for a disciple of Jesus as her nom-du-revenge makes perfect sense.

She must have used her vast library of audio recordings she made of Seamus during those Coal Creek days to painstakingly put together a voice emulator,

which she used to scare the living hell out of Una over the phone.

She terrified Una into hunting down me and my family by threatening Finn, who I'm guessing she already knew was dead. She rigged that cake to blow, to send the message and sow fear. She sent that wrecking ball crashing down onto Neve's car.

She did all of this because she *loved Seamus*.

For the first time maybe ever, I'm fucking terrified. Because I know what *I'm* prepared to do for *my* love.

And now I'm wondering just what Gail is prepared to do for hers.

I clear the kitchen next. Or, I think I clear it. I'm about to move on, when something catches my eye. I whirl, snarling, the gun coming up.

Bones meows as he steps out of the pantry.

Jesus fuck. I glare at him, pulling the gun back as I bring a finger up to my lips.

“We're in here, Cillian!”

The voice is cheerful and peppy. Near laughter in its delightedness.

No. Insane. That's what it really is.

When I was young, before Lorcan taught me about focusing and channeling my violence and darkness, and before my parents knew what to even *do* with me, I spent a few weeks here and there at quiet, discreet, expensive institutions.

I've heard people speak like this—in that near manic voice—more times than I care to remember.

“In the study, Cillian!” Gail calls brightly again. “We're *all* here, and we

can't wait for you to join us!"

All.

My teeth grind.

What the fuck is she talking about.

I move out of the kitchen, the smell only getting worse and worse as I approach a door that's cracked open.

"Come in, Cillian. Slowly, now."

I push open the door, and I walk into—

Jesus Mary and Joseph and all the saints...

The first thing I see, lying in the near corner, is Neve, hogtied and gagged on the floor next to a table.

Why is she here.

I want to *scream*. I want to scream at her, asking her what the *fuck* she's doing here too. But there's no time. I push the door further open, and something rips inside my chest.

Una is on her knees, kneeling on a high-backed chair—a gag across her mouth, hands tied behind her, tears streaming down her face. Gail stands behind her, a gun barrel jammed against the head of *the woman I love*.

Past them, even I flinch at the pure horror hanging on the wall.

The dead one—nailed to the wall in a Crucifixion of Christ pose, because of course she did—is Seamus. A very dead, very rotting, *very* decomposing and disgusting Seamus.

It's the very much still alive man, bound to a newer, makeshift cross *next* to

him on the same wall, that really yanks my attention.

Ares.

Oh, fuck.

There's a ringing sound in my ears and a numbness in my chest as I try and focus on *something* in this hellish room to ground me, with three of the people I love the most in this world in trouble. My eyes lock onto Una's—so big and blue and full of tears and pain and terror.

Mine green, narrowed, and full of vengeance.

“Put the gun on the floor, Cillian.”

My gaze snaps to Gail, staring lethally at me, completely calm.

“Now, if you would, please? Slowly.”

I grit my teeth, easing down to lay my gun onto the floor.

“Kick it over here.”

I glare at her.

“Now, Mr. Kildare.”

My toe connects, sending the gun skittering across the room to land by the legs of the chair Una's sitting on.

Gail smiles warmly at me, the perfect hostess. “It's so *nice* to finally meet you, Mr. Kildare!” Then her smile evaporates instantly, her eyes going dark. “You *snake*.”

“Gail,” I growl quietly, my eyes sliding back to Una's. “Whatever the fuck this is, it's not about—”

“Her?” Gail blurts, nodding her chin at Una. She grins. “Oh, but it is! You

see, this is my daughter!”

Holy fuck.

It couldn't be. And yet...

They met earlier, before Coal Creek

Before Una was born...

“Well, stepmother, at least.”

Thank fucking God.

Gail smiles a dazed, wild smile. “No one knew that dear Seamus and I got married while he was locked in that dreadful prison, just like Jesus in Pontius Pilate’s dungeon.”

“What do you fucking *want*,” I hiss. I glance at Neve, trying to tell her with my eyes that it’s going to be okay. That I’ll save her—her and Ares.

I glance at him next, and my brow furrows as I still.

“What the fuck is that, Gail.”

There are tubes coming out of Ares’ arm closest to Seamus’ corpse—three of them, pricked into him with IV needles and ending in three more needles dangling above the floor at the other end.

Gail smiles. “Precious life blood, Cillian. For my dear Seamus.”

I suddenly and horribly realize that I’ve *vastly* underestimated just exactly how abominably insane this woman is.

“That’s how I get him back, you see. By letting him drink the blood of the devil who killed him.”

Fuck.

My gaze rises to Ares' face. He's gagged as well—conscious, but only partially, and he looks bleary-eyed. I'm guessing the blood trickling down the side of his skull has something to do with that. His gaze finds mine, though, and that seems to wake him up a little. I give him a quick nod of my chin before I turn back to Neve on the floor.

Then violence surges through my bloodstream like a black tidal wave as I turn back to Gail, and the gun pointed at Una's head.

“Let her—”

“*Shut. UP!*” she screeches. “She will watch as her father is avenged and reborn! When the blood of *that fucking man,*” she sneers, glaring at Ares, “*flows!* The blood of the man who killed my dear Seamus! The beautiful man that I loved—”

“Seamus was a fucking monster, Gail,” I snarl.

“He was *mine and I loved him!*” She raves back. “And this piece of shit put a bullet through him!”

“*Love?*” I sneer, purposefully goading her. “You *loved* him? Your true love murdered and tortured *children.* Did you know that?”

“Lies!”

“No, *facts,*” I snarl. “That woman over there?” I gesture to Neve. “He had her tied to a fucking crucifix, ready to bleed her out until she died.”

Gail's lips curl. “She—”

“She was *nine years old,* Gail!” I snap.

She blinks quickly, but her eyes quickly narrow again viciously. “Seamus knew what she was, and what she'd become! Kildare blood is *poison!* And just like my love, I will *rid* the world of every single—”

“Lose the fucking crazy and tell me what you fucking *want*,” I bark at her.

My eyes dart to Una’s and lock on them again.

You will not die here.

Gail smiles thinly. “So impatient. *Fine.*”

She nods to the table next to me. I turn, my eyes dragging over the six cheap flip phones...the remote control I’m betting set off either the cake or cut the cable on the wrecking ball...a small first aid kit...candid photos of Una and I...until they land on the big, gleaming, deadly sharp, military-grade knife.

“Oh good, you noticed it. Pick it up.”

I stiffen, my eyes darting to Una.

“It’s not a trap, Cillian,” Gail laughs before jamming the barrel of the gun even harder against Una’s temple. “Pick. It. Up.”

My fingers curl around it. I heft the weight as I lift it, turning back to them.

“What the fuck is this.”

She smiles. “My sacrifice to God. The blood of the innocent washes away the sins of the wicked. And the blood of the *wicked* cleanses and renders undone the persecution of the innocent.”

