



# Bloody Knuckles

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**Description:** Bloody Knuckles

(Enemies to Lovers Forced Proximity Dark Hero Revenge Romance Forbidden Romance Protective Alpha)

She was my enemy's daughter. Now she's mine to break—or protect. Cormac Donovan: ruthless heir, lethal fighter, and Dublin's most feared man. My loyalty belongs to blood and violence—until Aoife Gallagher is delivered to my doorstep. Fiery, defiant, and impossibly tempting, she's collateral in a deadly war.

We're enemies forced under one roof, trapped in a dangerous game neither can afford to lose. Every heated glance, every stolen touch pushes us closer to the edge.

But when my rivals come for her, I'll burn this city to ashes to keep her safe.

She may hate me now, but soon, she'll beg me never to let her go.

**Total Pages (Source):** 52

## CHAPTER1

### CORMAC

#### BLOOD & MEMORY

The bell clangs, cutting through the underground space. Sweat and copper fill my nostrils as the crowd erupts around the makeshift ring. My fists connect with jawbone—a satisfying crack that vibrates up my arm.

Across from me, the rookie staggers. Fresh meat with more ink than brains. His eyes widen as I advance, circling like a predator. Four years fighting in Dublin's pits taught me patience. The art of pain.

"A Donovan doesn't lose."

My father's voice cuts through my skull. The memory flashes: twelve years old, my cheek pressed against concrete, garage floor cold beneath my body. His boot against my spine. "Pathetic," he'd said, grinding down until breathing became a luxury. All because I'd flinched during training.

The rookie spits a glob of crimson onto the mat. "Fuck you, Donovan."

He charges. Amateur. I pivot, driving my elbow into his temple. The impact sends him reeling. Another strike to his kidney drops him to his knees.

The warehouse trembles with shouts and stomping feet. Men wave cash in the air,

hungry for the finish. My crew presses against the ropes—Declan's voice rises above the din. "Make an example of him, Mac!"

I circle the fallen fighter. Teaching requires demonstration. My foot connects with his ribs—once, twice. The crack is audible even over the roaring crowd. Pain radiates through my split knuckles, but pain is an old friend. We understand each other.

The rookie curls inward, a wounded animal begging for mercy. I grant none. The crowd needs to see what happens when you face a Donovan.

After the match, Declan tosses a rag my way. His gaze locks on my hands. "Christ, those need stitching."

I wipe my face, tasting salt and iron. "Where's Finn?"

"Outside. News about the Gallaghers."

My muscles tighten at the name. A reflex born from years of hate. "Tell me."

"Their crew hit our dock yesterday. Torched three crates of product. Liam Gallagher paid us a personal visit, apparently did it himself."

Liam. That smirking prick with his pressed suits and university accent. Acting civilized while playing in the dirt. "How much did we lose?"

"Quarter million, at least."

The rage builds, familiar and welcome. Better than the numbness. I have an idea, that no one will like. "Find his sister. Aoife. Drag her to the estate."

Declan steps back. "You want to kidnap Patrick Gallagher's daughter? You'll start a

fucking war."

A smile tugs at my lips. "I'm counting on it."

\* \* \*

The manor is quiet when I arrive, stone walls housing generations of Dublin's most feared family. Security nods at me as I pass. My father built this place as a fortress—a monument to fear disguised as respectability.

In my office, I pour whiskey into a tumbler. The amber liquid burns a path down my throat. Planning a war requires clarity, even when vengeance clouds my judgment.

Finn enters without knocking. My younger brother carries tension in his shoulders. "Tell me you're not serious about the Gallagher girl."

I set down my glass. "You going question me now?"

"It's suicide. Patrick Gallagher will burn this city to ashes looking for her."

"Let him try." I gesture toward the chair. "Sit. Listen."

Finn remains standing. Defiance runs in our blood. "We can make him pay for the product in other, more rational ways."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

"This isn't just revenge." I trace the rim of my glass. "The Gallaghers need to understand their position. They cross us, they pay with what they value most. I happen to know what that is."

"And what does Aoife Gallagher mean to you? Revenge? It's a bit psycho, even for you."

The question hangs between us. What indeed? I've seen her from afar—vibrant red hair, emerald eyes filled with fire. At charity galas where our criminal worlds pretend we're civilized. In photographs from surveillance. A woman raised in privilege yet rumored to possess a rebellious streak that drives her father to day-drink.

"She's leverage," I reply, but the words taste like a half truth.

Finn's stare cuts deep. "This fixation with her?—"

"Enough." My palm slams against oak, sending tremors through the desk. "This is how I want to do this, and I am in charge."

My brother retreats a step. He knows better than to push when my temper flares. "The men are ready. Just... consider the aftermath."

After he leaves, I examine my battered hands. My reflection stares back from the window—hard eyes, jaw clenched tight. Father's training never included mercy. Mercy gets you killed in Dublin's underworld.

I pull out my phone, scrolling through surveillance photos. Aoife Gallagher entering a

club last month. Aoife arguing with her father outside their estate. Aoife laughing with friends, unaware of how close I am, that I have been watching all along.

My thumb pauses on a particular image. Her profile caught in dusk light, that Celtic pendant glinting at her throat. Something about her expression—defiance mixed with vulnerability—triggers an unfamiliar sensation in my chest.

I delete the photo. Sentiment is weakness.

The phone buzzes with a message from Declan.

Target located. Going for it?

Anticipation courses through me. I've wanted this confrontation for months. Years, perhaps. The Gallaghers crossing lines they shouldn't. Liam thinking his family untouchable. Their princess about to learn what happens when you're born to the wrong family.

My knuckles throb as I type a response.

Alive! Do not hurt her, I can't use broken leverage.

Strange, that instruction. Practicality, I tell myself. Damaged goods lose value as bargaining chips. Yet the thought of marks on her skin—marks not placed by my hand—ignites something possessive and primal.

I drain my whiskey, embracing the burn. Whatever happens next will reshape Dublin's criminal underworld. The Donovan's will reclaim what's ours. And Aoife Gallagher will pay for her family's sins.

Perhaps she'll fight. I hope she does. Breaking her spirit will be all the more satisfying

for me.

The clock strikes midnight. By dawn, she'll be mine to control, to threaten, to use as I see fit. The thought brings a calmness I rarely experience. My father taught me to channel rage into action, turn emotion into weapon.

No room for mistakes. No space for mercy.

## CHAPTER2

AOIFE

### REBELLION & ROOTS

Islip into The Fiddler's Hearth through the back entrance, the music pulling me in like a current. The pub sits deep in Donovan territory, which makes coming here a death wish, but the risk sends a thrill up my spine. My name—Aoife Gallagher—might as well be painted on my forehead with a target. Still, tonight I need an escape from the suffocating walls of my family's estate.

The ancient wooden floor creaks beneath my boots as I navigate past clusters of smokers. A traditional music session fills the cramped space—bodhrán drum setting a heartbeat as a silver-haired man coaxes notes from a fiddle that make my skin prickle. I tuck my copper hair deeper under my hood, keeping my face down.

"What can I get you?" The barman gives me a once-over, distrust written across his weathered face.

"Jameson. Neat." I slide a few euros across the sticky counter, angling away before he can put a name to my face.

The whiskey burns a path down my throat, warming my insides. I claim a corner spot, positioning myself with a full view of both exits—a survival tactic hammered into me since I could walk.

The musicians huddle together, instruments catching the pub's muted copper tones. Their music starts as a lament before building to a frenetic pace that sends electricity through my veins. For these stolen moments, I can pretend I'm not Patrick Gallagher's daughter, not the heiress to Dublin's most notorious crime family.



## Page 3

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My fingers find the gold pendant at my neck—a Celtic knot my mother gave me before illness took her. "Wear this for strength, a stór," she'd whispered. "When the world tries to crack you open."

As the band launches into "The Rocky Road to Dublin," patrons stomp and clap. I drain my glass and signal for another. Two hours of freedom before returning to my gilded cage—that's all I'm allowing myself.

"Got some nerve." The voice cuts through the music. A man drops into the chair across from me without invitation. His jacket shifts, revealing the outline of a pistol. "Coming to this neighborhood."

I keep my voice neutral despite the sudden rush of adrenaline. "I'm enjoying the music. That's all."

He leans closer, whiskey fumes mingling with tobacco on his breath. "Aoife Gallagher sitting pretty in Donovan territory. Must be my lucky night. Do they noy have music on your side of the tracks? Or are you just stupid?"

A cold rush floods through me. I calculate distances—back exit too far, front door now blocked by three men who weren't there before. My hand inches toward the blade strapped to my thigh.

"Tell Cormac Donovan to piss off," I say, injecting venom into my tone. "If he wants to threaten me, he can deliver the message himself."

The man's mouth curls upward. "Funny you mention the boss. He's real eager to meet

you. In person."

I scan the room again. Five men total, strategically positioned by both exits. All armed. No chance of fighting them off. I'm well and truly fucking trapped.

"Not interested in a social call." I stand abruptly. "Move aside."

"That wasn't a request, princess."

I fling my whiskey into his face and lunge for the kitchen. Shouts erupt behind me as I crash through the swinging doors. A cook jumps back, cursing in Gaelic. I knock over a tray of glassware—the shattering creates a momentary distraction.

The back alley beckons through the service exit—narrow, dark, promising escape. I burst outside, cold air hitting my flushed skin. Freedom waits just beyond the street corner if I can?—

A vise-grip clamps around my arm, yanking me backward. The stench of cheap cologne and stale cigarettes invades my space as a broad-shouldered man slams me against rough brick.

"Got her!" he calls out.

Instinct takes over. I drive my knee upward into his groin. He doubles over with a grunt of pain. I twist free, ready to sprint, when a fist connects with my jaw. Another thug appears, smirking at me through yellowed teeth.

"Feisty little thing," he laughs. "The boss said you'd be trouble."

Copper fills my mouth. I switch to Gaelic, words my grandmother taught me. "Go raibh na Sí ag do thóir!" I spit the curse at him. "May theféar gortachhaunt your

dreams, may the hungry grass drain your worthless soul!"

He strikes me across the face. "Speak English, you crazy?—"

"Enough!" A new man steps into the alley, taller and more commanding than the others. "Cormac wants her unharmed. You going to tell him that shiner, was you?"

I spit blood onto his polished shoes. "Worried I won't look pretty enough for your master's collection? He likes ring-bunnies, and cover models."

The tall man ignores my taunt, addressing his men. "Get her secured. Car's waiting."

I fight as they grab my arms, twisting and clawing. My nails rake down one man's cheek, drawing blood. Another curses when my boot connects with his kneecap.

"This is taking too long," the leader mutters, producing a syringe. "Hold her still."

Fresh panic jolts through me. "Don't you dare!" I thrash harder, screaming now. A meaty palm clamps over my mouth, muffling my cries. The needle pricks my neck, sending fire through my veins.

The alley tilts and swirls. My limbs grow impossibly heavy.

"Sweet dreams, princess," a mocking voice says as blackness swallows me whole.

\* \* \*

The rumble of an engine pulls me back to consciousness. My wrists burn, bound tight with plastic zip ties. My mouth tastes like ash and copper.

"She's waking up," a male voice announces.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

I pry my eyelids open. Three men in the vehicle with me. Dublin streetlights create streaks across tinted windows. My pendant presses against my collarbone, a small comfort in this nightmare.

"Where are we going?" The words scrape from my dry throat.

The driver flicks a glance in the rearview mirror. "To meet Cormac Donovan."

A chill runs through me despite the car's warmth. Cormac Donovan. The man whose bare-knuckle fights are legendary. Who ordered my brother beaten almost to death last year. Whose family has warred with mine for three generations. A monster with a perfect smile, and enough charm that no one sees the villain.

"What does he want with me?" I demand, though the answer seems obvious. Revenge. A message. Leverage.

Silence answers as we leave the city center, heading north toward Howth Peninsula. The Donovan estate. I've seen surveillance photos—stone walls, armed guards, security systems. A fortress that people enter by invitation only, but don't always leave.

I test the zip ties. Too tight to slip. The drug still clouds my thinking, making escape possibilities murky.

"My father will slaughter every one of you for this," I say, voice steady despite my racing pulse. "He'll hunt your families, too."

The man beside me laughs. "Your daddy should've considered that before hitting our shipment."

So that's what triggered this. Liam's operation at the docks. My brother's recklessness has painted a target on my back yet again.

The car slows, turning onto a private drive flanked by ancient trees. Terror mixes with anger in my gut as iron gates swing open. Beyond them stands a mansion of gray stone and crawling ivy. Security floodlights wash over manicured grounds patrolled by armed men.

We pull up to the front entrance—grand stone steps leading to massive oak doors. A dwelling built to intimidate and impress.

"Move," orders the tall man, cutting my zip ties only to replace them with cold metal handcuffs.

My legs wobble as I exit the car. "My family will find me."

"We're counting on it," he says, shoving me forward.

Inside, the manor reeks of leather, wood polish, and testosterone. Artwork worth fortunes hangs alongside medieval weapons. A monument to blood money and ruthless power. They march me through corridors past curious stares from Donovan soldiers.

We stop before imposing double doors. The tall man knocks once.

"Enter," commands a deep voice from within.

The doors swing open to reveal a study lined with leather-bound books. A massive

desk dominates the space. And there, looking like sin personified, stands Cormac Donovan.

I've glimpsed him before—charity galas, funerals, places where rival families maintain frigid civility. But never this close. Never alone.

He fills the space with raw physical presence. Broad shoulders stretch his tailored shirt. Dark hair, close-cropped at the sides, longer on top. Strong jaw darkened with stubble. And his expression—calculating, predatory, with a coldness that freezes my blood.

Fresh bruises mark his knuckles. The boxer. The heir. The blue-eyed nightmare my father warns about.

"Leave us," he tells his men without looking away from me.

"Sir, she might?—"

"I can handle one little woman." His voice brooks no argument. "Out."

The men retreat, closing the doors with a harsh click. Trapping me with Dublin's most dangerous bachelor.

I lift my chin, refusing to cower despite the flood of adrenaline and fear. "If you plan to kill me, Donovan, skip the theatrics."

One corner of his mouth quirks upward. "If I wanted you dead, you wouldn't have woken up. I certainly wouldn't bring you home to kill you, murder is messy."

He circles the desk with fluid grace, each step bringing him closer. I retreat until my back hits a bookcase.

"Then what?" I demand. "Ransom? My father doesn't pay?—"

## Page 5

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"Your father," Cormac interrupts, "crossed a line." He stops mere inches away, close enough that his scent—expensive cologne mingled with whiskey and something darker—invades my senses. "Actions carry consequences, Miss Gallagher."

I stare up at him, defiance masking fear. "Do your worst."

His gaze travels down my body with insulting slowness before returning to my face. He reaches out, fingers brushing the gold pendant at my throat. The casual possessiveness of the gesture sends an unwelcome spark through my body.

"Be careful what you wish for," he murmurs, voice dropping to a rumble that vibrates against my skin.

His proximity triggers something primal—a mixture of fear and unwanted awareness. His thumb traces my jawline where a bruise forms from his thug's handiwork.

"My men marked what's mine," he says, disapproval evident. "That won't happen again."

"I'm not yours," I spit back, hating how my body betrays me with a shiver.

Cormac leans closer, his breath warm against my ear. "Everything in this house belongs to me. Including you. You're in my house, you are very much, mine."

I shove against his chest, a futile gesture against solid muscle. "I'd rather die than be your possession."



He captures my wrists in one large hand, pressing them above my head against the bookshelf. His body cages mine completely, an overwhelming wall of masculinity.

"Death isn't what I have planned for you, Aoife Gallagher," he says, my name rolling off his tongue like a dark promise. His free hand traces the curve of my waist, a touch that burns through fabric. "Your brother stole from me. Now I'm taking something precious from him."

"Liam doesn't care what happens to me," I lie, trying to ignore how my pulse jumps beneath his fingers.

"Your family will tear Dublin apart looking for you," Cormac continues, satisfaction coloring his tone. "And when they're desperate enough, they'll agree to my terms."

"Which are?"