My eyes stay fixed on her as the psycho Seamus-babble vomits from her mouth.

“I’ll bleed Neve to death later, as Seamus intended.”

“You go anywhere fucking *near* my niece and I’ll—”

“And dear *Una* over here...” Gail pushes on as if I hadn’t said anything. “Well, she’ll finally truly see. She’ll see past the veil you’ve put over her—”

“Listen to me, you crazy cunt,” I snarl.

I need to keep her talking. I need to keep her focused on *me*, not Una. Not Neve. Not Ares.

Me. Keep the rage on *me*.

Gail’s lips curl. “*Excuse me?*”

“You heard me. All I’m hearing is a bunch of re-runs of Seamus’ lunatic talk from a crazy bitch who smells like she’s been fucking his corpse in the apartment his blood money bought her.”

Her face turns livid. “You *disgusting*, vile—”

“What the *fuck* am I doing here with this fucking knife, Gail?!” I roar. “Unless there was more to your lunatic ranting and ravings. Because honestly, I wasn’t even paying attention.”

“You want to know what you’re doing with the knife, Cillian?” She smiles. “Goodness, that’s the easy part.”

Her smile widens to a sickening degree.

“You’re going to cut your own throat.”

Una *screams* through her gag, fighting to get free. But she’s bound tightly to the chair, and Gail just giggles as she presses the gun to Una’s head.

My eyes burn as they lock onto Gail’s.

“And why would I do that, Gail?”

She shrugs. “Because if you don’t, well...” She sighs, turning her attention to Una.

Fuck.

“Eyes on me, Gail,” I snarl. “*Look at me.*”

She doesn't.

“I *want* to spare her, Cillian. I really do. I mean, she's my true love's daughter. His blood.” Slowly, her crazy eyes slide back to me. “But you have to help me there. Kill yourself. Or I'll kill her. It's that simple.”

There's nothing simple about any of this. There are too many variables. Too many other potential and probable victims.

I breathe, channeling all the hate and the violence and the darkness inside of me as my eyes drag to Neve. To Ares. To Una, where they burn into hers.

The thing is, I *would*.

I *would* cut my own throat to save her life. But Gail isn't stable. Or remotely in touch with reality. And there's no doubt in my mind that she could very well kill the woman I love anyway.

I exhale slowly.

Then inhale again.

Focus.

I have to focus past an unfamiliar feeling surging in my soul while the concept of failing Una and letting her get hurt or killed edges insidiously into my mind.

I'm pretty sure that unfamiliar feeling is *remorse*.

My teeth grit.

Yeah, not fucking today.

I turn to glance at Neve, her eyes so big and filled with tears of pain and fear

as she looks at me. My gaze slips to Ares.

Then Una.

You will not die here, none of you.

Quietly, hefting the weight of the knife in my hands, I turn back to Ares tied to the cross. He's looking at me, and the knife in my hand, and I watch him slowly shake his head.

"Cillian..." he mumbles through his gag. Though it sounds more like "kuhleenn". His head shakes slowly side to side. "Shull kuil ushh hnnnywhay."

She'll kill us anyway.

Fire churns in my heart and my mind works as I heft the knife again.

"I'm afraid we're a *bit* pressed for time here, Cillian," Gail snaps. "You have five seconds. Do it."

My gaze slides to Neve, sobbing on the floor. Neve, who's been through so much. Who's already had to do this once—watch her husband almost die.

"Five."

My eyes move back to Una, whom I never saw coming.

Who changed me.

Who makes me fucking feel in ways I didn't think I was chemically wired to be able to feel.

Whom I love, more than I've ever loved anything, or anyone, in my life.

"Four."

Who will *not*. *Fucking. Die. Here.*

“I love you,” I murmur quietly to her, our eyes locked. She sobs, wrenching and choking as the tears wrack her body and flow hot and fast down her cheeks.

My gaze moves to Ares, and stays there.

This is a very bad idea. There are a million ways it could go terribly, terribly wrong. But I am not watching any of them die.

“Three, Cillian.”

I heft the knife in my hand, testing its weight, bringing the blade to my bare throat.

Gail grins maniacally.

“Seamus taught you well, Gail.”

She beams, her eyes shining with glee and pride and twisted love.

“You missed something, though.”

I start to grin like the fucking psychopath that I am.

“You’re trying to fight crazy with the *wrong. Fucking. Crazy person.*”

In one motion, I whip the knife back and throw it.

...Right at Ares.

He roars as it sinks blade-first into his thigh, blood spurting out. Neve screams into her gag, kicking and thrashing on the ground as Ares writhes in agony.

Gail turns white.

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!”

She whirls back to me, looking like she's about to explode. Neve is still screaming and sobbing.

“WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU—”

“*That,*” I hiss savagely, “is his femoral artery. You want a goddamn blood sacrifice to bring Seamus’ rotten fucking corpse back to life?!” I snarl. “Well, your sacrifice has about a minute before he bleeds out every drop of that blood you need.”

Gail starts to hyperventilate. Her eyes are darting all over the place, staring at me, at the dead body on the wall behind her, at Ares, at Una, Neve, back to me. Her shoulders start to heave.

“You—you—you...!”

“*Psychopath,*” I hiss. “That’s the word you’re looking for. And you’ve got about forty-five seconds, Gail.”

My eyes drop to the little first aid kit on the table.

“Throw that over here!!” she screeches at me.

“Oh, *this?*”

I smile darkly, lifting it gently. “This one?”

“NOW, asshole!!” Gail screams, shoving the gun against Una’s head.

“No problem,” I shrug, tossing it across the room where it lands at Ares’ feet. “There you go.”

Gail stiffens, her face white as she looks between me and the first aid kit ten feet away from her with Ares’ blood dripping all over it as he writhes and groans.

I can see the wheels turning in her sick mind. She’ll have to move the gun

away from Una to get it.

“Tick-fucking-tock, Gail!” I roar. “Twenty-five seconds! I dunno, he’s looking pretty fucking pale to me, you crazy bitch.”

“Shut up! SHUT. UP!”

“His heart is going to stop in ten seconds.”

She’s panting, her shoulders heaving as she hyperventilates.

“The blood of the innocent...wickedness. The sins of the world. And I shall fear no evil...”

The river of crazy words starts burbling out of her again, and my lips curl wickedly.

“TEN. FUCKING. SECONDS. GAIL! It’s now or never! If he dies, you can fucking say goodbye to your goddamn beloved—”

“NOOO!”

There it is.

That’s it.

That’s her breaking.

And suddenly, Gail makes her move. She bolts for the first aid kit. But I’m faster. And the second that fucking gun leaves Una’s head, I’m rushing across the room as fast as I can.

I hit Gail so hard, I feel something snap in her spine as we go crashing into the wall behind her with a sickening, wet *scrunch*-ing sound. Gail gurgles and chokes, and suddenly goes limp against me.

I frown, pulling back before I stiffen.

The end of the big spike that's been pinning Seamus's dead, decaying feet to the wall is now protruding clean through Gail's ripped-open neck. Her eyes go dim.

Then it's over.

It's all over.

I grab Una, yanking off the gag her as she sobs and shakes.

"Please!" she chokes. "Help them!"

I rush to Neve, but she wrenches away from me the second I pull her gag off and start working on freeing her wrists.

"GET ARES!!!" she screams in a voice that breaks my heart. "GET HIM! GET HIM!!" Fuck, she believed me.

"Neve, he's fine—"

"FUCK YOU!" she sobs. "GET HIM—!"

"NEVE," I hiss, grabbing her face in my hands as our eyes lock. "I'm fucking crazy. But I'm not *that* fucking crazy."

I stand and walk over to where Ares is writhing on the cross and yank his gag off.

"You fucking *PSYCHO* Irish motherfucker!!" he spits at me, blood still leaking out of his leg.

I grin. "I'll give you that one."

I don't give him any warning. I just reach down and yank the knife out of his thigh, making him groan as a fresh wave of blood spills out. His face is chalk white as he stares down at the wound.

“Is that seriously my fucking femoral artery!?”

I chuckle quietly. “If it was, Ares, you’d already be dead.” I kick open the first aid kit I threw over earlier, letting the band-aids, a roll of gauze, a pack of aspirin, and a fucking pair of nail clippers roll out. “And you wouldn’t get saved by a fucking band-aid.”

I glance up, grinning as I pat his cheek.

“Just a scratch. Toughen up, God of War.”

“Fuck you, Cillian.”

I chuckle, using the knife to cut him down, just as Neve lurches over, apparently having wriggled the rest of the way out of her own binds. She slams past me into him, holding him tight as her eyes dart to mine. She still looks pissed, which is fine. But her lips curl up a little at the corners.

I’ll take that.

Una almost collapses as I cut her free. I catch her in my arms, scooping her up against my chest as her arms wrap tightly around me.

“*I love you so much,*” she chokes, sobbing into me.

I hold her tight with one arm, using my other to help Neve prop Ares up on his one good leg.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

UNA

I DIDN'T REALIZE JUST how vile the air inside was until we stumbled out the front door into the street. I've been clinging to Cillian like a child since he freed me. But when he starts to help Neve lay Ares down, I let go of my grip to let him.

The two of them get the Drakos king down on the ground, Neve clinging to him and crying into his face as Cillian rips off the sleeve of his shirt and ties it tightly around the stab wound in Ares' leg.

"Just muscle and some minor veins," Cillian grunts quietly. "You're going to get ten stitches, a tetanus shot, some antibiotics, and a fuck ton of *great* drugs. You're going to be fine."

"What I'm going to be is fucking punching you in the fucking nuts the first chance I get, you fucking psycho."

Cillian grins.

So does Ares.

Neve turns and throws her arms around me, startling me.

"I'm so thankful you're okay," she sobs into my shoulder.

Something warm lights up inside of me. And some dark, frozen walls that have been standing guard around me for years slowly begin to crack, chip, and melt.

My family consisted of one person for so many years. Finn, who was as broken, aching, and lost as me.

I've never known *this*. And I want to know this all the time now.

Neve pulls away, crying happy tears as she drops to her knees next to Ares and pulls his head into her lap. I look up, the grin on my face so wide that it hurts as I stare up into New York City's night sky, inhaling deeply.

Fresh air.

A fresh slate.

A fresh beginning, a chance to be reborn.

Sirens scream, whining closer and closer. A white Range Rover screeches up, Castle and Hades tumbling out of it and bolting for the front steps where we're all standing. Behind them, another car skids in against the curb as Kratos and Callie come rushing over.

Strong arms circle me. I turn, tears running down my cheeks as I sob and look up into Cillian's impossibly green gaze.

He searches my eyes. "Are you hurt?"

"Not anymore."

His mouth crushes to mine, my arms circling his neck as the world around us disappears.

Two broken pieces, fitting together perfectly.

Two black, bruised hearts, beating together as one.

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EPILOGUE

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CILLIAN

THE BEDROOM I once kept in this house is currently being occupied by my bride. In Castle's room, I straighten my tie in the mirror before stepping back to check myself over.

Black tie. Check.

Black shirt. Check.

Black suit. Check.

There are parts of me that'll never change. There's no "fixing" or plastering over the darkness, the violence, and the monstrosity in me, and there never will be.

But there is a tempering of it.

The Japanese have an art form called kintsugi, which is fixing broken pottery using molten gold to fill in the cracks. The gold is then left to harden so that the final repaired piece has lines of gold snaking through it, making it even stronger.

That's Una and I.

I'm the broken black bowl. She's the gold filling in the cracks. Smoothing

out the jagged edges. Softening the viciously sharp points.

Making me whole.

No. There's no changing what I am. But the woman I love, who I'm marrying *again* today, doesn't want me to change, just as I don't want to change her. There's a blackness in both of our souls. There are wounds that will slowly harden over with scar tissue, and time.

Apart, we'll break, wither, and die. Or eventually succumb to our own demons.

Together, we're unstoppable.

There's a quick knock on the door behind me.

"Come in."

It swings open, and Ares limps in, leaning heavily on his cane.

"Happy wedding day, asshole."

We haven't gotten a chance to talk much in the last two weeks, since the madness that went down at Gail's apartment. But, as predicted, ten stitches, some antibiotics, a tetanus shot and some strong painkillers that made him say some seriously loopy shit later, Ares is going to be fine. He'll do some physical therapy for the leg, but it's not going to be an injury that sticks with him.

Believe me, I'm pretty good with human anatomy. And with knives. I knew what I was doing.

Well, mostly.

I smirk at him as I turn. "Nice cane."

He squints at me. "Don't even fucking start."

“What? It’s a very ‘Godfather’ look, Ares. And, I mean, you *are* the head of a criminal—”

“This thing is going up your ass if you don’t knock it off.”

“Are you making me an offer I can’t refuse?” I huff in my best Brando impression.

He rolls his eyes.

“Neve here yet?”

He nods. “Yeah, downstairs with Callie and Eilish.”

My niece is another person I haven’t gotten enough time with over the past two weeks, what with the chaos of dealing with the aftershocks of Gail, taking care of Una, and with making *damn sure* there’s no more “Apostles” lurking out there. It doesn’t look like there are.

“She still mad at me?”

“For fucking *stabbing me*?” he mutters before shaking his head and looking away. “No, actually. Not in the slightest.”

I chuckle as he sighs heavily.

“Because she’s as fucking nuts as you are.”

I arch a brow. Ares rolls his eyes again.

“Well, nuts-ish. Not *your* level of nuts.”

“You hope. Kildare madness manifests later in life.”

Ares shoots me another cold look. I grin.

“That’s a joke, by the way.”

“Not fucking *funny*, by the way.” He shakes his head. “I’m really not sure I was fully briefed on the perils of marrying into your family.”