His hand moves up to cup my throat, thumb pressing against my racing pulse point. Not enough to hurt, just enough to show me he is in control.

"Territory. Compensation. Respect." His fingers tighten fractionally. "And maybe, if you behave, I'll let you go back to them. Eventually."

In this moment, looking into those merciless blue depths, I realize I've become caught between monsters in a game of power. But Cormac Donovan will learn—I'm nobody's toy. I can't be possessed.

With calculated precision, I bring my knee up between us, aiming for his groin. He anticipates the move, twisting to avoid impact, but it creates enough space for me to break free.

His laugh fills the study—a sound of genuine amusement that chills me more than

anger would. "I hoped you'd fight. Breaking you will be so much more satisfying this way."

"You'll never break me," I promise, backing toward the doors even knowing escape is impossible.

Cormac watches me with the patience of a predator who knows his prey is cornered. "We'll see, princess. We have all the time in the world."

## CHAPTER3

### CORMAC

#### COLLATERAL & CONFLICT

She stands across the study, wild and untamed. Ferral with fear, and anger. Aoife Gallagher—the crown jewel of my enemy's empire—now in my house, under my control. The taste of victory fills my mouth.

"Sit down," I command, motioning to the leather chair.

"I prefer to stand." Her chin lifts in defiance.

I circle her, savoring each moment. The whispers about Patrick Gallagher's daughter failed to capture her essence. Her beauty carries an edge—sharp cheekbones, full lips pressed into a hard line, hatred radiating from her. Not some fragile socialite, but a woman forged in the same hell-fire as me.

"As you wish." I return to my desk, pouring two measures of Redbreast. "Drink?"

"Go fuck yourself."

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A laugh escapes me. "Such vulgarity from the Gallagher heiress. What would Daddy say? Did you kiss your dead mommy with that mouth?"

Her nostrils flare. Every reaction reveals another layer—fierce, unbroken despite the terror she fights to conceal. The purple mark forming on her jaw sends rage through my veins. My orders were explicit: deliver her untouched.

"Your accommodations aren't ready," I tell her, taking a sip. "So, we have time to discuss our arrangement."

"There's nothing to discuss." Her voice remains steady. "You kidnapped me to provoke my father. How original. Hardly an arrangement, just predictable thug behavior."

I lean back, taking her in. The gold pendant at her throat catches firelight—a Celtic knot, ancient and intricate. She touches it unconsciously, revealing her attachment to it.

"Your brother destroyed property worth a quarter million," I say. "Debts must be paid."

"And I'm the payment?" She laughs bitterly. "Typical man, targeting a woman instead of facing Liam directly. Cowardly move."

Her taunt misses its mark. My reputation stands on direct confrontation, unlike her brother who cowers behind minions and schemes.

"You're insurance," I correct her. "A reminder that the Donovan's can reach anyone, anytime. Even Patrick Gallagher's precious daughter."

I rise from my chair and approach. She tenses but remains motionless—admirable, if foolish. Her scent hits me—vanilla and whiskey with an undercurrent of fear. My body responds with unexpected hunger. Power and desire tangling together in my blood.

"My father will hunt you down," she whispers. "He'll butcher everyone you care about."

"Looking forward to it." I take her cuffed wrists in my hand. The metal has left angry marks on her skin. Another failure from my men.

I produce a key, unlocking the restraints. "These won't be necessary inside. My security won't let you leave without permission."

She rubs her wrists, never breaking eye contact. Then, unexpectedly, her attention drops to my hands. Something shifts in her demeanor—a flicker beyond hatred.

"Your knuckles," she says quietly.

I examine them. Yesterday's fight left fresh bruises alongside older scars. White lines cross my skin in patterns no boxing match could create. They tell stories of bottles broken against bone, signet rings splitting flesh, cigarettes extinguished on tender skin. My father's lessons, permanently carved into me.

When she looks up, understanding dawns. For an instant, the antagonism between us transforms into an understanding far more complex.

I pull back. "Occupational hazard."

"Those aren't from fighting," she says, perception cutting too deep. "Not all of them."

"Enough." I turn away, discomforted by her insight. "Time to go."

I press the intercom. "Bring the car around."

While waiting, Aoife wanders toward the bookshelf, inspecting titles with false nonchalance. She's searching for weapons, exits, anything to gain advantage. Her resourcefulness ignites a reluctant admiration in me.

"Fan of Russian literature?" she asks, trailing her hand along the spine of *Crime and Punishment*.

"Dostoevsky understood moral ambiguity better than most."

Her mouth quirks. "A philosophical gangster. How unexpected."

"We all contain multitudes, Miss Gallagher." I move closer, forcing her retreat. "You'll discover that during your stay. I am not just a fighter—I have other talents."

A knock interrupts us. Declan enters, keys in hand. "Car's ready."

"Escort Miss Gallagher downstairs." I retrieve my coat. "I'll join you momentarily."

After they leave, I open my desk drawer, removing her file. Twenty-six years old. Master's degree in Celtic Studies from Trinity College. Fluent in Gaelic and French. Relationships with several diplomats' sons, none lasting longer than three months. Having met her, I now know why. Allergic to penicillin. Blood type A negative.

I know facts, but the woman in my study contains contradictions no dossier has captured—vulnerability beneath bravado, perception behind beauty. Something

unexpected stirs in me—a hunger not just to possess her body, but to unravel her mind. Unravel her completely.

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Downstairs, Declan waits by the Bentley, Aoife already inside.

"Any trouble?" I ask.

"Nothing major. She tried to bribe Jenkins with her watch." Declan smirks. "Worth more than his yearly salary, but he isn't an idiot, he declined."

"Loyalty matters more than money." I clap his shoulder. "You drive. I'll sit with our guest."

Aoife shrinks against the door as I slide in beside her. In this confined space, and her presence intoxicates. The car pulls away from the estate, passing through security gates.

"Where are you taking me?" she asks, breaking the silence.

"Somewhere secure."

"A dungeon? Warehouse? Shallow grave?" Her sarcasm masks genuine fear.

I turn toward her. "A residence befitting your status. I'm not a barbarian, Aoife. And shallow graves get you caught, six feet or more is the only way to bury a body."

Her name feels intimate on my tongue. She notices, jaw tightening.

"Not a barbarian, just a kidnapper, murderer, and extortionist," she retorts.

"Criminal, yes." I shrug. "But one with standards."

Dublin passes outside our windows—pubs spilling patrons onto cobblestone streets, bridges spanning the Liffey, history embedded in every corner. My city. My territory. Aoife tracks it all, mapping our routes, memorizing turns.

"Your father's men will tear the city apart," I tell her. "Wasting time and resources while we negotiate."

"He doesn't negotiate with terrorists."

"Every man negotiates when something precious is at stake."

My hand lands on her thigh, feeling her heat through denim. She flinches but doesn't pull away—a careful calculation that fighting me in a moving vehicle offers poor odds.

"Remove your hand or lose it," she threatens, voice low.

I squeeze instead, moving higher. "You're not in a position to make demands."

The car turns toward the river, approaching Ha'penny Bridge. We pull into an underground garage beneath a restored Georgian building.

"Welcome to your new home," I say as we stop. "Temporary accommodations until our business is wrapped up."

Security meets us, four men stationed strategically. Overkill perhaps, but the Gallaghers aren't known for subtlety. If they do find her, they'll come at us full force.

The elevator ascends to the penthouse level. Declan unlocks the door, stepping aside



for us to enter.

Aoife pauses on the threshold, taking in the space. Floor-to-ceiling bulletproof windows showcase Dublin's skyline, Ha'penny Bridge visible below. Expensive furnishings, artwork, luxury throughout.

"Your gilded cage," I announce. "Guards outside 24/7. Windows bulletproof and sealed. No phone, no internet, no contact with the outside world." I pause. "It's soundproof, so don't yell like baby."

She walks to the window, pressing her palm against glass. "So, I'm your prisoner indefinitely?"

"Until your father meets my demands."

She turns, assessing me. "And if he refuses?"

I cross to her, invading her space deliberately. Her breathing quickens—fear mixed with something she'd deny if I asked her.

"Then our arrangement becomes permanent." My voice drops lower. "But don't worry. I'll ensure you're well cared for."

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My fingers trace her collarbone, a possessive gesture meant to unsettle. Her skin burns against mine.

"Don't touch me," she hisses, jerking away.

I grab her wrist, yanking her against me. Our bodies press together, her softness against my hardness. "You'll need to adjust that attitude." I capture her chin, forcing her to meet me. "Your comfort depends entirely on your cooperation."

A pulse flutters at her throat. Hatred battles attraction as I hold her. The tension shifts, electric and dangerous. My cock hardens against her hip, and her sharp intake of breath tells me she feels it.

"I'll never cooperate with you," she promises.

"We'll see." I release her, noticing the flush spreading across her skin. "You'll find clothing in the bedroom. Dinner arrives at eight. Any dietary restrictions, tell Declan."

"I want to speak to my father," she demands. "Prove I'm alive."

"All in good time." I move toward the door. "Rest. Tomorrow, we can discuss your terms."

"Cormac." My name from her lips stops me. "This war between our families... people will die."

I turn back. "People always die in war, Aoife. The question is which people die first?"

Her fingers twist the Celtic pendant nervously. "And if I'm one of them?"

The question hangs between us, honest vulnerability piercing her armor. For a moment, I picture her lifeless—copper hair spread across blood-stained concrete, vacant and cold. The image disturbs me more than it should.

"That outcome benefits neither of us," I reply. "So, you'd best ensure your father understands what's at stake."

I step closer again, unable to resist. Her back hits the window as I cage her with my arms. "I can think of much better uses for you than a corpse."

Fear and disgust flash across her face, but underneath lurks something else—a flicker of forbidden interest her body can't hide. I lean in, my lips brushing her ear.

"Your father wronged me, Aoife. And I take payment in full." My hand slides to her throat, feeling her pulse race beneath my palm. "Every. Single. Debt."

I bite her earlobe, hard enough to make her gasp. The sound goes straight to my groin. For a heartbeat, I consider taking her right there against the window, showing all of Dublin who owns her now.

Instead, I step back, savoring the conflict in her posture—hatred warring with unwanted arousal.

"Sleep well. Tomorrow we can begin your education."

I exit before she can respond, instructing the guards as the door locks behind me. Declan waits by the elevator.

"Four-hour rotations," I tell him. "No one enters except medical personnel if necessary. Food delivered on schedule. No communication devices, no exceptions."

"Understood." He hesitates. "The Gallaghers will retaliate. Hard."

"I'm counting on it." The elevator doors close, sealing us in. "Their desperation will make negotiations simpler."

Declan studies me. "There's another way to handle this. Less messy."

I know what he suggests. A bullet solves many problems. But Aoife Gallagher dead creates more issues than it resolves.

"She's worth more alive," I say. "For now."

As we descend, her image lingers—defiant yet vulnerable, hatred masking unexpected depth. The pendant against her throat. The flash of understanding when she saw my scars.

I flex my damaged hands, feeling phantom pain where my father's ring split skin years ago. Aoife saw what few ever notice. The weakness beneath my armor.

That makes her dangerous.

For now she belongs to me. And I'll take pleasure breaking her, piece by piece, until she begs for mercy—or perhaps for something else entirely.

### CHAPTER4

#### AOIFE

#### TRAPPED BY FIRE

The penthouse suffocates me with its luxury. Three days confined inside these gilded walls, watching Ha'penny Bridge span the Liffey below, taunting me with freedom just beyond reach.

Cormac visits daily, bringing demands wrapped in business proposals. His massive frame dominates the doorway whenever he arrives, power radiating off him. Each interaction ends with his touch lingering too long—fingers tracing my collarbone, palm pressed against my waist, marking me as property.

But tonight, he made a mistake.

The guard rotation changed at midnight. The newer one—Jenkins—brought dinner without checking that the balcony door latched properly. A tiny oversight. A crack of opportunity.

I wait until 2AM, counting seconds in the stillness. Moonlight spills across polished floors as I slide from beneath silk sheets. My captors think I'm broken after days of confinement. They're wrong.

The balcony access opens with barely a whisper. Cold night air rushes against me as I step outside. Ten stories separate me from the street, a deadly drop with no safe way

down. But I didn't earn my reputation as Patrick Gallagher's wild child without learning a few tricks.

The neighboring building stands just six feet from the edge of my balcony. Between them runs a maintenance ladder, partially hidden by decorative stonework. Spotted during my daily observation of guard patrols, and changeovers.

I've changed into black jeans and a dark sweater stolen from the closet. Not ideal climbing gear, but better than the ridiculous dresses Cormac provided. The bastard enjoys watching me in them too much.

My pendant remains tucked beneath my sweater, its familiar weight against my skin the only comfort in this nightmare. Strength, a stór, my mother's voice whispers through memory.

I swing one leg over the railing, the metal cold against my palms. The drop below sends vertigo rushing through me, but I push it away. Fear is a luxury I can't afford.

The gap to the maintenance ladder looks wider from here. Six feet of empty air between me and the first rung. One mistake means death.

Worth it to escape Cormac's possession.

I take three deep breaths, position myself, and leap.

My hands connect with metal, impact jarring through my arms. For one terrifying moment, my grip falters—then holds. I hang suspended, adrenaline surging through my veins.

The descent takes forever, each rung a triumph against gravity and panic. My muscles scream in protest. The ground approaches inch by agonizing inch until my feet touch

blessed concrete.

Temple Bar district buzzes with nightlife even at this hour. Drunken tourists and locals spill from pubs, their laughter a cover for my escape. I pull my hood up, keeping my head down as I weave through the crowd. This feels too easy.

Cormac's men will discover my absence soon. I need distance and a phone. My father's number is seared into my memory—one call and his soldiers will descend on Dublin like the wrath of ancient gods.

I duck into a narrow alley off Fleet Street, brick walls rising on either side. The shortcut should lead toward the main road where I can flag a taxi or find help.

Halfway down the passage, footsteps echo behind me.

I freeze, instinct recognizing danger before conscious thought catches up. The footfalls—deliberate, measured, familiar. Not the hurried pace of a drunk tourist or the stumble of a homeless person.

The stride of a predator.

I break into a sprint, boots slapping against wet cobblestones. The alley stretches endlessly, shadows swallowing any hope of sanctuary. Behind me, the footsteps quicken.

A figure steps out from a connecting passage ahead, blocking my path. Broad-shouldered, tall, unmistakable even in darkness.

Cormac.

I skid to halt, spinning to retreat, only to find Declan emerging from the direction I

came. Trapped between them.

"Impressive," Cormac says, voice carrying in the narrow space. "Six minutes from alarm to finding you. A new record."

My fists clench at my sides. "How?—"



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

"Tracking chip in your pendant." He approaches, each step unhurried, confident. "Did you think I wouldn't take precautions with something so valuable to you?"

Rage boils through me. The one item connecting me to my mother, violated. Used against me.

"You fucking bastard!" I lunge at him, fists swinging toward him.

He catches my wrists with insulting ease, spinning me against the brick wall. My back hits rough stone as he presses his body against mine, pinning me in place.

"Such fire," he murmurs, his breath hot on my neck. "Most would be grateful I didn't put a chip under their skin. Nasty little things to cut out, bleed like hell."

"I'd rather die than go back to your cage." The words squeeze through clenched teeth.

His laugh vibrates against me where our bodies connect. "Death isn't in your future, Aoife. Not until I've gotten what I want."

"My father will never give you what you want."

Cormac hovers mere inches away. "What makes you think it's only your father's submission I'm after?"

Heat floods my center at his implication. His grip shifts, one large hand now holding both my wrists above my head against the wall. The other traces down my jawline to my throat, resting there with just enough pressure to remind me of my vulnerability.

"Declan," he says without looking away from me, "give us a moment."

"Boss—"

"Now."

Footsteps retreat, leaving us alone in the dark alleyway. Music from nearby pubs provides a distant soundtrack to our standoff.

"You're more trouble than I anticipated," Cormac says, voice dropping lower. "I admire resourcefulness, but your defiance requires correction."

"Fuck your correction." I struggle against his hold, accomplishing nothing except pressing our bodies closer together.