“Yeah, probably not. Except you’re stuck now. You ever leave her, and I’ll skin you alive.”

We both grin. We also both know I’m not at all joking.

Good thing we *also* both know Ares wouldn’t ever leave Neve’s side.

He frowns as I bring up a hand, taking a slow pull from the little device in my hand and exhaling whitish smoke.

“You fucking *vaping* now?”

I shoot him a dark look. “Easy. I’m trying to quit the real cigarettes, and apparently this helps.”

Ares’s brows arch. “*You* are quitting smoking?”

“Apparently it’s bad for your life expectancy.”

“Just hearing that now, huh?”

I grin.

“Or is it that you’ve got something now you’d like to extend your life expectancy for? *Someone*, maybe?”

“That master criminal mind of yours doesn’t miss a thing, does it, God of War?”

Ares chuckles and flips me off. Then he hobbles over and claps a hand on my shoulder. “I’m happy for you, you know. I hope you know you deserve this. Una and you both do. Congratulations, Cillian.”

I dip my chin. “Thank you.”

“And, the second wedding is because...?”

“Because the first felt a little forced and stiff.”

“You can blame your fucking officiant for that.”

We both turn at the sound of Hades’ voice as he saunters through the door.

“And what, may I ask, is wrong with Elsa?”

He groans. “How is that I’m the only one who’s bothered by that fucking stick up her ass?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” Ares growls. “Leave Elsa Guin the fuck alone, man. I’m still working on wooing her away from Crown and Black to be our full-time Drakos family attorney.”

“Just buy an air conditioner,” Hades mutters. “Won’t cool the room *quite* as fast as that chick, but it’ll be a hell of a lot cheaper.”

Ares sighs, turning to me. “Seriously, I can’t with this guy, I’m out. Congratulations, Cillian. See you down there.”

I shake his hand before watching him hobble back out the door.

“Well, there goes his Olympic hurdler dream.”

I roll my eyes at Hades. When I see the grin fade from his face, I frown.

“What’s up?”

“Look, recent events notwithstanding, I usually agree that Drakos business stays Drakos business, and Kildare business stays Kildare business...”

I nod. That’s the basis of the truce between our families: we present a united front against attacks, but when it comes to business, we keep ourselves to ourselves, unless it’s a special arrangement.

“...but,” Hades grunts, “this might concern you, too.”

“I’m listening.”

“Does the name Leo Stavrin mean anything to you?”

My jaw clenches.

It sure fucking does.

“Of course. Top *avtoritet* in the Reznikov Bratva. One of Gavan Tsarenko’s most powerful underlings—”

“With a reputation of being about as fucking nuts as you are. No offense.”

I lift a shoulder. “Your point?”

“One of my guys is dating a Russian girl. Her brother is a foot soldier under Stavrin. Her brother is *also* a mouthy drunk, and apparently told her there’s been talk of making moves.” His eyes narrow. “Against *our* assets. Both Drakos, and Kildare.”

My jaw grinds. “Why the fuck would they be stupid enough to try that?”

He shrugs. “No idea. It could be nothing, just bullshit or vodka-fueled chest-thumping. But thought I’d pass it along.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Anytime.” He clears his throat. “Guess this sort of means our paths won’t be crossing again at Club Venom anytime soon.”

“I’d stab *my own* eyes out if they ever did,” I grunt. “But no. I’m done there.”

I’m done with a lot of my avenues and outlets. I don’t need them anymore.

He glances around Castle’s bedroom before his eyes land on the flowers still in the vase by the bed. Hades chuckles as he walks over and reaches for the

card. “Who sent poor widdle Castle flower—” His face goes dark before his eyes drag up to mine. “*Callie?*”

I shrug. “He did save her from that wrecking ball.”

“Cillian,” he hisses. “Keep that Captain fucking America bodyguard the *fuck* away from my sister, okay?”

I start to hum the chorus to Whitney Houston’s *I Will Always Love You*. Hades gives me a venomous look before he looks away and turns serious again.

“So, what do you want to do about Stavrin?”

“Honestly, I want to banish him from my fucking head today, because I’m getting married, Hades. *That’s* what I want to do.”

He smirks, nodding. “Fair enough. I just mean—”

“Hades?” I mutter, turning and buttoning my jacket.

“Yeah?”

“You think I could go get married now? Please?”

“Think you can resist knifing any of my siblings on the way?”

“I’ll do my best.”

THE INK on her back is beautiful. *Stunning*. I wait in the doorway, not wanting her to see me yet, letting my eyes drink in the tattoo for the millionth time since she got it last week.

It’s still fresh, and a little raw. But it’s finished. She did the entire fucking

piece in one brutal thirteen-hour session. Her artist was floored, telling her it was the most hardcore resistance to pain she'd ever encountered in her chair.

But that's my wife for you. Tough as nails. Unflinchingly brave. *Very* hardcore.

What does not kill you.

I grin as my eyes slide over the words above Finn's design. Over the dragon, and the waterlilies, and the phoenix, and the tarot card. If anyone could have captured Una like this, it's her brother. And of all the sketches of his I've seen in his book, this might be his masterpiece. It's so her it's impossible for me to look away sometimes.

Echoing our first wedding theme, Una's in black again. This time, the back of the dress scoops way down to her lower back, what with the freshness of her tattoo and all.

She looks fucking gorgeous.

My dark queen.

"Fuck!"

She whirls, her face white as she stares at me. "You scared the living shit out of me."

"You look stunning."

She blushes. "You're not supposed to see—"

"Except we're already married, my love."

"True."

"And I had to see you before we walk out there."

She grins. “Really? Why?”

“Because I don’t know if that ass is *nearly* bruised and spanked enough yet to be standing in front of an altar with me.”

Una’s face burns with a fierce intensity. Her teeth drag sensually over her bottom lip.

“We’ve got fifteen minutes, I think...”

She whimpers as I shrug my jacket off and start to roll up my sleeves as I approach her.

“Then you’d better bend the fuck over that vanity and lift your dress for me.”

“Yes, Sir—”

My mouth slams to hers.

Two black hearts.

Two broken black pieces, glued back together with gold.

The Dark Hearts series continues with Hades’ story in
Sinful Hearts.

Haven’t gotten enough of Cillian and Una?
[Get their extra scene here](#), or type this link into your browser:

<https://BookHip.com/QHRLTPC>

This isn’t an epilogue or continuation to *Vicious Hearts*. But this extra hot
“follow-up” story is guaranteed to keep the steam going.

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DARK KINGDOM

Thank you so much for reading *Vicious Hearts*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, the Dark Hearts series continues with Hades' story in *Sinful Hearts*. You can also get a glimpse of a much younger Cillian in *[Dark Kingdom](#)*, another dark enemies-to-lovers mafia romance, and book one of the Kings and Villains series. There's even a sneak peek of that book on the following pages for you.

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.

www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Dark Kingdom*.