His mouth curves wickedly. "Such vile language from that pretty mouth."

"Let me go, or I'll show you what else this mouth can do." I bare my teeth. "I'll rip your throat out."

Something dangerous flashes across his face—amusement mixed with genuine intrigue. "You and I are more alike than you admit. Both born into violence. Both trapped by family legacy."

"We are nothing alike." The accusation burns worse than his restraint. "You're a monster."

"And what are the Gallaghers? Saints?" His fingers tighten fractionally on my throat. "Your father ordered the execution of the O'Malley family. Even their children."

The truth of his words cuts deep. My family's business drips with blood, same as his.

"At least I don't kidnap women to settle scores," I hiss.

His thumb traces my lower lip, the gesture strangely intimate amid our battle. "No. You just profit from the protection your last name provides while pretending moral superiority."

"Remove your hands before I remove them permanently."

"Make me."

The challenge hangs between us, electric and dangerous. Something shifts in the atmosphere—hatred warping into a different kind of heat. His body presses harder against mine, and I become acutely aware of every point of contact. The muscled thigh between my legs. His hips aligned with mine. The unmistakable hardness pressed against my stomach.

"This exciting you, Donovan?" I taunt, desperate to regain control of the situation. "Getting off on forcing yourself on women?"

His free hand tangles in my hair, yanking my head back. "I've never forced a woman. And when you come to my bed, Aoife Gallagher, it will be because you're begging for it."

"Never."

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

The word barely leaves my mouth before his lips crash down on mine. The kiss holds nothing of gentleness or romance—it's possession, dominance, punishment. His mouth demands submission, tongue invading when I gasp in shock.

I should bite him. Fight him. Instead, my body betrays me. Liquid fire pours through my veins, pooling low in my belly and between my thighs. The kiss transforms, rage melting into something more primal.

I kiss him back with ferocity, channeling days of fear and hatred into the connection. His groan vibrates against my lips as his hand releases my wrists to grip my waist instead. My freed hands find his shoulders, nails digging through expensive fabric.

Our mouths battle for control, neither yielding. He tastes of whiskey and danger, intoxicating in the worst way. His tongue strokes against mine, demanding responses I can't fight. His hand slides lower, gripping my ass, pulling me tighter against his erection.

The hard length of him pressed against me sends a forbidden thrill racing through my core. His teeth capture my bottom lip, biting just hard enough to blur pleasure with pain. My nipples tighten against my sweater, my treacherous body responding to my captor's touch.

His mouth moves to my neck, hot and demanding. "You taste like rebellion," he murmurs against my skin, before sucking hard enough to leave a mark.

The claiming gesture shatters my momentary madness. I tear away, shoving against his chest.

"No." My voice comes ragged, betraying my response. "This doesn't change anything."

Cormac's lips curve with lust and triumph. "It changes everything, princess. Now I know how good that defiance tastes. How your body responds with lust when you surrender, even for seconds."

"I didn't surrender."

"No?" His thumb wipes across my swollen bottom lip. "The wetness between your thighs disagrees."

Shame and unwanted desire war within me. I turn away, refusing to acknowledge the truth in his words. The kiss revealed something I've fought to deny—raw attraction to the man who holds me captive. Stockholm syndrome in record time.

"Take me back if you must," I whisper, defeated for now but not broken. "But don't pretend this was anything but a power play."

"Oh, it's all about power." Cormac steps back, creating space between us. "But not the kind you think."

He wraps his fingers around my upper arm, grip firm but not bruising. "Let's go. Unless you'd prefer I carry you through Temple Bar for all of Dublin to see?"

The walk back to the penthouse passes in tense silence. Not the elevator, but stairs through a service entrance—another security measure I hadn't discovered. With each step, my failure weighs heavier. So close to freedom, only to be dragged back by the devil himself.

Inside the apartment, Cormac dismisses the guards with a gesture. The door locks,

sealing us in together.

"You'll find security upgraded," he says, removing his coat. "Your little adventure exposed weaknesses in our system. They won't recur."

"Congratulations." I cross my arms. "You've built a better prison."

"A prison you'll learn to appreciate." He approaches, backing me against the wall. "Especially compared to alternatives."

His proximity reignites the unwanted heat from the alley. My body remembers his kiss, craves more despite my mind's protest. The space between us vibrates with tension.

"I hate you," I whisper, the declaration as much for myself as for him.

"Hate me all you want." His palm flattens against the wall beside my head. "But don't lie to yourself about what happened tonight."

"A mistake. Nothing more."

His laughter holds no humor. "No, Aoife. What happened was inevitable. Fire recognizes fire."

He leans closer, lips nearly brushing mine again. I turn away, denying him.

"Rest while you can," he murmurs against my ear instead, his breath sending unwanted shivers down my spine. "Tomorrow, your father will be given my terms. Then we'll see what your freedom is truly worth to the Gallagher empire."

His hand trails down my side, stopping at my hip. "And when I finally take you to my

bed—and I will—it won't be because of Stockholm syndrome. It'll be because you can't deny this current between us any longer. You will beg me, on your knees."

He steps back, his composure perfect despite the hardness still visible against his trousers. The evidence of desire he makes no attempt to hide.

"Sweet dreams. Dream of me."

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

After he leaves, I sink to the floor, touching my bruised lips. The pendant at my throat now feels like a collar, binding me to Cormac.

Tonight changed nothing and everything. My captivity continues, but the prison walls have closed in more. The most dangerous cage isn't this penthouse, but the unwanted desire Cormac ignited within me—a fire that threatens to consume everything I believed about myself.

My thighs press together, seeking relief from the ache he created. I despise my weakness, my body's betrayal. Worse still, I know with terrible certainty that when he touches me again—and he will—I might not have the strength to stop him. Or to stop myself.

### CHAPTER5

#### CORMAC

#### LOYALTY'S CHAINS

Islam the door of my private quarters, whiskey in hand, the taste of Aoife Gallagher still on my tongue. Her fire burns through my veins hours after I left her in that penthouse. The way she fought me. The way she melted.

Fuck.

This wasn't part of the plan. Taking her was business—leverage against Patrick, punishment for Liam's theft. Not... this. Not the hunger clawing at my insides.



I drain the glass, welcoming the burn. The clock reads 3:47 AM. Sleep seems impossible with her phantom presence haunting me. The softness of her skin. The sound she made when my teeth grazed her neck. The way her body betrayed her hatred.

"Get it together," I mutter, pouring another drink.

My phone buzzes. Declan.

All quiet at the penthouse. She tried the balcony door twice more. Security holding.

Smart girl. Persistent. I admire her refusal to surrender, even as it complicates matters.

I type:

Double the night guard. She's resourceful.

The Bentley brought me back to Donovan Manor rather than my Dublin apartment. Distance from Aoife seemed necessary after the alley incident. Another minute pressed against her, and I might have taken her against that brick wall. The thought sends blood rushing south again.

I unbutton my shirt, tossing it aside. The mirror catches my attention—scars crisscrossing my torso—souvenirs from my father's lessons in discipline. Twenty years of training to become what the Donovan name demands: ruthless, cold, untouchable.

Weakness gets you killed in this business.

And Aoife Gallagher is rapidly becoming a weakness.

I stretch across my bed, focusing on nothing. Tomorrow, Patrick Gallagher receives my demands: territory along the northern docks, compensation for the stolen shipment, and public acknowledgment of Donovan supremacy over the Temple Bar district.

Fair exchange for his daughter's safe return.

If he refuses...

My mind wanders to alternatives. Keeping Aoife indefinitely. Making her mine in every way. Breaking down that defiance until she begs for my touch.

My cock hardens at the thought. I press my palm against it, remembering how she felt against me. So responsive despite her hatred. So perfectly matched to my darkness.

Sleep claims me between one thought and the next, whiskey and desire pulling me under.

\* \* \*

The study dooropens without warning. I straighten immediately, fifteen years old and already conditioned to fear the sound of those footsteps.

"You embarrassed me tonight." My father's voice carries no emotion—the calm before violence. He locks the door behind him.

"I didn't mean to, sir." My words emerge steady despite the cold dread spreading through me.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

The charity gala. The ambassador's daughter. A moment of kindness mistaken for vulnerability.

"A Donovan doesn't comfort crying girls." He removes his signet ring, placing it deliberately on the desk. Bad sign. "A Donovan shows no compassion. Compassion is vulnerability."

"She was hurt?—"

The first blow catches me across the cheek. I don't fall. Falling makes it worse.

"Hurt?" He laughs, the sound empty of mirth. "You think that matters? That girl's father works for the State Department. Information is power, not comfort. You could have leveraged her distress, extracted something useful."

"She's fourteen."

Another blow. Blood fills my mouth.

"Age is irrelevant. Everyone is useful or useless. Nothing between." He circles me like a shark. "Your mother ruined you with her softness. I need to burn it out of you."

The beating begins in earnest then. Methodical. Educational. Each blow accompanied by lessons in power and control. My arms take the brunt of his rage.

"Sentiment is a disease." Crack goes my rib. "Empathy is a liability." Another blow lands across my kidneys. "The moment you care about anyone but family, you create

leverage against yourself."

I remain standing as long as possible. It's a matter of pride now.

"Even family becomes liability when they demonstrate vulnerability." He pulls me up by my hair after I finally collapse. "Remember this pain, Cormac. It's nothing compared to what our enemies will do if they sense softness in you."

The signet ring returns to his finger, metal catching light before it connects with my flesh...

\* \* \*

I jolt awake, sheets soaked with sweat. My pulse hammers as present reality comes back with a bite. Manor. Bedroom. Safety.

The nightmare leaves me shaking, echoes of old pain ghosting across my skin. I haven't dreamt of that particular lesson in years. Why now?

Aoife.

Her accusation. "Those aren't from fighting. Not all of them." She saw through me in seconds, recognized the systematic nature of my scars. No one else ever noticed—or dared mention it.

The clock shows 6:19 AM. No point trying to sleep. I shower, letting scalding water wash away the nightmare's residue. Under the spray, my mind returns to Aoife—her defiance when I caught her, the softness of her lips contradicting the hardness of her words. The way she yielded momentarily before fighting herself.

She awakens something dangerous in me. Something my father spent years trying to

destroy.

By seven, I'm dressed and in my office. Connor arrives with coffee and the morning briefing.

"The Gallagher operation at the docks has gone quiet," he reports. "No movement since we took the girl."

I nod, scanning the intelligence reports. "And our shipment coming in tomorrow?"

"Route changed as ordered. New security measures in place."

"Good." I tap my pen against the desk. "Have you identified how they knew about the pickup location? It was compartmentalized information."

Connor shifts uncomfortably. "Still working on that, boss."

My instincts scream patterns. The last three Gallagher hits against our operations targeted locations known to only a handful of people. The shipment Liam Gallagher stole—the one that justified taking Aoife—had been rerouted last minute. Few knew the change.

Someone's talking. We have a rat, and I loathe rodents.

"I want surveillance on Liam Gallagher," I say. "Full coverage. Phone taps, locations, associates."

"We're already watching the Gallaghers?—"

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

"Not like this." I slide a file across the desk. "I want to know who he meets with, especially anyone connected to our operation. Focus on Sean Murphy and David Karney."

Connor raises an eyebrow. "You suspect one of them?"

"I suspect everyone." The pen snaps between my fingers. "Three shipments hit in exactly the right place at exactly the right time isn't coincidence."

"Karney's been with us fifteen years. Murphy's your second cousin."

"Family ties haven't stopped betrayals before." The memory of my father's lessons burns fresh after the nightmare. "Set it up. Discreetly."

"And the girl? Patrick gets our demands today."

My jaw tightens at the mention of Aoife. "No one enters the penthouse without my authorization. Actually no one enters, no one but me."

"And if Patrick refuses our terms?"

"He won't." I stand, moving toward the window. "But if he doesn't, I want options."

After Connor leaves, I take out my phone. The security feed from Aoife's penthouse shows her pacing, still wearing the clothes from her escape attempt. She hasn't slept either.

My cock stiffens immediately at the sight of her. The kiss in the alley wasn't enough. It merely stoked a fire that now threatens to consume me.

Taking her as collateral was business. Wanting her is dangerous.

I pocket the phone and grab my coat. The message to Patrick Gallagher leaves in an hour—demands accompanied by proof of life. A photograph of Aoife holding today's newspaper, unharmed but clearly in my possession.

Before that, I need to see her again. Test this hunger. Control it before it controls me.

The drive into Dublin gives me time to fortify my resolve. This attraction is merely physical—a challenge to be conquered. Once Patrick meets my demands, she returns to her family. Business concluded. Problem solved.

Unless he refuses.

The thought brings unexpected satisfaction. More time with Aoife. More opportunities to break through that defiance. To claim what responded so sweetly to my touch in that alley.

The penthouse security team stands at attention as I arrive. "Any incidents?"

"None, sir. She's been quiet since you left."

I dismiss them to the hallway and unlock the door. Inside, Aoife stands by the window, copper hair catching morning light. She turns at the sound of my entrance, chin lifting in that now-familiar gesture of defiance.

A purple mark darkens her neck where my mouth claimed her hours ago. The sight sends possessive satisfaction through me, along with a fresh surge of lust.

"Come to gloat about my failed escape?" she asks, voice steady despite the shadows underneath her lashes.

"Come to ensure you're prepared for your photo shoot." I toss a newspaper onto the coffee table. "Your father needs proof you're alive and well."

She makes no move toward it. "And if I refuse to cooperate?"

I close the distance between us, backing her against the window. "Then the photo shows you considerably less comfortable."

Her pulse jumps at her throat. "You wouldn't damage your precious collateral."

"Try me." I trail my fingers along the mark on her neck. "Though it seems I already have."

Color floods her cheeks. Anger or arousal—perhaps both. "That meant nothing."

"Your body disagreed." I lean closer, my lips nearly brushing her ear. "You responded to me, Aoife. Like you were made for my touch."

She shoves against my chest. "I'd rather die than let you touch me again."



## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

"Liar." I capture her wrists, pinning them at her sides. "Your hatred excites you. The danger. The forbidden fruit. It makes you hot—and wet."

"You're delusional."

"Am I?" I press my thigh between her legs, feeling her heat even through denim. "Should I check how wet you are right now?"

Her breath catches. For a moment, pure want flashes across her features—quickly masked by defiance.

"My father will destroy you for this," she whispers.

"He's welcome to try." I release her wrists but don't move away. "Many have. I'm still standing."

She doesn't move. The tension between us pulses, alive and dangerous. My cock throbs, aching to take her against this window, to make her scream my name while the whole city watches.

I imagine bending her over the kitchen counter, ripping those jeans down her thighs, spreading her legs and driving into her until she shatters. Taking what her body offers even as her mind resists.

With effort, I rein in the savage impulse.

"The photographer arrives in twenty minutes," I say, stepping back. "Clean up."

Change if you wish. Clothes in the bedroom should fit."

"And if I refuse that too?"

I shrug. "Then you appear on film exactly as you are—wearing the same clothes from your failed escape, marked by me. Your father will draw his own conclusions about your treatment here."

Her fingers touch the bruise on her neck unconsciously. "You're a monster."

"Perhaps." I move toward the door. "But I'm the monster you wanted to fuck last night. Remember that."

Her defiance, her fire—they call to something primal in me. Something I've spent a lifetime suppressing.

My father was right about one thing: vulnerability gets you killed in this business.

But as I instruct the security team about the photographer, desire courses through me like molten steel. The throbbing between my legs demands satisfaction. Demands her.

Perhaps the real liability isn't my attraction to Aoife Gallagher, but my resistance to it. Fighting nature never ends well.

Liam Gallagher's activities will soon reveal if my suspicions about a traitor are correct. And if they are, the leverage against Patrick doubles. The price for his daughter's return becomes much, much higher.

Perhaps high enough that she stays mine permanently.

The thought sends a dark thrill through me. I could keep her. Break her. Rebuild her

as mine.

And if Patrick refuses my terms? Well, that just gives me more time to claim his daughter in every way possible. To fuck the Gallagher defiance out of her until she begs for my collar around her throat. Until she forgets she was ever anyone's but mine.