Prologue

Adrian

Four Years Ago, Ascot, England:

Rain and fog shroud the cemetery, as if nature herself has dressed for the funeral today.

I look down numbly into the open coffin that cradles my father's body. It's dressed in a slate gray suit he never could have afforded when he was alive. Or at least never would have spent the money on, even if he'd had it.

Words like "alone" and "orphan" thud dully inside my head. First my mother, when I was four, and now my father, a month after my twentieth birthday. Her from the blunt violence of gunfire, him from the creeping assassin of cancer.

The priest finishes his words, and silence falls over the meager crowd of mourners. It's just me, the housekeeper of the family and estate my father worked for Mrs. Dubois, the groundskeeper Mr. Peddleton, and Chris, my father's friend and darts partner from down at The Spotted Hen.

A firm hand lands gently on my shoulder.

And my uncle, Jonathan. My father would have been enraged to know his brother was attending his funeral. But, you know, it *is* his funeral.

Sort of hard to protest the guest list.

I glance down at my watch—the one that Jonathan gifted me last night as we sat at the bar at The Spotted Hen over scotch. He and my father might not have spoken in sixteen years. The history between them might be the reason my father severed all ties with the rest of the Cross family and moved us away from Manchester for the job here in Ascot working for Jean Margaux.

But Henry Cross was still Jonathan's brother. And even a man as dangerous, connected, and powerful as my uncle can still feel grief.

My eyes drop to the watch again before I lift my head a little and turn to peer through the rain, looking for someone else that I was hoping would be here.

Someone I wish was here by my side right now above anyone else, even Jonathan. Someone I didn't ask to be here because, well, who knows why.

Ah, yes. Because I'm the "emotionally stunted son raised alone by an emotionally stunted father", as she likes to tell me with that sly grin of hers that sends me reeling and takes the wind out of my lungs. Because I know it comes from a place of humor, and love.

And love.

A love that was...one thing, and is now, as of two weeks ago, very much another.

Despite the rain and the fog, and Mrs. Dubois crying quietly beneath her black veil, and the body of my father lying before me ready to be put into the ground, I smile. It's not because I'm a psychopath. It's because when Celeste dances into my head, I become helpless. When I even imagine that smile, it's the only physical motion I'm capable of making, like my heart is too full to do anything but grin.

But she's not here.

I know deep down that's probably a good thing. If Mr. Margaux, the powerful and connected Frenchman who employed my father for the last sixteen years, isn't here for Henry's burial, his daughter being here might raise...questions.

Those questions might escalate if she were standing next to me, holding my hand. Which she would be, if she were here.

Questions along the lines of "why is Jean Margaux's youngest daughter wrapped in the arms of her father's chauffeur's son?" The boy with nothing to offer but grease-stained hands and a dangerous last name. The pauper with his hands on the gilded elite French princess.

There wouldn't just be questions. Answers would be demanded.

Celeste and I had always been close, to a point. Friends, to a certain degree, raised basically under the same roof—her a resident, and me the son of the help. But I think both of us always knew the truth, or knew it since we were old enough to realize what it meant:

Celeste Margaux and I were only ever “friends” because calling it more or pushing it any further would be dangerous. Because of her father. Because of the family my father came from, even if he spent the last sixteen years pretending otherwise.

And then two months ago, a week after her eighteenth birthday and two after my twentieth, we stopped being “friends”.

A single kiss more than decade in the making burned that façade to the ground, finally letting us both see what had always really been there underneath. And after that single kiss, there was no going back.

My blood hums against the chill in the air as my mind replays all the stolen moments over the last fourteen days. Gaspd kisses in the pantry of the huge Margaux estate while Mrs. Dubois is busy in the kitchen. Celeste's teeth biting down on my neck, trying not to scream as my fingers down the front of her panties drive her over the edge behind the garage.

Her body feverishly grinding to mine, our skin slick against skin, our mouths devouring each other in the gardens before dawn.

The smile plays across my lips once again as I lift my eyes to scan the road by the cemetery. She's not here. My smile fades, but I nod to myself.

She can't be here. We both know that would raise too many questions.

“You know you can't let her be a part of your decision, Adrian.”

I tense and slowly turn to glance back at my uncle. My father, when he *did* bring up his brother, always framed him as a savage criminal. A bloodthirsty, reckless force of chaos rampaging across Britain.

The man who stares back at me, the man I've come to know again over the last two terrible days, is anything but reckless or chaotic. Dangerous, of course. But one doesn't become—much less stay—the head of the Cross organization by being reckless. My uncle is a coldly calculating, highly intelligent man.

And now he wants me to sit at his side and learn the ways of the empire that bears my name. My father kept me from that world. But I know it's in my blood. I *know* that's where my destiny lies.

So therein lies the dilemma: stay here in Ascot, and step into my father's shoes working for Jean Margaux. Be a chauffeur and personal mechanic to the ill-tempered, coldly dismissive French businessman. Or step into the shoes I was born to step into, and learn how to sit at the head of the Cross family table one day, after the mantle passes from Jonathan to me.

That should be an abundantly easy choice to make. Stay in the house of a man I dislike as his servant, or seek the throne of power, wealth, and limitless possibilities at my uncle's side? But of course, it's not an easy choice to make at all.

Not when all my mouth ever wants to taste is Celeste's lips.

“Adrian—”

“*I know,*” I growl quietly.

Jonathan nods slowly. I can see in his eyes that he understands what's going through my head. Not just sees it, but gets it, too. I never told him about Celeste, but he guessed all on his own and spoke to me about it last night at

the pub when he gave me the watch.

There's a possible middle ground here, though. Since my father and I left Manchester, the Cross Family seat of operations has moved to London. And Celeste has every intention of attending Kings College, also in London, beginning with the fall term.

We can finally stop sneaking around. In a few short months, we can *be together*.

So it's okay if she can't be here today.

I turn back to the coffin, staring numbly at my father's body as Mrs. Dubois sobs beside it. Chris, my father's pub friend, shakes my hand solemnly and then turns to pay his last respects to my dad. He lays three feathered darts on my father's chest, patting them with a soft hand.

The sound of car tires on gravel has my heart jumping into my throat. I turn, and there's no stopping the grin spreading across my face as I recognize the Margaux family's black and silver Bentley rolling to a stop on the white stone drive a dozen yards away.

My heart surges. She came.

I pull away from my uncle and walk quickly through the drizzling rain, *sans* umbrella, towards the girl I've loved since I was old enough to understand what that really means. The tinted back windows roll down as I approach, grin on my face—

“Mr. Cross.”

My smile shatters, and my heart falters as the grim, lined, aristocratic and distinctively French face of Jean Margaux, not Celeste, greets me from inside the dark car. I stutter to a stop, at a loss for words.

“Mr. Margaux, I wasn’t expecting—”

“Your father was a loyal employee, Mr. Cross,” he says tersely. “He shall be missed.”

I swallow, nodding.

“Thank you, Mr. Marg—”

“I’m fully aware of who you *were* expecting,” he hisses quietly.

I stiffen. His eyes narrow, and his lips curl slightly.

“You were expecting a prettier face, no doubt.”

“Mr. Margaux—”

“I’m going to say this to you one time and one time only, you little asshole,” he snarls.

My eyes drop to his hand that is tightly clasping the diamond hilt of his cane between his knees. I suddenly realize he’s not alone. There’s a burly man in a black suit sitting next to him in the back seat of the car. And instead of a cane, this man’s hands are wrapped around the stock of an enormous, gleaming Glock 17.

“Stay the fuck away from my daughter.”

My eyes snap to his. But I don’t flinch. I don’t quail from this man, or fumble apologies, or beg for his forgiveness. I stare him right back in the eyes.

It’s not something a man like Jean Margaux is used to, and I can see it filling his eyes with anger.

“Sir,” I mutter back. “All due respect—”

“Respect, Adrian,” he snaps, “would have been keeping your filthy hands off

of my Celeste in the first place.”

“*Respectfully*, sir,” I growl back, “I love—”

He barks a cold, brutal laugh.

“Ahh, *c’est l’amour*, is it?” He smiles cruelly, sneering at me.

“Yes.”

He snorts.

“Sir, you can’t tell me to stay away from—”

“You think this is *my* order? That I am here simply to be cruel to you on this day of mourning?”

My eyes narrow.

“Yes, I do.”

He shakes his head.

“*Non*, Adrian. While these may also be *my* wishes, this request doesn’t come from me.”

He smiles triumphantly.

“This is what *Celeste* wishes.”

My heart thuds and my mouth thins to a line as I glare at him.

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Margaux,” I grunt. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to—”

“You’re the proverbial *other man*, Adrian.”

I freeze as his words hit me like a slap. Jean just grins at me.

“You were a fling, boy. A dalliance with ‘the help’. With the filth,” he sneers. “She’s not here because *you mean nothing to her*. She’s busy getting on with her real life.”

His smile widens.

“Getting ready for her big day tomorrow.”

He’s baiting me. But even as I hold myself back from asking what the bloody fuck he’s talking about, I can tell he sees that’s getting to me. Cracking me. Breaking me.

“Ask me,” he hisses thinly. “*Ask me, you little bastard.*”

I swallow.

“What the fuck is tomorrow?”

His teeth flash.

“Her wedding day, Adrian. She’s getting married.”

I stare. I want to see the lie in his eyes. I want to see it slipping out of the cracks in his cruel mask. But, the harder I stare, the more brightly the truth burns.

He’s not lying.

“Here. See for yourself.”

One of the hands on his cane drops beneath the window. It comes back holding a delicate cream card with gold calligraphy across it. I pluck it from his hand and stare at the words mocking me, inviting me to celebrate the marriage between Celeste Meline Margaux and a certain Amir El-Sayed.

Tomorrow.

Rain blurs the golden lettering and starts to melt the delicate card in my hands. I let it drop to a puddle at my feet as Jean begins to laugh.

“You were *never* the end game, Adrian. Ever.” His eyes glint at me dangerously.

“Now fuck off to your world of petty crime and nothingness. To your insignificant, miserable life, without her in it. You and your father’s belongings will be waiting for you at the gates to my home. After that, if I ever see you again...” He turns to nod at the silent man with the hand cannon next to him.

“I’ll have someone blow your head off.”

His eyes dart past me to the small gathering by the open grave.

“Now please tell Mrs. Dubois and Peddleton to return to their jobs immediately, if they’d like to be employed tomorrow.”

He shifts his eyes back to me and smiles thinly.

“Fuck off and fly away, little boy.”

The tinted window rolls back up and the car glides away, sending up wet gravel and mud that splatters my shoes and shins.

But I don’t feel it. I don’t feel anything as my heart begins to calcify, turning to stone inside of my chest.

“You’re the other man. A fling. A dalliance. You were never the end game.”

My lips curl into a snarl as I drop my eyes to the soggy invitation, welcoming me to *celebrate* the eternal bond of the girl I love to some other man.

My heel slams into it, crushing it to a wet pulp before I turn and walk in a daze back towards the hole in the ground holding the man who raised me, and

the man standing beside it who will guide me into the next phase of my life.

Without her.

Jean Margaux may think he took a win today. But he's wrong. My life will not be insignificant. It will not be petty.

I am destined to be a *king*.

And one day, he, like everyone, will bow to me.

Chapter 1

Adrian

Four years later, London:

I grunt as the alarm drags me from sleep. My brow furrows, and the tinge of a hangover starts to bite into me as my body wakes.

Christ, I can still taste the scotch on my lips.

With a groan, I reach over and slam the alarm off. My fingers find and stab at the button for the automatic shades on my bedroom windows. Slowly, with a soft mechanical hum, the blackout shades roll up, letting the sunlight in.

My eyes squeeze shut, wincing. But I have things to do today. And there's no rest, as they say, for the wicked.

Or the hungover.

I fling the covers back and then roll out of bed directly onto my toes and fingertips on the hardwood floor. My muscles coil and flex as I push up and down, pumping out a set of pushups that gets my blood coursing through my veins, chasing away the lingering remnants of alcohol.

Heart racing, I instantly roll onto my back, gritting my teeth as I alternate elbows to knees, feeling my core clench with each crunch. When that fresh hell is done, I roll back over for another round of pushups, then flipping again for more brutal crunches. Lastly, it's rapid high-intensity dumb bells until my arms and shoulders scream.

But at least the hangover is fading.

I pad naked across the elegantly-wainscoted bedroom on the top floor of my three-story townhouse. I can faintly hear the new Velvet Guillotine record blasting from my kitchen, reminding me that Noel crashed here last night after our night of apparently bottomless scotch.

But for Christ's sake, the man needs to *stop* with that fucking album.

The shower is cold, which has me gritting my teeth and hissing. But it's what I need, and the hangover retreats further as I rinse off. I step out to shave quickly—with hot water, thank you very much. The silver straight razor gives me pause, and I allow myself ten seconds of melancholy, remembering the man who this once belonged to.

It's been six months since Jonathan passed—cruelly and ironically to the same pancreatic cancer that took his brother, my father. But in the two and a half years he had me under his wing, I grew in ways I never imagined I could.

Now it's me who sits at the head of the Cross table. It's a delicate balancing act, considering I'm both the leader of a billion-dollar criminal enterprise as well as a student in my final year at Lords College graduate school of business.

There's a chance this tightly-wound balance is a contributing factor to my Thursday night scotch shenanigans.

I dress for the day quickly: dark charcoal gray suit, crisp white shirt, midnight blue tie and pocket square, dark brown shoes. By the time I'm heading down the stairs to the first-floor kitchen, my hangover is just about gone.

Velvet Guillotine's *Wreck Me Gently* seems to be on its fifth rotation of the morning as I step into the kitchen. Worse, Noel is bloody *singing along* to it in his goddamn boxers and t-shirt as he flips something on the stovetop, his back to me.