## CHAPTER6

AOIFE

### GAMES & GHOSTS

The photographer leaves after twenty awkward minutes of posing with today's newspaper. My cooperation bought solely through Cormac's threat about what the alternative photos might suggest to my father. The click of the door lock follows the man's exit, sealing me in solitude once more.

Alone again in my gilded prison.

Five days captive. The walls close in despite the penthouse's spacious layout. I've memorized every inch—the sixteen steps from bedroom to kitchen, the slight creak in the third floorboard near the sofa, the exact angle where sunlight hits the Ha'penny Bridge around noon.

I pace, searching for weaknesses missed during the hundred times I have already looked. The windows are impenetrable. The balcony door now sealed with additional electronic locks. Guards rotate outside with military precision.

Boredom poses its own danger. Restlessness leads to recklessness.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

The desk tucked in the corner catches my attention. Cormac used it briefly before the photographer arrived, writing something in a leather-bound book before tucking it into the drawer. A drawer he failed to lock in his haste.

Perhaps carelessness. Perhaps a trap.

I hesitate before crossing to it, listening for footsteps in the hallway. Silence greets me. The guard rotation happens at noon—twenty minutes from now.

My fingers trace the polished wood before pulling the drawer open. Inside sits the leather volume alongside a folder stamped with the Donovan crest. My pulse quickens at this unexpected access to Cormac's private thoughts.

The folder first—labeled "Gallagher Operations." Inside, detailed intelligence reports on my family's business. Shipment schedules. Property holdings. Security protocols at our compound. Some information so accurate it sends chills down my spine.

Beneath these typed reports lie handwritten notes in bold, slashing script. Cormac's writing—confident strokes betraying arrogance.

Northern docks vulnerable at checkpoint three. Minimal security Wednesday nights. Murphy confirms shipment pattern.

Murphy? The name registers instantly. Danny Murphy works security for my father—has for fifteen years. The implication settles like ice in my stomach. A traitor in our ranks.

I flip through more pages, finding a detailed map of our family estate with entry points circled. Guards' rotations noted. Blind spots marked. The level of intelligence surpasses anything I imagined the Donovan's possessed.

The leather book proves even more revealing. Cormac's private strategies laid bare in his own handwriting:

Patrick Gallagher responds to force, not negotiation. Liam—impulsive, susceptible to provocation. Key weakness: family loyalty, particularly to daughter. Leverage against Aoife = leverage against entire operation.

My fingers tighten on the page. Being reduced to a strategic calculation stokes my rage anew.

The next entries detail Cormac's plan to use my captivity to force territorial concessions. His analysis of potential Gallagher responses. His counterstrategies.

A laugh escapes me, bitter and sharp. His assessment contains fundamental flaws only an insider would recognize. My father doesn't negotiate out of emotion—ever. His countermoves will come from cold calculation, not paternal concern. I might be his precious daughter, but I have been a royal pain in his ass.

And Liam? Cormac underestimates my brother's vindictive streak. Liam won't be baited into hasty action; he'll orchestrate something spectacular and devastating. Or do something stupid, he's an unpredictable chaos all of his own

More pages reveal contingency plans. Options if my father refuses to negotiate. Ways to extract maximum value from my captivity.

The last entry, dated this morning, sends heat flooding my cheeks:

Aoife Gallagher—greater asset than anticipated. Knowledge of family operations extensive. Consider extending captivity indefinitely regardless of negotiations. Physical response to contact suggests potential leverage beyond initial purpose.

He's planning to keep me. The realization hits like a blow. And worse—he's noted my body's betrayal in that alley. Catalogued it as another weapon to use against me.

The sound of a key in the lock sends panic surging through me. No time to return everything properly. I shove the folder into the drawer, but keep the leather book clutched behind my back as I move away from the desk.

Cormac enters, alone this time. His massive frame dominates the doorway, tailored suit doing nothing to conceal the raw power beneath. Dark stubble shadows his jaw, giving him a dangerous edge. He pauses, nostrils flaring slightly as if sensing something amiss.

"Enjoying your accommodations?" His voice carries that hint of amusement that makes me want to slap him.

"Immensely. The constant surveillance adds such ambiance."

He moves further into the room, closing the door behind him. "The photos were perfect. Your father should receive them within the hour."

"Lucky him."

Something about my tone must alert him. His demeanor shifts, predatory awareness replacing casual confidence. "You've been busy."

"Captivity offers limited entertainment options."

He moves closer, danger in each calculated step. "What's behind your back, Aoife?"

"Nothing."

"Liar." One more step brings him into my personal space. "Show me."

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

For a heartbeat, I consider denying it further. But the game shifts in my mind—knowledge is power, and his private notes have given me plenty.

I bring the leather-bound book forward, holding it up between us like a prize. "Your strategizing needs work, Donovan."

His demeanor darkens instantly. One large hand snatches the book from my grasp. "Going through my things. Not very good manners."

"Kidnapping isn't very good manners either." I maintain my ground as he looms over me. "Murphy's your inside man, isn't he? Feeding you information about our security and business?"

A muscle ticks in his jaw—confirmation enough.

"Did you really think my father would trade territory for me?" I continue, pressing my advantage. "Patrick Gallagher doesn't negotiate with his heart, only his ledger. And your assessment of Liam is laughably wrong."

"Is it?" Cormac tosses the book onto the coffee table, his attention entirely on me now. "Enlighten me."

"You wrote he's impulsive. Susceptible to provocation." I smile, sharp as a blade. "Liam orchestrated the bombing of the O'Reilly warehouse last year. Planned it for six months before acting. Made it look like the Cassidys' work. Started a war between them while we claimed their territories during the chaos."



Something shifts in Cormac's stance—reassessment. Good.

"You think you understand the Gallaghers," I continue. "You don't know us at all."

"I know you, Aoife." His voice drops lower, intimate. "Better than you think."

"You know nothing about me."

He steps closer, eliminating the space between us. "I know how you taste. How your body responds when I touch you. How you fought yourself more than me in that alley."

Heat crawls up my neck. "Seeing a physical reaction isn't knowing me."

"No?" His hand rises to my throat, thumb brushing where his mark still lingers on my skin. "Then tell me something I don't know, princess. Prove you're more than just a pawn in this game."

The challenge ignites something in me—anger mixed with spite. His touch burns against my pulse point, thumb gently pressing where my heartbeat betrays my calm façade.

"You've underestimated what I'm capable of," I whisper. "That's your biggest mistake."

His lips curve. "Show me."

The invitation hangs between us, charged with electricity. Time suspends. Five days of captivity. Five days of powerlessness. Five days of unwanted desire building beneath my skin.

I grab his tie, yanking him down to my level. His momentary surprise gives me the advantage as I press my lips against his.

Unlike our alley encounter, I control this kiss. Demanding. Claiming. His shock lasts only seconds before he responds, mouth opening under mine. But I refuse to yield control, biting his lower lip hard enough to draw blood and a grunt of surprise.

His hands move to my waist, attempting to take back control. I break the kiss, shoving him backward until his legs hit the sofa. Another push sends him sitting down, confusion warring with hunger in his eyes.

"What are you doing?" he asks, voice rough.

"Showing you what you don't know." I stand between his spread knees, dominance shifting deliciously in my favor. "You think you own me because you locked me in a cage? Because my body responds to you?"

I lean down, bringing my lips to his ear. "You've never met a Gallagher woman before me, have you, Cormac? Never learned what we're capable of when cornered."

His breathing quickens as I trail my fingers down his chest, feeling hard muscle beneath expensive fabric. I straddle him in one fluid movement, settling onto his lap. His erection presses against me through our clothes, thick and insistent. "We bite."

"Aoife—" His warning tone has a thread of uncertainty to it.

I silence him with another kiss, rolling my hips against his hardness. His groan vibrates against my lips, hands gripping my thighs with bruising intensity. I thread my fingers through his hair, tugging sharply to expose his throat.

"You marked me," I murmur against his skin. "Maybe I should return the favor."

My teeth graze his pulse point before biting down, sucking hard enough to leave evidence. His hips buck upward involuntarily, the friction sending shivers down my spine.

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

"Fuck," he growls, fingers digging into my flesh.

I pull back to admire the darkening mark. "Now everyone will know who's had their cock between my thighs."

He inhales sharply at my crude language. I roll my hips again, in a rhythm that has us both breathing harder. The thrill of reducing Dublin's most dangerous man to this state—flushed, wanting, following my lead—intoxicates beyond reason. I like this little bit of power I have.

"This proves nothing," he says, though his voice lacks conviction.

"No?" I unbutton his shirt slowly, revealing tanned skin and hard muscle beneath. Scars crisscross his torso—some from his father's abuse, others from his violent profession. I trace one pale line across his collarbone. "Seems I'm learning plenty about you, Cormac Donovan."

His patience snaps. Large hands cup my face, pulling me into another searing kiss. This time he battles for control, tongue invading my mouth with demanding strokes. I allow it momentarily before reclaiming dominance, grinding down harder against his erection.

He breaks the kiss with a curse. "What game are you playing?"

"The one you started." I unbutton my blouse slowly, revealing black lace beneath. His hungry stare sends liquid heat pooling between my thighs. "You wanted to use my body against me. Two can play that game."

I guide his hands to my breasts, arching into his touch as his thumbs brush over sensitive peaks through lace. The sensation sends shockwaves of pleasure through me. For moments, I lose myself in it—the forbidden thrill of enemy touching enemy.

"Take it off," he commands, tugging at my bra.

"No." I capture his wrists, pinning them against the sofa on either side of his head. "You don't give orders right now."

Something dark and primal flashes across his face. His cock pulses against me, harder than before.

"You like this," I realize aloud. "The mighty Cormac Donovan, surrendering control."

"I surrender nothing," he growls, though he doesn't break my hold.

I lean down, my breasts brushing his chest as I whisper against his ear, "Your body disagrees. You like it when I tell you that you can't touch me."

My teeth tug at his earlobe, drawing another muffled curse. I release his wrists to trail my fingers down his chest, across the ridges of his abdomen, to the waistband of his trousers. The outline of his erection strains against expensive fabric.

"Should I check how hard you are right now?" I throw his own words back at him, palm pressing against his length.

His hips jerk upward. "Christ, Aoife."

I slide to my knees between his spread legs, looking up at him through my lashes. His breathing turns ragged as I free his cock from its confines. The size of him sends a fresh wave of heat through me. Thick. Hard. Ready.

I wrap my hand around him, stroking slowly from base to tip. Pre-cum beads at the head, which I spread with my thumb. His muscles tense, jaw clenched with the effort to maintain any semblance of control.

"Still think you know me?" I ask, maintaining the torturous pace. "Still think you understand what I'm capable of?"

He doesn't answer except to thrust upward into my grip. I tighten my hold, increasing speed until a vein pulses visibly along his length.

"I could make you come like this," I murmur. "Or just leave you wanting more. Punishment for keeping me prisoner."

"Or you could stop teasing," he counters, voice strained. "And take what you clearly want."

The suggestion sends a bolt of desire straight to my core. My body throbs with need, eager to feel him inside me despite every rational objection.

I lower my head, maintaining eye contact as I circle the tip of his cock with my tongue. His sharp intake of breath is reward enough. I taste the salt of him, savoring the power of this moment before taking him deeper into my mouth.

"Fuck, Aoife—" His hand tangles in my hair, not pushing, just anchoring himself as I work him with my tongue and lips.

I take him deeper, hollowing my cheeks as I suck. His thighs tense beneath my hands. My own arousal builds with each muffled sound he makes, each twitch of his impressive length against my tongue.

When his breathing turns ragged and his grip tightens in my hair, I pull away

completely. His cock stands fully erect, wet from my mouth, pulsing with need.

"What the—" he starts, frustration evident in every line of his body.

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*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

"Lesson one about Gallaghers," I say, rising slowly to my feet. "We never give our enemies what they want."

Fury and desperation war across his face as I stand before him, disheveled but triumphant.

"You think this changes anything?" He tucks himself back into his trousers, movements jerky with unfulfilled desire. "You're still my prisoner."

"And you're still hard," I counter, licking my lips with deliberate slowness. "I wonder which of us is more uncomfortable right now. Blue balls are such a bitch."

He rises from the sofa, rebuttoning his shirt as he comes toward me. "You'll regret starting this game."

"Will I?" I stand my ground despite the dangerous intent radiating from him. "Seems I've learned plenty about your... vulnerabilities today."

His hand shoots out, gripping my jaw. "You've learned nothing except how to provoke me."

"On the contrary," I say against his grip. "I've learned Murphy betrays my father. I've learned your strategy against the Gallaghers has critical flaws in it. And I've learned—" I press my thigh against his still-hard cock, "—that Cormac Donovan can be controlled by a woman he considers nothing but collateral. That and his cock, like most men."



He spins me suddenly, shoving me face-first against the wall. His massive body presses against my back, cock hard against my ass as his lips brush my ear.

"You think you've won?" His voice drops to a dangerous whisper. "This little demonstration just proved how wet you get for your captor. How eager you are to touch me."

One hand slides around to cup me through my jeans. The pressure against my center draws an involuntary gasp from my lips.

"Soaked," he murmurs, satisfaction threading through his tone. "Your body betrays you, princess. Just like you're going to betray your family, and fuck me."

He's right—my arousal has reached embarrassing levels. But I refuse to surrender the advantage I've gained.

"Yet you're the one who'll be thinking about my mouth tonight," I respond, pushing back against him. "Imagining what would have happened if I'd kept going."

His fingers tighten on my jaw, turning my head for a brutal kiss. His other hand works at the button of my jeans.

"Should I finish what you started?" he growls against my lips. "Show you what happens when you tease a predator?"

My body screams yes even as my mind recognizes the danger of surrendering now. "We bite harder." He growls. With monumental effort, I twist from his grip, putting some distance between us.

"Another time, perhaps," I say, struggling to steady my breathing. "When it's my choice, not yours."

Something shifts in his demeanor—malice replacing raw desire. He straightens his tie, composure returning with alarming speed.

"Well played, princess." His voice turns deceptively casual. "But the game's far from over."

"No," I agree, maintaining the confidence I don't entirely feel. "It's just beginning."

He retrieves his leather book from the coffee table, tucking it inside his jacket. "Enjoy your victory. Brief as it will be."

At the door, he pauses. "Oh, and Aoife? That information about Murphy? Consider it a gift. What you do with it... well, that might prove interesting. Oh, you can't do anything you're a prisoner."

The door locks behind him, leaving me alone with the aftermath of what just happened. My body still thrums with unsatisfied desire. My thighs press together, seeking relief from the ache between them. My nipples remain hard peaks beneath my blouse, sensitive even to the brush of fabric.

I sink onto the sofa, the lingering scent of his cologne surrounding me. The taste of him remains on my tongue—salt and musk and forbidden pleasure. I press my hand between my legs, desperate for relief from the throbbing need he left behind.

The encounter rewrote the dynamic between us, if only temporarily. No longer simply captor and captive, but players in a more complex game. A game where desire serves as both weapon and weakness.

The knowledge about Murphy sits in my mind. A traitor so close to my father. Information Cormac deliberately left for me to find? Or carelessness born of his growing obsession? He's not careless, so I have to wonder.

Either way, I've gained leverage—both over Cormac and potentially within my own family. The question remains what to do with it. There's nothing I can do from here.

One thing becomes clear as I slip my hand beneath my waistband, seeking relief from the ache he created. Cormac Donovan might control my prison, but he no longer fully controls our interactions. The power balance has toppled in my favor.

And next time—because there will be a next time—I won't stop until I've claimed complete victory over Dublin's most dangerous man.

### CHAPTER7

#### CORMAC

#### BETRAYAL & BROTHERHOOD

Her taste lingers on my tongue hours after I leave the penthouse. The memory of Aoife on her knees, copper hair spilling over my thighs, lips wrapped around my cock—it haunts me through meetings and strategy sessions. My body is on a knife edge, unsatisfied, taunted by her deliberate denial.

A dangerous game she's playing. One that will end with her beneath me, begging.

But first, business requires my attention.