"This song? Again?"

He chuckles without turning.

"Bloody love this fucking record."

"Oh, do you?" I mutter dryly. "I'm not sure fucking Scotland is aware of that just yet, if you could maybe turn it up for them?"

Which he does. Wanker.

I groan and step past him, dialing the volume down on the speaker it's blasting from.

"Is there coffee?"

"Oh, *yes*, but of *course*, m'lord!"

I roll my eyes as he turns to flip me off and nod at the pot.

"Hot and strong."

"Lovely."

The smell of sausages suddenly makes my stomach gurgle as I start to pour a mug of back coffee.

"Oi, speaking of Scotland..." Noel turns to give me a look that says he's been

wrestling with the same scotch-based hangover that I am. “How was your head this morning?”

“Vindictive,” I grunt. “Yours?”

“A bastard.” He sighs, shoving his fingers through his dark hair. “Thanks for letting me crash.”

“Any time.”

It made sense. We’d been drinking with friends at the Deluxe Lounge, which is a stone’s throw from my townhouse near campus but much further to Noel’s flat. Plus, I’m starting to recall the end of the evening over more scotch at my kitchen counter once we got here.

“Were we the last ones standing at Deluxe?”

My brows furrow, thinking. “Thomas and Cassandra left early, I remember that.”

“Well, there’s a shock.”

I grin. Our two good friends are newly engaged and newly pregnant, and still as perpetually entangled in each other’s arms as ever. Lately, it seems when they come out, it’s only to humor us, and only for as long as they can stand not being alone together.

“Lars was chatting up that redhead...” Noel frowns. “They may have left together?”

I give him a look. He grins.

“Right, as if that didn’t happen.”

I smirk at him. “Surprised you noticed.”

“Hmm?”

“Seems there was something, or should I say someone, occupying your attention last night.”

He glances at me. “Look, I was just—”

“Noel, I don’t care if you’re friends or, you know, whatever, with Matilde.”

Maybe I should care. Maybe it should bother me more that somehow, Matilde Laurent, née *Margaux*—as in, the older sister of the girl who put a bullet through my heart out of fucking nowhere—has somehow become part of our little group here in London.

Maybe it *would* bother me more, if it wasn’t for the fact that Celeste and her goddamn husband, *Amir*, have basically dropped off the face of the planet somewhere in Dubai.

With their fucking *daughter*.

I swallow the hatred that boils like molten lead in my chest, waiting for it to cool to the edged steel it always turns into.

Matilde knows enough to not mention her sister around me. But, from my own digging—and I *have* dug—Matilde has also barely been in contact with her own sister for the last four years.

She’s also smart enough not to mention her father around me. But there too it’s the same thing. She and Jean haven’t spoken in a year, since Paul, her husband at the time, ran off with our friend Oliver Prince’s wife Vanessa. Apparently, Jean took that personally, and decided it was Matilde’s fault that her shit-head husband wanted to stick his prick in another man’s wife.

Jean Margaux: still the same son of a bitch four years on.

“Seems to be a good thing; she’s coming out more often now.”

“Good thing for you, you mean.”

Noel glares at me. I shrug.

“She’s a package deal, you know.”

“Yes, Adrian, I’m aware that her children aren’t an optional add-on.”

“I’m just saying, ‘step-father’ has a nice ring—”

“Adrian?”

He turns to glare at me. “If you want this breakfast on a plate instead of shoved up your ass, shut the fuck up.”

I grin into my coffee as he finishes with the bacon, sausages, beans, and fried eggs on the stove. Not quite a full English, but I’ll take a half any day.

I’m not just giving him shit for the sake of giving him shit. Matilde Laurent *does* come with two small additions: three-year-old Naomi, and eight-month-old Cora—two more casualties of Paul and Vanessa’s fling, along with Oliver’s three-year-old son, Jacob.

Noel plates our food and then pauses, a scowl on his face.

“When did Prince fucking leave last night, anyway?”

I sigh. Noel and Oliver are seemingly perpetually in competition with each other over *something*. And most recently, that something seems to be Matilde, given how they were both vying for her attention last night before she slipped out early to relieve her nanny.

“Late.”

I eye him.

“*Much* later than her, relax.”

“I’m perfectly relaxed.”

I roll my eyes.

“And he went home. *His* home. He has a young son, remember?”

“I’m not sure I could forget, given how many times he mentioned it to Matilde last night.”

I shake my head as I shovel food into my mouth.

“They both got burned, Noel.”

“No, *she* got burned. Oliver Prince is a dumb, greedy prick who lost his wife because he only gives a shit about himself.”

I glare at him. “Do I need to lean on Thomas to make sure you two get into the ring soon?”

“Please do,” Noel chuckles, gulping down breakfast before his brow furrows. He glances back up at me.

“I *did* appropriately bust your balls last night about completely ignoring the blue-eyed blonde in the black dress who was all over you, right?”

“You did.”

“And again I say, why the fuck was I the one sleeping over at your house last night instead of her?”

Because I don’t want blonde hair and blue eyes. I want raven hair and emerald green ones.

“Because I know how good a breakfast you can make, Ransom.”

He snorts, shaking his head.

“Look, I know you’re wound pretty tight what with school, and the business. But, Christ, Adrian. How long has it been?”

I stiffen.

Noel chuckles. “I’m being fucking serious, you know. When’s the last time you allowed yourself some female comp—”

“I allow myself exactly as much female company as I want, Noel. But thank you for your interest in my bedroom activities, you fucking creep.”

He grunts, turning to sip his coffee and letting the subject drop.

Technically, it wasn’t a lie. I *do* in fact allow myself as much female company as I want. It’s just that the amount of female company that I want these days is none.

I simply don’t have that urge anymore.

The only girl I ever wanted cut my heart out, burned it, and stamped on the ashes in front of me four years ago. My celibacy since isn’t any sort of bloody torch I’m carrying for her.

It just...is what it is.

I glance at my watch—the same one Jonathan gifted me the night before my father’s funeral—and frown.

“Fuck. I need to run.”

“Mind if I use your shower to clean up here?”

I nod. “Sure. But if you wank off in my bloody shower, it’s going to be war.”

Noel sighs. “Adrian, please.” He grins. “That’s what your pillow-cases are for.”

“Fuck you.”

He smirks. “What’s your morning like?”

“Advisor meeting with Professor Higgins.”

The funny thing about being at business school here at Lords College is that it’s only about twenty-five percent actual learning things. The rest is making connections and building relationships. And even in my world, that’ll be handy. Handy, if not necessary.

The professors know that, too. I mean, Higgins isn’t just some tweed-wearing schoolteacher. When he’s not advising at Lords College, he’s the Vice President of Rutger Capital, one of the largest, most aggressive hedge funds in the UK. He also knows *exactly* who and what I am. And he doesn’t turn a blind eye and “not give a shit”, but actually gives a shit precisely *because of* who and what I am.