The surveillance on Liam Gallagher has been very insightful. Connor drops a manila folder on my desk, he's uncharacteristically silent as I flip it open.

Photographs spill across polished mahogany. Liam Gallagher meeting someone at a pub in Temple Bar. The second figure sits with his back to the camera in the first shots. Then, in the final image, he turns.

My blood freezes.

Finn. My youngest brother.

"There must be a mistake," I say, voice deadly calm despite the rage building beneath

my skin.

Connor shifts uncomfortably. "Three separate meetings documented. Audio recordings from the last one."

He slides a flash drive across the desk. "You'll want your privacy for this."

After he leaves, I plug the drive into my laptop. The audio quality isn't perfect—pub noise creating background static—but the voices come through clear enough.

"Patrick's losing patience," Liam's distinctive voice says. "The shipment locations worked out, but he wants something bigger."

"I've given you three major scores." Finn's voice, unmistakable. "That wasn't our arrangement."

"Arrangements change. Especially when you're dealing with a man whose daughter's been kidnapped."

A pause, then Finn again: "Cormac's move, not mine. I strongly advised him against it."

"Yet here we are. And now Patrick wants the Donovan distribution network. All access points, security details. Everything."

"That wasn't the deal. I agreed to help balance power in exchange for territory when this is over. Not hand over the family business."

Liam laughs, the sound cold through the static. "You handed over the family business the moment you betrayed your brother. Don't act all moral and mighty now."

The recording continues, detailing drop points, payoffs, schedules. With each word, the betrayal cuts deeper. Finn—raised under my protection after our father's brutality nearly destroyed him. Finn—whom I shielded, educated, positioned as my right hand.

Finn—who has sold our family to the Gallaghers.

I send a text to Declan: Bring him. Now. The warehouse.

Then another to Connor: Secure transport for our guest at the penthouse. Deliver her to location Alpha at 9PM. No explanations.

The drive to our Docklands warehouse passes in a blur of cold calculating rage. Betrayal in our ranks explains everything—the ambushed shipments, the precise intelligence, the targeted strikes against our operations. Not Murphy feeding information to the Donovan's, but my own brother driving a knife into my back.

Declan waits outside the warehouse, cigarette burning between his fingers. "He's inside. Confused, not afraid. He clearly doesn't know what we know."

"Anyone else know?"

"Just Connor and me, boss. As ordered."

"Good." I adjust my cufflinks, a ritual before violence. "Family business stays private."

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*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

The warehouse interior stretches vast and empty, save for a single chair in the center where Finn sits, unbound. He rises as I approach, confusion on his face.

"Cormac? What's this about?" He gestures around the empty space. "Declan wouldn't explain anything."

I circle him slowly, measuring each step. "Tell me about Liam Gallagher."

His posture shifts subtly—the first sign of guilt. "What about him?"

"Your meetings. Three in the past month. The most recent on Tuesday at O'Malley's Pub."

A flash of panic crosses his face before his demeanor settles into neutral. "Business reconnaissance. Getting a feel for their operation since the escalation."

"Business reconnaissance," I repeat, voice deceptively soft. "Is that what we're calling treason now?"

"Treason? Cormac, what are you?—"

I strike without warning, fist connecting with his jaw. He stumbles backward, hand rising to his split lip.

"Don't. Lie. To. Me." Each word punctuated with cold hard pain. "We have a recording, Finn. Your voice, clear as day, selling our shipment schedules, and secrets to Liam fucking Gallagher."

The color drains from him. His shoulders slump as the pretense falls away.

"You wouldn't understand," he murmurs.

"Try me."

He straightens, finding a shred of dignity. "This war with the Gallaghers—it's destroying our business. You're so blinded by hatred for Patrick that you can't see the damage it's causing. I made a strategic business decision."

"To betray your family." The words taste like ash. "Without fucking talking to me first?"

"To save it!" His voice rises. "Patrick approached me three months ago with an offer. Limited information exchange to prevent all-out war. A controlled conflict that benefits both families."

I laugh, bitter and cold. "And you believed him? Patrick Gallagher would burn every Donovan alive given the chance."

"He offered us territory. A seat at the table when the city gets divided. More than you ever promised me."

The accusation hangs between us. Finn—always in my shadow. Always the protected one, never the protector. But he's always coveted what was mine.

"You cost us three shipments," I say quietly. "Two men dead in the Connelly Street ambush. All because you felt that you weren't given enough power?"

He flinches. "The men weren't supposed to be killed. That was Liam's doing, not the plan."



"And what was the plan for Aoife Gallagher?" The question emerges sharper than intended. "Did you know I'd take her? Did you warn them?"

Confusion radiates from him. "That was your move, not mine. Patrick went ballistic when it happened. It wasn't part of our arrangement. And he may still kill me over it."

The warehouse door opens behind me. Declan enters with Aoife between him and Connor. Her hands cuffed in front of her, copper hair gleaming under harsh fluorescent lights. Her chin lifts in that defiant gesture I've come to expect, though she looks confused.

"What is this?" she demands.

"Education," I reply, not shifting my attention from Finn. "About family loyalty."

Recognition hits as she recognizes Finn. "Your brother?"

"My little traitor brother." I circle Finn again, each step deliberate. "Who sold our operations to your family. Who got our men killed chasing the promise of power."

Understanding transforms her. She assesses Finn with new interest. "So not Murphy after all."

"Murphy was a distraction," Finn says, addressing her directly. "A name I fed Cormac to divert his suspicions."

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"Clever," she acknowledges. "Though not clever enough. Murphy is as loyal as a dumb dog."

I motion Connor forward. "Tie him up."

Connor forces Finn into the chair, binding his wrists to the armrests with zip ties. My brother doesn't resist—perhaps already sensing the inevitability of what comes next.

"Cormac," he begins, voice steady despite his position. "This doesn't need to end badly. I can fix this. Negotiate with Patrick?—"

"Negotiate?" I cut him off. "The way you negotiated our family secrets? Our security protocols? The lives of our men? Negotiate with me, bother, I fucking dare you."

"I never meant for anyone to die."

"But they did." I remove my jacket, folding it carefully before handing it to Declan. Next, my cufflinks, placed in my pocket. The ritualistic preparation for violence learned at our father's hand. "Actions have consequences, brother. Rats get trapped, and then they die."

Aoife observes silently from where Connor holds her to the side. Her presence should feel like an intrusion into family business, yet somehow it feels necessary. A witness to the price of betrayal.

"Why bring her here?" Finn asks, nodding toward Aoife.

"Because the Gallaghers should know what happens to those who betray me." I roll up my sleeves methodically. "And because Miss Gallagher has developed certain... misconceptions about me she needs corrected."

Her posture stiffens at my words, the memory of our earlier encounter clearly fresh in her mind. Good. Let her sense the monster beneath the man she played with so boldly.

"Last chance, Finn," I say quietly. "Full confession. Every detail you shared. Every plan discussed. Tell me what you did, and pray to God it was worth the pain that comes with it."

He meets my stare, something like resignation settling over him. "Everything's on my laptop. Password is MaMasBirthday1988. Files labeled 'Contingency Planning.'"

I nod to Declan, who steps away to make a call.

"Was it worth it?" I ask. "Betraying everything our father built? Everything I protected you from?"

"Our father was a sadistic bastard," Finn spits. "And you became him, Cormac. Every day, every decision—you're him in every way except the drinking. But even that, these days I wonder."

The accusation lands like a physical blow. In my peripheral awareness, Aoife shifts, her attention at this revelation.

"I protected you," I remind him. "Took the beatings meant for you. Sent you to university while I cleaned up his mess. Gave you a place in our business when you could have walked away with nothing, he disowned you, I let you stay."

"Protection, you mean control." Finn's voice rises. "You shielded me and suffocated me in the same breath. Just like him."

The comparison ignites something primal. In three strides, I close the distance between us. My fist connects with his jaw—once, twice, three times. Crimson sprays from his split lip, spattering across my white shirt.

"Cormac!" Aoife's voice cuts through the red haze. "He's your brother!"

I pause, breathing heavily. "Family means loyalty. Above all else."

"And what has your loyalty earned any of us?" Finn asks through bloodied teeth. "A legacy of violence. Territory that costs more to defend than it makes. Endless blood feuds with families like the Gallaghers."

"You chose your side," I tell him coldly. "Now face the consequences."

What follows isn't quick or merciful. My father taught lessons through pain, and some teachings run too deep to escape. Each blow extracts another confession—names of contacts, drop locations, bank accounts where Gallagher money was being washed.

Aoife remains silent, her earlier defiance replaced by silence. Not horror, exactly. The daughter of Patrick Gallagher has surely witnessed violence before. But something else—beneath that, something dangerously close to understanding.

When Finn becomes unrecognizable, I step back. Blood coats my knuckles, drips from my sleeves. The warehouse is silent except for his labored breathing and my own.

"You know how this ends," I tell him quietly.

He nods once, dignity somehow intact despite his broken state. "I knew the moment you found out."

I turn to Declan. "Give me your gun."

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The weight of the pistol feels familiar in my palm. Cold metal, warm grip. I check the chamber—habit, not necessity. Declan's weapons are always perfectly maintained.

"Leave us," I order. "Take Miss Gallagher outside."

"No." Aoife's voice rings with surprising authority. "I'll stay."

Connor looks to me for instruction. I consider her request—the witness to family execution, the enemy granted access to our most private shame. By all logic, she should be removed.

Instead, I nod once. "She stays. Everyone else out."

When the warehouse door closes behind them, leaving just the three of us, I turn back to Finn.

"Any last words?"

He meets my stare steadily despite the crimson dripping down his chin. "You'll become him now. With no one left to remind you of who you once were. Once you kill me, you're just like him—exactly the fucking same monster."

The accusation cuts deep. For a moment, I'm fifteen again—standing over our father's unconscious form, knuckles bleeding, vowing never to become the monster who raised us.

"Remember me as your brother," Finn continues softly. "Not your betrayer."

The gun rises in my hand. One shot. Clean through the heart. Mercy, he doesn't deserve but receives because blood still means something to me.

The retort echoes through the empty warehouse. Finn's body slumps forward, crimson blossoming across his chest. Something breaks inside me—a piece of myself severed and lost forever.

For several minutes, I stand motionless. The gun dangles from my fingers, its purpose fulfilled.

Behind me, Aoife's voice comes soft yet clear. "You didn't shoot him in the head."

I turn slowly to face her. "What?"

"Professional killers shoot in the head. You chose the heart." Her gaze holds mine, unflinching. "Even in execution, you felt something for him."

"Don't mistake a bullet for mercy," I warn her.

She steps closer, unafraid despite the weapon still in my hand, despite the blood covering my shirt, even having just witnessed murder.

"I've seen men kill before," she says. "My father, my brother. Enemies. Associates. There's always something in it for them—pleasure, power, satisfaction." Her head tilts slightly. "You took no joy in this."

"He betrayed everything." The justification sounds hollow even to my ears.

"Yes." Another step closer. "And still, you suffer for killing him. That's the difference. When you kill for revenge, dig two graves Cormac, you just died with him."

Her perception unsettles me. This wasn't what I intended when bringing her here—not this strange moment of connection over my brother's corpse. She was meant to witness the brutal enforcer, the monster who holds her captive. Not... this. Not the fracture in my armor.

I turn away, holstering the gun at my waist. "Connor will take you to the penthouse."

"Is that all I am to you now? A prisoner?" Her voice carries an edge. "You brought me here for a reason, Cormac."

"To show you what happens to those who cross me." I face her again, forcing steel back into my voice. "Remember that when you're planning your next move."

She glances at Finn's body, then back to me. "I think you brought me here because you wanted someone to see."

"See what?"

"That it costs you something. That you're nothin." Her meaning is clear—not my father. Not the monster Finn accused me of becoming.

The insight strikes too close to truth. I close the distance between us, backing her against a support column. Blood-stained hands plant on either side of her head, caging her in.

"Don't mistake me for something I'm not," I warn, voice low. "I just executed my brother without hesitation. I kidnapped you to hurt your father. I'll kill anyone who threatens what's mine. Even you."



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"Liar," she whispers, "your hands are shaking."

They are. Imperceptible to most, but she notices. The tremble of adrenaline crash, of loss, of something dangerously close to doubt.

"You're still reading me wrong, princess." I press closer, using proximity as intimidation. "This isn't grief. It's restraint."

"Restraint from what?"

"From taking what I want." My hips pin hers against the column. "From finishing what you started in that penthouse. From making you scream my name while your family's spy cools on the floor."

Color floods her cheeks, but she doesn't back down. "Is that what this is? Murder as foreplay? Not my thing, but I'm not judging."

My hand finds her throat, not squeezing, just resting there—a reminder of her vulnerability. "This is reality, Aoife. The world you were born into. The legacy you profit from. Don't pretend your father's hands are cleaner than mine."

"I never said they were." Her pulse races beneath my palm. "But I know the difference between a man who kills because he must and one who kills because he enjoys it."

"And which am I?"

Her lips part slightly. "That's what terrifies you, isn't it? Not knowing the answer yourself."

The observation lands like a punch in the kidney. In retaliation, I crash my mouth against hers, swallowing whatever insightful words might follow. The kiss holds no gentleness—it is all possession and punishment and the desperate need to silence her too-accurate voice.

She responds instantly, her body arching into mine despite the blood on my shirt, despite the corpse mere feet away. Her tongue battles with mine, hands fisting in my ruined shirt.

The darkness of the moment feeds something primal between us. My thigh presses between her legs, finding her heat even through denim. Her hands slide into my hair, pulling hard enough to hurt as she grinds against my leg.

"This is what you want?" I growl against her mouth. "To fuck with death in the room?"

"This is what you need," she counters, biting my lower lip. "To feel anything besides the emptiness."

The truth cuts too deep. I spin her roughly, pressing her front against the column. My hand slides down her back, over the curve of her ass, before gripping her hip with bruising force. My cock hardens against her, straining against my trousers.

"You think you understand me," I murmur against her ear, teeth grazing the sensitive lobe. "You don't know me."

My hand slides around her waist, up under her shirt to find bare skin. She gasps at the contact, arching back against me. I cup her breast roughly through her bra, feeling her

nipple harden against my palm.

"Tell me to stop," I challenge, grinding my erection against her ass. "Tell me this disgusts you."

"I won't lie to save your conscience," she pants, pushing back against me.

I spin her again, lifting her against the column. Her legs wrap around my waist instinctively, pulling our bodies flush together. The heat between her thighs presses against my cock, only layers of fabric preventing me from taking her completely.

My mouth descends to her neck, biting hard enough to mark her again. She moans—a sound of pure need that sends fire through my veins. My hand works at the button of her jeans, desperate to feel her wetness, to confirm what her body language already reveals.

I slide my hand inside, past the barrier of black lace to find her soaked and ready. "This is what execution does to you?" I growl, circling her clit with my thumb. "Makes you wet for your enemy?"

"No," she gasps as I slide a finger inside her. "It's what you do to me. God help me."

Her confession breaks something loose inside me. I add a second finger, pumping into her slick heat while my thumb continues its assault on her sensitive clit. Her head falls back against the column, lips parted in pleasure.

"You're going to come for me," I tell her, curling my fingers to hit that spot inside her that makes her shake. "Right here, with my brother's blood still on my hands. Show me how depraved you truly are, princess."

"Fuck you," she moans, but her hips rock against my hand, chasing release.

"Soon," I promise, increasing my pace. "But first, I want to feel you shatter into pieces."

Her pussy clenches around my fingers as she gets close to climax. I cover her mouth with mine, swallowing her moans as she comes undone. Her body trembles against me, thighs tightening around my waist as pleasure overtakes her.

When she comes down from her high, I withdraw my hand slowly, bringing my fingers to my mouth. I taste her essence, mixed with blood, never breaking eye contact. "Sweet," I murmur. "Even better than I imagined."

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Reality crashes back as the warehouse door creaks. I step back quickly, putting distance between us as Aoife adjusts her clothing with shaking hands.

Connor enters, carefully neutral as he assesses the scene—the body, the blood, our disheveled state.

"Clean-up team is five minutes out," he reports. "And Mr. Gallagher has responded to our demands."