Because the place where the gilded world of the elite and the dark world of crime meet is *money*. The marriage of sin. Higgins is my advisor because, one, he sees the business acumen in me, not just the hustler. And two, because he *also* sees the hustler. Rutger Capital knows full well there’s more than a pretty pound to be made doing off-the-books business with people like the Cross family.

“Don’t forget tonight.”

“I’ll be there.”

“You know it’s fight night?”

“Precisely why I’ll be there,” I grunt. “Let yourself out when you’re done. Cheers for breakfast.”

Then I’m out the door and heading across the street to the campus.

The “tonight” Noel is talking about is a meeting of the eight of us: myself, Noel, Thomas, Oliver, Braddock, Lars, Kristoff, and Maddox.

In the beginning, we were all mostly strangers—all first-year students here at Lords, with all manner of backgrounds. From wealth and privilege. From royal names and titles. But also from the streets and houses of crime—mafia, Bratva.

The common thread running through all of us was, and remains, Thomas. It was he who ended up being the lynchpin in this whole bizarre group that has somehow come to mostly call itself friends despite the different roads that led us here, and the different titles we bear.

It's why he decided to name the group what he did. It was Thomas who said that in all of us, all eight of us, there are both kings and villains.

Yale University has the Skull and Crossbones. The University of Oxford has the absurdly pretentious-sounding Bullingdon Club. Lords College has us: the Kings and Villains.

The biggest difference between us and those other prats? You've heard of them.

You'll never hear of the Kings and Villains.

Secret society sounds...stupid. Fellowship, as Thomas likes to call it, sounds ridiculous, like we're playing some stupid fantasy game involving hobbits and elves or some shit.

To me, the group just...*is*. Eight men with their eyes on conquering the world, who found each other through various connections to one of their own.

We meet on Friday nights. And every third or fourth meeting, such as tonight, we have a fight night amongst ourselves. There's no deeper message or meaning to it. It's not because we've seen *Fight Club* too many times. It's not some fucking blood oath or bullshit like that. Like the group, it just...*is*.

We box, one round at a time, winner fights winner, until there's only one left standing.

Normally, that last one standing is either Noel or Thomas. Noel, because his father was the relatively famous boxer Colin Ransom. Thomas, because despite his bookish accountant's appearance, he can fight like the bloody devil. *I can fight. We all can.* Braddock hits like a goddamn truck to the face, and Maddox is a fucking monster. Kristoff has almost certainly killed people with those hands of his. But Thomas, for all that he grew up privileged and gilded...he has one leg up.

He was trained to fight for *years* by Noel's famous father, when he was the Ashford family's personal trainer. That's how the two boys became friends, actually. It's also how—no disrespect intended—a guy like Noel, with the lack of money, influence, or power his family has, got into Lords College.

Because *Sir* Geoffrey Ashford, Thomas's father, took a shine to Noel right from the start. He always looked at him like a second son. Probably because his *actual* second son, James, Thomas's older brother, is a pretentious trust-fund douchebag. James will do nothing with his life, and his father knows it. Thomas and Noel, however, like the rest of us, will conquer it.

I duck into the faculty offices just as it starts to drizzle outside. My mind ticks, trying to recall the fight schedule this evening.

I grimace.

Fuck, I'm fighting Kristoff tonight. I want to smirk, wondering if Thomas did that on purpose—pitting the two criminally-connected ones of the group against each other. Me, the lowlands gangster, and Kristoff, whose way to Lords College has been paved with blood money, courtesy of his employer, the Bratva-connected oligarch Boris Tsavakov.

I'm still trying to calculate the best plan of attack for dodging that Russian

motherfucker's south paw, when Higgins opens his office door.

"Ah, Mr. Cross."

"Mr. Higgins."

He grins. Behind him, I can already see the paperwork he wanted to go over with me last week. It wasn't school related. It was *business* related.

"Shall we?"

"Absolutely."

Two hours and a very meaningful handshake later, I'm headed to my afternoon lecture. After that, I'm stepping outside again. It's raining again as the sun is going down. I mentally tick off the schedule for the evening:

Home, to change. Then dinner with Thomas at Chesterford's, our usual Friday night steak spot. And then to the Red Dragon pub, where we'll first have a pint and then head through to the private back room to which only we hold the keys.

Through there, it's down the stairs to the old sub-basement beneath the pub. And that's where kings and villains will collide for the evening.

The rain is coming down harder as I jog across campus back to my townhouse. My head is down, my eyes stabbing at the dreary darkness ahead of me to find the next streetlight around the corner. When suddenly something small, drenched, and gasping comes slamming into me.

I snarl, gripping the person by the arms, ready to shove them away—or fight them, if they insist upon it. When suddenly, we both stumble under a streetlight, and the glint of it on her dripping wet, stricken face takes the very

ground out from under me.

It's *her*.

For the first time in four fucking years, I'm face-to-face with Celeste Margaux.

And time stands perfectly still.

I've thought of this moment. I've envisioned it in my head a thousand different ways. In some of those scenarios, I hurl her away, or snarl in her face for stabbing me through the heart from behind. In other versions, I grab her, never let her go, and crush my lips to hers until all she knows is my mouth.

My pain.

My vengeance, in carnal form.

But now that we're actually here, standing right in front of each other? Now that I've got her in my hands, literally, for the first time in *four fucking years*?

I don't know if I should choke her or kiss her.

Time stops around us. My steel-blue eyes stab into her swirling emeralds. My lips curl, still unsure if I'm going to sneer, or slam them against hers.

"You..."

"*Adrian.*" Her voice breaks, croaking as her eyes widen in fear. Her fingers grip my soaking wet dress shirt tightly, clinging to me desperately like I'm a life raft in a stormy sea.

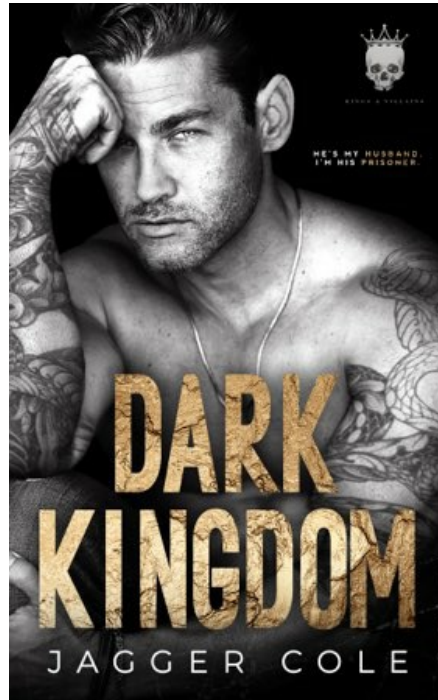
"What the *fuck* are you doing—"

"*I need your help.*"

She swallows, her face pale and her eyes impossibly wide as she holds onto me.

“Someone’s trying to kill me, and I need your help.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jagger Cole

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at

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