Compartmentalization snaps back into place. Business first. Always.

"His answer?"

"Rejected everything on it, but offered monetary compensation for the shipment. And—" Connor hesitates, "—a counterproposal. He wants a meeting. You and him, neutral ground."

Interesting. Patrick Gallagher, legendary for refusing to negotiate directly, now requests a face-to-face. The game shifts again.

"Arrange it," I tell Connor. "And return Miss Gallagher to her accommodations."

Connor nods, moving toward Aoife. She allows herself to be guided toward the door, but pauses on the threshold.

"Your brother was wrong," she says quietly. "About you becoming your father. And my father, will try to kill you."

"You don't know my father."

"I know sons who become their fathers," she responds. "And sons who define themselves by opposing them. You're the latter, not the former."

With that, she disappears through the door, leaving me alone with my brother's body and her unsettling insights.

I run blood-stained hands through my hair, exhaling slowly. Tonight, changed things I didn't realize needed to change. Finn's betrayal. Patrick's unexpected response. And Aoife—seeing through the armor I thought impenetrable.

The cleanup team will erase all physical evidence of tonight's events. But nothing will erase what happened between Aoife and me against that column. Nothing will erase the knowledge that she witnessed not just my brutality, but the cost of it. Not just the monster, but the man.

And that makes her more dangerous than anyone.

## CHAPTER8

### AOIFE

### FLAMES & FAITH

The penthouse feels different after witnessing Finn's execution. Cormac's security doubled overnight—two guards at the door, hourly check-ins, cameras repositioned so there are no blind spots. My failed escape attempt and his brother's betrayal have made him paranoid.

But his precautions have one fatal flaw: they focus on keeping me in, not keeping

others out.

The priest arrives at precisely ten o'clock. Connor escorts him into the living room where I wait, dressed in the modest black dress Cormac provided after I "accidentally" damaged my other clothes.

"Father Donohue," Connor announces. "Twenty minutes."

The priest nods, clutching his Bible to his chest. His collar sits slightly crooked, a sign of haste or nerves. Late fifties, thinning gray hair, and soft hands that have never known violence.

Perfect.

Connor leaves us alone—Cormac's standing order for my weekly spiritual counsel. A courtesy he grants me despite our circumstances. The only visitor I'm allowed besides himself.

"Miss Gallagher," Father Donohue greets me, his voice carrying the soft lilt of Galway. "How are you faring this week?"

I wait until the door clicks shut. "Better than expected, Father. Did you bring what I requested?"

He shifts uncomfortably. "Miss Gallagher, I'm not certain this is appropriate. Using confession as?—"

"Five thousand euros." I cut him off, gesturing to the envelope on the coffee table. "For your parish feeding scheme. No questions asked."

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*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:15 am*

His attention shifts to the envelope. The hesitation lasts only seconds before he sighs, reaching into his Bible to extract a folded paper.

"The information you requested about Murphy." He places it beside the envelope. "Though I don't understand why you need this when Mr. Donovan?—"

"Has his own agenda," I finish, taking the paper. "Thank you, Father. Now, about the other matter?"

He produces a small vial of clear liquid from his pocket. "Holy water, blessed this morning as requested."

I accept it with a grateful smile. "You've done God's work today."

"I pray that's true." He tucks the envelope into his Bible. "Your spiritual counsel?—"

"Can wait until next week," I interrupt. "I need time alone to... contemplate my sins."

After the priest leaves, I unfold the paper. Murphy's daily schedule, compiled through his parish connections. His Wednesday routine includes confession at Christ Church Cathedral at 1:30 PM.

Today is Wednesday.

The "holy water" sloshes in its vial—not blessed by any church, but by a chemist in Father Donohue's congregation. A powerful sedative that works on contact with mucous membranes.



My escape requires perfect timing. The guard rotation happens at noon. Connor brings lunch at 12:15, always checking that I'm eating properly on Cormac's orders. My "exhaustion" after the warehouse incident has made them complacent about my afternoon naps.

I empty the vial into Connor's coffee when he steps away to answer his phone. By 12:30, he's slumped on the sofa, breathing steadily in chemically induced sleep. His access card and gun now mine.

The service hallway leads to the emergency stairs—locked for residents but accessible to security. Connor's card opens every door, and his unconscious body won't be discovered until the 2 PM check.

I emerge onto Nassau Street wearing Connor's oversized jacket over my dress, gun tucked into the waistband at my back. The weight of freedom hits me like summer sunshine after months of darkness.

\* \* \*

Christ Church Cathedral looms ahead, medieval stone against modern Dublin. Inside, tourists murmur in hushed reverence while locals light candles in quiet corners. I slip into a pew near the confessional, waiting.

At 1:25, a familiar figure enters through the south transept. Danny Murphy—my father's longtime security chief and Finn's replacement traitor. The realization still burns. While Cormac was hunting his brother's betrayal, I discovered mine.

Murphy moves toward the confessional, shoulders hunched beneath his expensive coat. I follow, keeping my distance until he enters the wooden booth.

Five minutes later, he emerges, making the sign of the cross. I trail him through the

nave, past ancient tombs and arching columns. When he pauses in the dimly lit north aisle to light a candle, I make my move.

"Hello, Danny."

He spins, alarm rippling through him before recognition settles in. "Aoife? Jesus Christ, you're?—"

"Free?" I supply. "Temporarily."

His hand moves toward his jacket. I shake my head slightly.

"I wouldn't. There's a Glock 19 pointed at your liver under this coat. Painful way to die."

Murphy's hand falls to his side. "How did you escape? Your father's been?—"

"My father thinks I'm still Cormac's prisoner. But that's not what we need to discuss, is it, Danny?"

Confusion radiates from him. "What are you talking about?"

"Finn Donovan," I say quietly. "Cormac's brother. You knew him well, didn't you?"

Murphy goes still. "I met him a few times."

"A few?" I press closer, keeping my voice low. "Or did you have regular planning sessions? Comparing notes on which Donovan shipments to hit? Which Gallagher secrets to sell?"

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The color drains from him. "Aoife, you don't understand?—"

"I understand perfectly. You've been playing both sides. The question is, for how long?"

A woman passes nearby, casting a curious glance our way. I smile pleasantly until she moves on.

"Three years," Murphy admits finally. "It started small. Information exchange. Keeping the peace."

"By betraying my father." My voice hardens. "By getting Donovan men killed, which justified my kidnapping."

"Your kidnapping wasn't part of any plan," he insists. "Cormac went rogue after the Westmoreland shipment was hit. Nobody expected him to take you."

"Yet here we are." I press the gun harder against his side. "Finn's dead, Danny. Cormac executed him last night. Made me watch."

Horror washes over him. "Jesus."

"You're next on his list. He knows about the partnership with Finn."

"That's impossible. We were careful."

"Not careful enough." I allow a hint of sympathy to enter my tone. "But you can fix

this. Tell me everything—dates, times, what information you shared. I'll take it to my father before Cormac gets you."

Hope flickers across him. "You'd do that? After what I did?"

"Family loyalty matters to me. If you help me now, I'll convince my father that Finn manipulated you. That you had no choice."

His shoulders slump in relief. "What do you need to know?"

"Everything. Starting with who else is involved."

For fifteen minutes, Murphy confesses his sins against the Gallagher family. Names. Dates. Bank accounts. Each detail damning him further to hell, while providing me the ammunition I need.

"There's one more thing," I say when he finishes. "The ambush on the O'Connell shipment where two Donovan men died. Was that planned?"

Murphy hesitates. "Not the dead bodies. That was Liam's call in the moment. Finn was furious."

"And my brother? How deep is he involved?"

"Deep enough. The whole thing was his idea originally—playing the Donovan's against themselves while we?—"

The crack of a gunshot cuts him off. Murphy jerks, crimson stain blossoming across his chest. His mouth opens in surprise before he crumples to the stone floor.

Screams erupt throughout the cathedral. Tourists scatter, diving behind pews. I drop

to the ground, frantically looking for the source of the shot.

Three men move through the panicking crowd. Not Donovan men—their movements don't have the disciplined restraint Cormac enforces. These are Cassidy soldiers, rivals to both our families.

I scramble behind a stone pillar as bullets chip ancient masonry. Connor's gun feels inadequate against multiple attackers. The nearest exit is thirty meters away, across open space.

"Find the Gallagher bitch!" a voice shouts over the chaos. "Brennan wants her alive!"

Sean Brennan—the Cassidy underboss who's been pushing for war with both the Donovan's and Gallaghers. If he orchestrated this, he must have had someone watching Murphy. Someone who recognized me.

I fire blindly around the pillar, buying seconds to think. The cathedral's layout offers few escape routes. The crypt maybe, or?—

A hand clamps over my mouth from behind, an arm like iron around my waist. I drive my elbow backward, connecting with solid muscle that doesn't yield.

"Stop fighting," Cormac's voice hisses in my ear. "Unless you'd prefer to try the Cassidy's' hospitality over mine."

Relief floods through me, followed instantly by dread. Cormac's presence means he discovered my escape. Discovered and tracked me. He knows I drugged his man, I betrayed him—and I know what that means.

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"Three shooters, west entrance," I whisper when he releases my mouth. "Cassidy crew. They killed Murphy."

"I counted four." His massive body shields mine behind the pillar. "Two more outside. We're taking the crypt exit."

"How did you?—"

"Later." He presses a second gun into my hand. "Can you run in those stupid shoes?"

I kick off the heels. "Better barefoot."

"On my go."

When Cormac Donovan gives orders in combat, even enemies listen. We move like shadows through screaming tourists, keeping low as bullets fly. Cormac fires—three shots, three bodies dropping.

The crypt entrance is just ahead, ancient steps descending into darkness. Cormac pushes me through first, following close behind as the heavy door swings shut, muffling the chaos above.

Dim emergency lighting casts long shadows across medieval tombs. Cormac grips my arm, pulling me deeper into the labyrinth of stone, death, and history. His fury radiates in waves, muscles tense beneath his suit jacket.

"You drugged Connor," he says, voice dangerously calm. "Stole his credentials. His

weapon."

"He'll live."

"Unlike Murphy." His grip tightens. "What did he tell you before they killed him?"

"Everything." I match his pace through the winding crypt. "Names. Dates. Bank accounts. The whole network Finn built inside my father's organization."

His stride falters momentarily. "And you risked your life for this information why?"

"To understand who betrayed my family." I pull my arm free. "To understand yours."

We reach a maintenance door marked "Staff Only." Cormac produces a key—of course he has a key to a crypt—and ushers me through to a service corridor.

"The Cassidys followed Murphy here," he says once the door locks behind us. "They must have been watching him since Finn's gone. You walked right into their surveillance."

"Or they followed you," I counter. "Since you clearly followed me."

His jaw tightens. "GPS tracker in the rosary beads Father Donohue gave you last week. I've known about your little arrangement with him from the beginning."

The revelation stings. "Then why allow it?"

"To see what you'd do." He guides me through another door into an underground parking garage. "To test your loyalty."

A black Range Rover waits in the nearest space, engine already running. Declan sits

behind the wheel.

"The Cassidys?" Cormac asks as we slide into the backseat.

"Two down at the north entrance," Declan reports. "The rest scattered when police sirens approached. We're clear for now."

The vehicle pulls smoothly into Dublin traffic, merging into anonymity. Only then does Cormac turn his full attention to me.

"You get one chance to explain yourself," he says quietly. "Before I decide your punishment."

The threat hangs between us, but something's changed since Finn's execution. The boundaries between captor and captive blurred by what happened against that warehouse column, by what he allowed me to witness.

"Murphy confirmed what I suspected," I tell him. "The betrayal runs deeper than Finn. My brother Liam initiated the partnership three years ago—information in exchange for maintain balance between our families while positioning for his own power play."

Cormac remains still, but tension radiates from his stillness. "Elaborate."

"Liam wants control of the Gallagher empire. He's been feeding information to Finn, who fed misinformation to you. The ambushed shipments, the territorial disputes—all carefully orchestrated to escalate conflict between our families while minimizing actual damage."



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"Until the O'Connell Street shipment," Cormac says. "Where my men died."

"Liam's unilateral decision. It angered Finn, apparently. Changed the dynamic between them."

"And my taking you?"

"Unexpected. It disrupted their balance. Things were already heading south."

Cormac absorbs this information in silence. His hand rests on the seat between us, knuckles still scabbed from Finn's beating.

"You risked everything for this information," he says finally. "Why not just tell me your suspicions?"

"Would you have believed me? Or assumed I was manipulating you?"

His silence confirms my suspicions.

"Besides," I continue, "I needed proof before confronting my father. Murphy gave me that."

"Murphy is dead."

"But his phone isn't." I pull the device from my pocket. "Took it while checking his pulse. Everything's here—texts, voice memos, account numbers."

Cormac's hand closes around mine, taking the phone. "Clever girl."

"You should be thanking me," I say. "I've handed you the architect behind your brother's betrayal."

"After drugging my security chief, stealing his weapon, and nearly getting yourself killed. Oh, and causing a shoot-out in church, the one place gangster usually fucking behave." His voice drops lower. "Gratitude isn't what I'm feeling right now, princess."

The Range Rover turns down an unfamiliar street, away from the city center.

"Where are we going?" I ask, suddenly aware we're not heading to the penthouse.

"Somewhere safer. The Cassidys know you've escaped. They'll be watching your penthouse now."

We drive in tense silence through Dublin suburbs until reaching a private gate nestled between ancient oak trees. A modernist structure emerges from manicured grounds—glass and stone merging with the natural landscape.

"Your house?" I ask as Declan stops at the entrance.

"One of them." Cormac's hand finds the small of my back as he guides me inside. "Declan, secure the perimeter. No visitors."

The interior matches Cormac's aesthetic—minimalist luxury, nothing fancy. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlook the Dublin Mountains, the city spread below like a carpet of lights as evening approaches.

"Your temporary accommodation," Cormac says, closing the door behind us. "Until I decide what to do with you."

"With me? Or with the information I gave you?"

"Both." He removes his suit jacket, tossing it aside to reveal a crimson-stained shirt beneath. Not his blood—one of the Cassidy men.

The adrenaline that carried me through the cathedral finally ebbs, leaving exhaustion in its wake. My bare feet ache from running across stone floors. My clothes covered in smudges of Murphy's blood where I knelt beside him.

"You could have been killed," Cormac says, breaking the silence. His voice laced with something beyond anger—concern disguised as an accusation.

"So could you, coming after me."

"I didn't come after you," he corrects. "I came before you. I was already there, watching the cathedral, waiting to see who Murphy met."

The realization hits me. "You knew about him. He was in your book."

"I suspected. After Finn, I had everyone connected to him under surveillance." He moves toward a bar cart, pouring two fingers of whiskey. "I didn't expect you to be his contact."

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"I'm full of surprises."

"Dangerous ones." He offers me the glass. "You seem determined to test my patience."

I accept the whiskey, needing its warmth. "And you seem determined to underestimate me."

"Not anymore." His attention slides over me, assessing. "What you did today was either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid. I haven't decided which."

"Why not both?" I take a slow sip, the alcohol burning pleasantly. "Brave and stupid often share a bedroom."

His mouth quirks slightly. "Like Gallaghers and Donovan's?"

The question hangs between us, charged with everything unspoken. The warehouse column. His fingers inside me. The way I came apart for my enemy.

"That was circumstance," I say, not believing my own words. "Adrenaline. Shock."

"Liar." He steps closer, invading my space. "That was inevitable from the moment I took you."

The air thickens between us. My body remembers his touch, craves more despite every rational objection.

"This is nothing," I insist. "The information about Liam?—"

"Can wait." His hand captures my chin. "Right now, I need to decide how to punish you for today's little adventure."

Heat pools low in my belly at his words. "Punish me? I'm not yours to punish. You didn't die and become God, nor are you my father, or teacher. You are nothing."

"No?" His thumb traces my lower lip. "Then why does your pulse quicken when I touch you? Why does your body betray you? Why can I smell your arousal from here?"

My cheeks burn at his crude words. More infuriating because it's so accurate.

"That's biology," I counter. "Not consent."

"Then say no." His mouth hovers near mine. "Tell me to stop, and I will."

The word refuses to form on my tongue. Instead, I surge forward, claiming his mouth with mine. The glass drops from my hand, shattering on the floor as I wrap my arms around his neck.

Cormac responds instantly, lifting me against him. My legs encircle his waist as he walks us backward until my spine meets the wall. His mouth devours mine—all possession and punishment and raw need.

"Do you have any idea," he growls against my lips, "what seeing you in danger did to me?"

I bite his lower lip hard enough to draw blood. "Do you have any idea what watching you kill your brother did to me?"

His hips grind against mine, the hard length of him pressing against my core through thin fabric. "It made you wet," he accuses. "Admit it."

"Not the killing," I gasp as his teeth find my neck. "The cost. The way it hurt you."

He freezes momentarily, then attacks with renewed fervor. His hands tear at my dress, ripping the delicate fabric down the middle to expose black lace beneath.

"I should lock you in a cell," he says, palming my breast roughly. "Keep you chained where you can't endanger yourself."

"Try it," I challenge, fumbling with his shirt buttons. "I'll escape that too."

He tears the shirt open, buttons scattering across hardwood. The movement exposes his scarred torso—a map of violence endured. I trace one long mark across his ribs, feeling him shudder under my touch.

"You drive me insane," he confesses, unhooking my bra with one move. "No one has ever defied me like you do."

My breasts spill free, immediately captured by his hungry mouth. He sucks one nipple hard, teeth grazing sensitive flesh until I cry out. My back arches involuntarily, pressing more of my flesh into his mouth. He lavishes attention on the hardened peak, alternating between gentle suction and sharp bites that send jolts of electricity straight to my core.

His hand finds my other breast, pinching and rolling the nipple between skilled fingers until both peaks are equally sensitive and throbbing. The dual sensation makes me whimper, my body already building toward release.

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"Is this how you punish all your prisoners?" I taunt, grinding against his erection.

He lifts his head, intensity pouring from him. "Only the ones who haunt my dreams."

The confession strikes deep. I affect him—like he does me. I capture his mouth again, pouring months of confusion and unwanted desire into the connection. His tongue battles mine for dominance as his hands slip beneath my ruined dress, finding the edge of my panties.

"These are in my way," he murmurs, hooking his fingers in the lace.

With one savage pull, the delicate fabric rips away. Cool air hits my exposed sex, quickly replaced by his fingers exploring my wetness.

"Already soaked," he notes with satisfaction. "From the danger or from me?"

"Does it matter?" I gasp as his thumb finds my clit.

"It matters." He circles the sensitive bundle of nerves. "I want to know what makes Aoife Gallagher this desperate."

"You," I admit, the word torn from me as he slides two fingers inside. "God help me, you do."

"He can't help you."

Something shifts in him—possessiveness mingled with victory. He pumps his fingers

deeper, curling them to hit that spot that makes my thighs tremble. Each thrust of his hand pushes me higher, coaxing whimpers and moans I can't suppress.

"Since that first night in the alley," he confesses, "I've thought of nothing but making you mine. Taking you until you forget your name—until you remember only mine."

My hips rock against his hand, chasing pleasure as tension builds low in my belly. "Talk is cheap, Donovan."

He withdraws his fingers suddenly, leaving me aching and empty. Before I can protest, he carries me across the room, depositing me on a glass dining table. The cold surface shocks my heated skin as he pushes me onto my back.

"Let's see if actions satisfy you better," he says, unbuckling his belt. His trousers and boxer briefs drop to the floor, freeing his impressive cock.

Long and thick, the head already glistening with pre-cum. My mouth waters at the sight, remembering how he felt against my tongue in the penthouse.

He stands between my spread thighs, running the head of his cock through my folds. The sensation makes me squirm, desperate for more. He teases me mercilessly, rubbing the sensitive tip against my clit before dipping just slightly into my entrance, never giving me what I truly need.

"Last chance to stop this, princess," he warns, his cock poised at my opening.

"Fuck me or I'll finish myself," I threaten, reaching between my legs.

He captures my wrists, pinning them above my head with one large hand. "Oh no. When you come, it will be because of me."



With his free hand, he positions himself at my entrance. Our connection intensifies as he pushes forward, stretching me inch by excruciating inch. The invasion burns despite my wetness—his size demanding space my body struggles to provide.

"Christ, you're tight," he groans, pausing halfway. "Relax for me."

I force my muscles to yield, breathing through the delicious pain of being filled so completely. When he finally seats himself fully inside me, we both moan at the perfect connection. The fullness is overwhelming—my inner walls gripping him like a vise, every ridge and vein of his cock magnified by my sensitivity.

"You were made for me," he murmurs, beginning to move. Slow, deep thrusts that hit places never touched before. "For this."

My back arches off the glass as he sets a rhythm that borders between pleasure and pain. Each thrust pushes me higher, building tension that threatens to shatter me completely. The glass beneath me creaks with each powerful stroke, our bodies joining with increasing urgency.

"Let me touch you," I plead, straining against his grip on my wrists.

He releases them, immediately bracing both hands on the table for leverage as he increases his pace. My fingers dig into his shoulders, nails leaving half-moon impressions in tanned skin. The new angle allows him to drive deeper, hitting my g-spot with devastating force.

"Say my name," he commands, driving deeper. His pelvis grinds against my clit with each thrust, adding another layer of pleasure to the overwhelming sensations.

"Cormac," I gasp as he hits that perfect spot inside me. "Fuck—Cormac!"

His rhythm falters at the sound of his name on my lips. "Again."

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"Cormac," I repeat, wrapping my legs tighter around his waist. "Please..."

The word—half demand, half surrender—breaks something loose in him. His control shatters as he pounds into me with abandonment. The table shifts beneath us, glasses falling and shattering unnoticed on the floor. The sound of skin slapping against skin fills the room, punctuated by our shared moans and gasps.

"Mine," he growls, one hand sliding between us to circle my clit. "You're mine now, Aoife. Say it."

The stimulation pushes me toward the edge. My inner walls clench around him, the dual sensation of his cock stretching me and his fingers working my clit overwhelming all rational thought.

"I'm—fuck—I'm yours!" I cry out, unable to deny him in this moment of pure sensation.

The admission triggers my climax. Pleasure explodes outward from my core, muscles clenching around his cock as wave after wave crashes through me. The orgasm is violent in its intensity, robbing me of breath, of thought, of everything except the white-hot ecstasy pulsing through every nerve ending.

Cormac follows moments later, burying himself deep as his release pumps hot inside me. His body tenses, a primal groan torn from his throat as he claims me completely. I feel each pulse of his cock as he empties himself, marking me from the inside in the most primitive way.

For long moments afterward, we remain connected, breathing synchronized in the aftermath. His forehead rests against mine, vulnerability in the gesture that defies our complicated relationship.

"She's a wildfire," he whispers, to himself. "I'd let her burn me alive."

The confession, not meant for my ears, lodges somewhere deep in my chest. This man—who executed his brother without hesitation, who kidnapped me without remorse—harbors a depth of feeling I never expected to discover.

Slowly, he withdraws from me, both of us wincing at the separation. His seed trickles down my thigh, a reminder of what just happened between us. Without the heat of passion, reality begins to intrude—the shattered glass surrounding us, my ruined dress, the dangers still lurking beyond these walls.

Cormac lifts me from the table with gentleness, carrying me through the house to a master bathroom gleaming with marble and chrome. He sets me on my feet before turning to fill the massive tub.

"You're not what I expected," I admit as steam rises between us.

He tests the water temperature. "Neither are you."

"What happens now?"

"Now?" He helps me into the tub, the warm water soothing aches I didn't realize I had. "Now we figure out how to use what you learned without getting you killed."

"We?" I sink deeper into scented water. "Are we allies now, Cormac?"

He removes his remaining clothing, stepping into the tub behind me. His powerful

body envelops mine as he pulls me against his chest.

"We're something," he answers, lips brushing my temple. "Something neither Gallagher nor Donovan has a name for yet."

As his arms tighten around me, I realize a fundamental truth: I escaped the penthouse today only to surrender something far more valuable than my freedom. Something I never intended to give my enemy. A piece of my heart.

## CHAPTER9

### CORMAC

#### LEGACY'S COST

Kilmainham Gaol holds the ghosts of Irish revolutionaries—men who died for ideals greater than themselves. Its stone corridors echo with two centuries of suffering, the perfect backdrop for Donovan family business. We've held our quarterly gathering here for generations, renting the historic prison after hours through connections in the Heritage Council.

Tonight, walking these cold corridors with Aoife beside me feels like its own revolution.

"You're sure about this?" she asks, voice low as we pause before entering the East Wing where my family awaits. Three days since the cathedral incident, since claiming her on my dining table, against my shower wall, across my bed. Three days of planning what comes next.

"Having second thoughts, princess?" I adjust the cuffs of my tailored suit, armor for battle.

"Wondering if you've lost your mind," she counters. "Bringing me here is tantamount to declaring war on my family. Also, probably treason to yours."

"That war started long before you." I brush a strand of copper hair from her shoulder, savoring the slight shiver my touch evokes. "This is about family, or war."

She wears a dress of emerald silk that clings to every curve I've memorized with my hands and mouth. Not coincidentally, the color matches the Donovan family crest. A deliberate choice to send a message while ensuring she stands out among the black-clad wives and daughters of my associates.

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"Your uncle will challenge you," she warns.

"Declan warned you about Seamus?"

"Connor did. While you showered this morning." A smirk plays across her lips. "He worries about you."

The loyalty of my men extends further than I realized if they're briefing my captive-turned-lover about family politics. Interesting.

"Seamus believes himself the rightful heir to my father's empire," I explain. "He's been waiting twenty years for me to fail."

"And you're giving him ammunition by bringing a Gallagher to Donovan holy ground."

"I'm strengthening my position by demonstrating control over an invaluable asset."

Her eyebrow arches. "Is that what I am? An asset?"

Three days ago, I whispered that she was a wildfire I'd let consume me. The admission still burns between us, acknowledged by neither in daylight hours.

"Tonight, yes," I answer, trailing my fingers along her collarbone. "Among my family, you must be nothing more and nothing less than what I claim you to be."

"Your prisoner? Your whore?"

I grip her chin, perhaps harder than necessary. "My conquest. Remember that."

Her pulse jumps beneath my thumb—arousal, not fear. This dangerous dance between us quickens her blood as much as mine.

"And what am I when we're alone, Cormac?" she whispers.

The question hangs between us, unanswerable in this moment. Instead, I press my lips to hers, claiming her mouth with bruising force. She responds instantly, matching my intensity, nails digging into my forearm.

I break away before the kiss consumes us both. "Ready?"

Her chin lifts in that defiant gesture I've come to crave. "Born ready, Donovan."

The massive iron-bound door groans as I push it open. Conversation dies as we step into the cavernous East Wing. Thirty-plus members of the Donovan extended family, and our closest associates turn as one, shock rippling through the gathering at the sight of Aoife Gallagher on my arm.

My uncle Seamus occupies space near the makeshift bar, whiskey forgotten in his hand. At sixty-two, he remains imposingly broad, silver hair swept back from a face marked by the same cruelty that defined my father. His son Ronan hovers nearby, perpetually in his shadow.

"Apologies for our tardiness," I announce, guiding Aoife forward. "Dublin traffic was unforgiving."

Declan materializes at my side, stance relaxed but alert. "Boss."

"All arranged?"



He nods slightly. "Extra security as requested. Exit routes clear."

Seamus approaches with artificial joviality. "Nephew! A surprise to see you accompanied tonight. And by such... a distinctive guest."

"Uncle." I accept his handshake, noting the excessive pressure—a childish dominance play. "You recognize Miss Gallagher, I'm sure."

"Patrick's daughter." He shifts toward Aoife, assessing her with cold calculation. "Last I heard, she was an insurance policy against Gallagher aggression. Not a dinner date."

"Circumstances evolve," I reply smoothly. "Miss Gallagher has proven her value extends beyond mere leverage."

Whispers ripple through the gathering. Aoife remains perfectly composed, her arm linked through mine in a convincing display of willing companionship rather than forced attendance.

"A word in private, nephew?" Seamus suggests, voice hardening despite his smile.

"After dinner," I counter. "Our guests await."

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The long tables arranged in the central hall bear the weight of an extravagant meal. I guide Aoife to the head table, seating her at my right—the position of highest honor. Another calculated insult to my uncle, who typically occupies that space.

He takes a seat farther down, fury simmering beneath his congenial façade. Throughout the first course, Aoife carries conversation with surprising grace, deflecting personal questions while charming the wives of key associates.

"Your Italian is impressive," remarks Giovanni Russo, our connection to the Sicilian families. "Where did you study?"

"Florence, for a summer," Aoife replies in perfect Italian. "Though my accent is regrettably Roman."

Russo laughs delightedly, launching into a story about regional rivalries that captivates the table. I place my hand on her thigh beneath the tablecloth, squeezing appreciatively.

She leans close, lips brushing my ear. "Your uncle hasn't moved in five minutes. I fear he might spontaneously combust."

"Let him burn," I murmur, sliding my hand higher, feeling her muscles tense beneath silk. "You're exceeding expectations."

"Don't sound so surprised." Her hand covers mine, stilling its ascent. "I was raised in this world, same as you. I know how to play the part, and read the room."

The reminder sends an unexpected pang through me. For days I've lost myself in her body, momentarily forgetting the generations of blood between our families. The sins of fathers visited upon children.

Seamus rises after the main course, tapping his glass for attention. Protocol dictates I speak first at these gatherings, another deliberate challenge.

"Friends, family," he begins, voice carrying through the vaulted space. "Before we proceed to business matters, I'd like to address the elephant in the room."

Silence falls. Beside me, Aoife straightens imperceptibly.

"The Donovan family has maintained power in Dublin through strength, yes, but also through consistency of purpose." Seamus gestures expansively. "We've survived because our enemies understand our code. Cross us, pay the price. Loyalty above all."

Murmurs of agreement ripple through the gathering.

"Yet tonight, we find ourselves in unprecedented territory." He directs his words toward Aoife. "A Gallagher sits at our table. Not in chains, but in silk. Not as penalty, but as guest."

"Your point, Uncle?" I interject, voice dangerously soft.

"My point, nephew, is that mixed messages create vulnerability." He sets down his glass. "The Gallaghers stole our shipment. Killed our men. And now their princess dines at your right hand? What message does this send?"

I make to stand, but Aoife's hand on my arm stops me. To my surprise, she rises instead, commanding attention with regal posture.

"Mr. Donovan," she addresses Seamus directly, "your concern for family messaging is admirable. Perhaps I might offer perspective that clarifies rather than confuses?"

Seamus pauses, wrong-footed by her intervention. "By all means, Miss Gallagher. Enlighten us."

"My presence here serves multiple purposes," she begins, voice carrying confidently. "First, it demonstrates the complete dominance your nephew holds over the situation. I am here because he wills it, neither more nor less."

Approving nods from several associates.

"Second, it signals evolution rather than capitulation." She gestures to the historic prison around us. "These walls once held revolutionaries fighting against empire. Men who understood that sometimes, to preserve what matters, things must change while principles remain constant."

She lifts her glass. "The Donovan principles—strength, loyalty, consequence—remain unchanged. What's changed is the recognition that old wars sometimes require new weapons."

"Pretty words from a hostage," Seamus counters. "But actions speak louder. My nephew keeps you in luxury rather than leverage. Parades you at family functions rather than using you to crush your father."

"And you believe that demonstrates weakness?" Aoife laughs, the sound echoing off stone walls. "Mr. Donovan, forgive my directness, but that perspective betrays an outdated understanding of power. You're old, and old me, living by old rules, go extinct."

Tension crackles through the room. No one speaks to Seamus Donovan this way,

especially not an enemy's daughter.

"Your nephew didn't bring me here for your approval," she continues. "He brought me to show that he controls every aspect of this situation—including me."

Her hand drops to my shoulder, a possessive gesture that sends heat through my veins.

"The true measure of power isn't how severely you punish enemies, but how thoroughly you convert them to your purpose." Her smile could cut glass. "Ask yourself, which takes greater mastery? Keeping me locked away? Or having me willingly stand beside Dublin's most feared man, serving his interests above my family's? Keep your enemies close?"

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Silence falls over the gathering. Even Seamus seems momentarily stunned by her audacity and the undeniable logic of her argument.

I rise then, sliding my arm around her waist. "Well articulated, as always." Turning to the assembly, I add, "My uncle raises valid concerns about messages. Let me clarify mine: The Donovan's adapt without compromising. We evolve without weakening. And we recognize valuable assets regardless of their origin."

My fingers tighten possessively on her hip. "Miss Gallagher serves my purpose. Anyone questioning that arrangement questions my judgment. Does anyone here wish to do that?"

The challenge hangs in the air. One by one, heads shake. Even Seamus recognizes when he has lost.

"No disrespect intended, nephew," he concedes grudgingly. "Family concerns only."

"Your concern is noted." I raise my glass. "To family—and its growth through new alliances."

The toast resonates through the hall, glasses raised. Beneath the surface cordiality, new lines have been drawn. My authority publicly challenged and publicly reaffirmed, with Aoife as both the catalyst and resolution.

The gathering transitions to business discussions after dinner. I circulate with Aoife, noting how Giovanni Russo and several other key allies seek her out for conversation. Her knowledge of international markets and shipping regulations—courtesy of her

family connections—impresses them.

"Your companion is remarkable," Russo tells me privately. "A valuable acquisition indeed."

"More than you know," I reply, sensing her magnetic presence across the room.

My uncle corners her near a display of prison artifacts. His body language radiates aggression despite his plastered smile. Instinct propels me forward, but Declan's hand on my arm stops me.

"Wait," he murmurs. "Let her handle it."

Sure enough, within minutes, my uncle's posture shifts from intimidating to defensive. Aoife speaks animatedly, gesturing to various business associates as she makes some point. By the time I reach them, Seamus appears thoroughly unsettled.

"Cormac," he acknowledges stiffly. "Your... guest was sharing fascinating insights about our Antwerp operation."

"Was she?" I slide my hand to the small of Aoife's back. "And what insights were those?"

"Merely that changing patterns in Belgian customs enforcement might create a vulnerability in your current routing," she supplies smoothly. "Nothing that Mr. Russo hadn't already noticed I'm sure."

Seamus's jaw tightens. "Apparently, Gallagher intelligence extends much further than we realized."

"Indeed." I glance between them. "I trust my uncle has been a good host?"

"Remarkably so," Aoife responds. "He was just explaining the Donovan family succession. Fascinating history."

The barb lands precisely. Seamus has lobbied for years against my leadership, arguing traditional succession should favor his branch over my father's. The fight has already cost him significant standing among our associates.

"Ancient history," he mutters. "If you'll excuse me."

As he retreats, Aoife leans against me slightly. "Your uncle suggested I might serve Donovan interests better under his...protection. Apparently, your judgment regarding Gallaghers is compromised by your father's obsession with mine."

Cold fury surges through me. "Did he now?"

"He also implied that certain associates might question your decision-making since Finn's death." Her voice remains casual, though her body tenses against mine. "Grief apparently clouds rational thought."

"Seamus always did mistake kindness for weakness," I murmur, tracking my uncle's movement toward a circle of older associates. "He won't make another attempt tonight, but this isn't finished."

"Is it ever, with family?" She accepts a champagne flute from a passing server. "Your colleagues seem divided on my being here. The younger contingent—impressed. The old guard—horrified. You are challenging tradition."

"As expected." I guide her toward a quieter alcove, once a prison cell now converted to a display area. "You handled Seamus brilliantly."

"Men like him are predictable," she says, tracing a finger along a centuries-old



carving in the wall. "They mistake youth for inexperience, femininity for weakness. They truly believe they're invincible, and that we all should worship them. I bet he has small wrinkle-dick."

"And what mistake am I making with you, Aoife?" I ask, boxing her against the stone wall, my body shielding her from the main gathering.

Her pulse jumps at her throat. "Assuming you're in control of this situation."

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"Aren't I?" My hand finds her waist, sliding around to the small of her back. "You played your role perfectly tonight. The conquered enemy, turned willing accomplice."

"And if it wasn't a role?" she challenges, tilting her chin up. "If I've decided cooperation serves my interests better than yours?"

"Then I'd say you're finally thinking like a boss." I lower my mouth to her ear. "But I'd also wonder what game you're really playing?"

Her laugh vibrates against my chest. "Perhaps the same one as you."

The words echo her earlier speech—clever, calculated, and just dangerous enough to send heat curling through my veins. I press closer, pinning her against ancient stone.

"Do you know what I'm thinking right now?" I murmur, lips brushing her temple.

"That you'd like to bend me over that display case while your family watches?" Her hand slides between us, palm pressing against my growing hardness. "Your body betrays your thoughts, Cormac."

"Christ," I growl, capturing her wrist. "You play with fire."

"I told you once—I was born in flames." Her free hand strokes my jaw. "The question is whether you can stand the heat."

The challenge ignites something primal in me. I capture her mouth in a bruising kiss, uncaring who might witness from the main hall. She responds instantly, opening for

me, her tongue battling mine for dominance.

When we break apart, her lips are swollen, cheeks flushed. "Your uncle is watching," she whispers.

"Good." I deliberately brush my thumb across her bottom lip. "Let him see exactly who holds the power here."

"And who might that be?" Her smile turns wicked. "The man who kidnapped me? Or the woman who's made him hard in front of his entire family?"

The combination of defiance and desire pushes me dangerously close to the edge of control. "We're leaving."

"Running away, Donovan?" she taunts.

"Making sure I don't take you against this wall," I counter, adjusting my suit jacket to conceal the evidence of my arousal. "Business is done for tonight."

We make our goodbyes, getting knowing glances from younger associates and disapproving frowns from elders. Seamus watches from across the hall, the distaste evident in his stillness. A problem for another day.

Outside, the night air cools heated skin. Declan waits with the car, ignoring the tension crackling between Aoife and me as we slide into the back seat.

"Home," I instruct, raising the privacy partition before turning to Aoife. "You exceeded expectations tonight."

"You expected me to fail? I don't fail, ever." She settles against the leather seat, dress riding higher on her thighs. "Did I earn a reward?"

My hand is sliding upward beneath silk. "What did you have in mind?"

"Freedom might be nice," she suggests, though her legs part slightly beneath my touch. "A phone call to my father, perhaps?"

"Not happening." My fingers trace patterns on her inner thigh, edging toward her center. "Try again."

Her breath catches as I brush against lace panties. "Then maybe you could finish what you started in that cell."

"Here?" I press against the damp fabric, feeling her heat. "With Declan just beyond that partition?"

"Unless you don't have the nerve." Her hand covers mine, pressing it harder against her core. "Or the skill to keep me quiet."

The challenge burns through any remaining restraint. I slide onto the floor between her knees, pushing her dress up around her waist. Her black lace panties—purposefully chosen to drive me mad all evening—present one final barrier I remove with a sharp tug.

"If you make a sound," I warn, spreading her thighs wider, "I stop. Understand?"

She nods, pupils dilated with arousal. The car's tinted windows provide privacy from the outside world, but Declan would certainly hear any noise despite the partition.

I lower my head between her thighs, inhaling her arousal before tasting her with a broad stroke of my tongue. Her hips buck involuntarily, a gasped "fuck" escaping before she clamps her hand over her mouth.

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"Strike one," I murmur against her sensitive flesh. "Two more and we wait until home."

The threat spurs her compliance. She bites her knuckle as I resume my assault, circling her clit with deliberate precision before sucking the sensitive bud between my lips. Her thighs tremble on either side of my head, muscles straining with the effort to remain silent.

I slide two fingers into her slick heat, curving upward to find that spot that makes her wild. The wet velvet of her inner walls grips my fingers as I pump them in and out, establishing a rhythm that has her writhing against the leather seat. My cock throbs painfully against my trousers, desperate for relief as her scent and taste overwhelm my senses.

Her back arches off the seat, silk rustling as she writhes beneath my touch. The power of reducing her to this state—desperate, silent, completely at my mercy—fuels my own arousal to unbearable levels.

I feel the first flutters of her impending orgasm around my fingers—subtle contractions signaling her approach to the edge. I increase the pressure on her clit, flicking my tongue faster as I curl my fingers more firmly against that swollen spot inside her.

Her hand tangles in my hair, pulling almost painfully as she approaches climax. Her thigh muscles quiver with the effort to contain her reaction, her entire body coiled tight like a spring about to release.

I lift my head momentarily. "Come for me," I command. "Silently."

The permission triggers her release. She convulses around my fingers, thighs clamping around my head as waves of pleasure wash through her. Her inner walls pulse rhythmically, gripping and releasing as I continue working her through each wave. True to command, she remains nearly silent, only the slightest whimper escaping as she bites down on her own forearm.

The knowledge that my uncle, my family, my business associates—none of them know that Patrick Gallagher's daughter is coming apart at my command mere minutes after leaving their presence—sends a surge of dark satisfaction through me.

I work her through the aftershocks before sliding back onto the seat beside her. She collapses against me, body boneless with satisfaction.

"That was..." she breathes, voice still trembling.

"Just the beginning," I promise, guiding her hand to the bulge in my trousers. "Consider it an appetizer."

She squeezes me through expensive fabric, the pressure both relief and torment. "And the main course?"

"Requires more space than this backseat allows." I capture her wrist, bringing her fingers to my mouth to taste her essence upon them. "And fewer witnesses."

Her pupils dilate further at the implied promise. "How much longer until we're home?"

"Twenty minutes." I straighten her dress, covering the evidence of our activities. "Unless you'd prefer, I tell Declan to drive around the city while I bend you over this

seat?"

"Tempting." She adjusts her position, wincing slightly. "But I prefer a bed for what I have planned for you."

The tease in her words sends fresh heat coursing through me. Three days of exploring her body, and still, she surprises me with her boldness, and a hunger that matches my own.

"And what exactly do you have planned?" I ask, voice rougher than intended.

"Proving that your uncle was right about one thing." She leans closer, lips brushing my ear. "I am indeed compromising your judgment. Because tonight, Cormac Donovan, I intend to make you beg."

The declaration, so at odds with her position as my captive, should anger me. Instead, it ignites something darker, more feral. The shifting power between us—captor and captive, enemy and lover—creates a dynamic unlike anything I've experienced.

"Ambitious," I note, sliding my arm around her shoulders. "Considering who holds the keys."

"Keys only lock doors," she counters, hand resting possessively on my thigh. "They don't control desires."

Her fingers trace higher, deliberately brushing against my erection. I catch her wrist, squeezing just hard enough to remind her who holds the physical advantage between us.

"I've never begged for anything in my life," I tell her.

"First time for everything." Her confidence borders on arrogance. "Unless you're afraid of what I might make you do."

The car turns onto the private road leading to my home. Soon, business will be set aside for pleasure—a temporary reprieve from the complications her presence cause in my world.

Tonight, proved Aoife Gallagher fits seamlessly into Donovan life when it serves her purpose. The question remains whether that purpose aligns with mine or only appears to while serving her own agenda.

As we exit the car, her hand linked with mine in a parody of normal couples, I think about the variables: Seamus's challenge, Aoife's information about Liam's betrayal, the shifting alliances among our associates.

Beneath it all runs a current of uncomfortable truth, bringing Aoife tonight wasn't purely strategic. Showcasing her served my interests, yes, but also satisfied something deeper—a primal desire to claim her publicly, to show my possession not just to my family but to myself.



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She's become more than leverage, more than a convenient body in my bed. The realization should terrify me. Instead, as she leads me toward my bedroom, I follow willingly into whatever fire she's kindled.

Some men fear burning. Others, like me, have already walked through flames and emerged transformed.

Let her try to make me beg. Let her believe she holds the power. By morning, she'll remember exactly who commands this dance between us.

As she turns in the doorway, copper hair catching moonlight, my certainty wavers. For the first time in my life, victory feels secondary to the battle. Perhaps we'll both burn before this ends.

### CHAPTER10

#### AOIFE

#### BLOOD & BIRTHRIGHT

Morning light streams through the massive windows of Cormac's bedroom, casting patterns across tangled sheets. My body aches pleasantly, proof of last night's activities after the Kilmainham gathering. True to my word, I'd pushed Cormac to the edge of control, though the bastard never quite begged—just demanded, groaned, and finally shouted my name as he came undone beneath me.

Small victories.

The space beside me is empty, sheets cool to the touch. A note rests on his pillow, elegant handwriting a contradiction of the man's brutal nature:

Business downtown. Back by noon. Security knows you're not to leave the property. -  
C

Of course. My gilded cage merely expanded from penthouse to estate. The pretense of freedom without any actual freedom.

I stretch, wincing as my body protests. Three weeks captive, and the last few days have transformed from prisoner to... what, exactly? Lover seems too tender a word for what happens between us. Enemy too simple for the complex web we've woven.

The bathroom mirror reveals evidence of our night, fingerprint bruises on my hips, a lovebite at the junction of my neck and shoulder, another on the inside of my thigh. Cormac marks what he claims as his—a habit I should find revolting rather than thrilling.

After showering, I dress in clothes he's left out for me—designer jeans that fit suspiciously well and a cashmere sweater in Donovan green. Another claiming. Another reminder of my place.

Downstairs, Connor sits at the kitchen counter, scrolling through his phone.

"Morning, princess," he greets without looking up. "Sleep well?"

"Well enough." I move to the coffee machine, pressing buttons at random until it hisses to life. "Where's Declan?"

"Perimeter check."

Interesting. Security protocols dictate they should never leave me with just one guard. Cormac's rules.

"Connor," I say casually, "did Liam ever contact you? After I was taken?"

His fingers still on the phone screen. "Why would your brother contact me?"

"Professional courtesy. He has moles in every organization." I pour coffee into a mug, adding cream. "Like Finn did with Murphy."

Connor sets the phone down, tension radiating from his posture. "Miss Gallagher, I serve one man. Always have."

"As does everyone. Until they don't." I sip my coffee, sensing his discomfort. "Liam can be very persuasive. Very generous too."

"What are you implying?" The edge in his voice betrays nervousness, not anger.

"Just making conversation." I move toward the massive windows overlooking the gardens. "Beautiful property. Those woods extend to the neighboring estate?"

"There's no neighboring estate for two kilometers." Connor stands, suddenly alert. "Why?"

"Professional curiosity." The coffee tastes bitter suddenly. "How many men does Cormac have on site right now?"

Connor stares at me, suspicion dawning. "Why?"

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"Because someone's coming through those trees." I point toward a barely perceptible movement at the property's edge. "And they're not wearing Donovan colors."

Connor rushes to the window, hand moving to his weapon. "Fuck. Get away from the?—"

Glass shatters as gunfire erupts. Connor shoves me to the floor, his body covering mine as bullets pepper the kitchen. A searing pain slices across my upper arm—a graze, not a direct hit.

"Panic room," Connor gasps in my ear. "Behind the pantry. Code 5829."

More shots. Connor's weight becomes deadweight atop me. Warm wetness seeps through my sweater—his blood, not mine.

"Connor?" I whisper, trying to shift beneath him. No response.

Footsteps crunch on broken glass. Men's voices, low and urgent. Irish accents, familiar cadence.

"Find her. Boss wants her unharmed."

Gallagher men. My father's soldiers.

I remain motionless beneath Connor's body, mind racing. The pantry stands fifteen feet away—impossible to reach with armed men in the room.

"Check him," someone orders. "Make sure the fucker's dead."

Hands grab Connor's shoulders, rolling him off me. I keep my eyes half-closed, playing possum—a childhood trick Liam taught me when we played war games.

"Girl's hit too."

A boot nudges my side. "Aoife? Can you hear me? It's Sean McKinney. Your father sent us."

Sean—my father's lieutenant for eight years. A man who taught me to shoot a gun when I was sixteen.

I moan softly, feigning semi-consciousness. "Sean?"

"Thank Christ." Relief floods his voice. "We need to move. Now."

"Connor?" I murmur, allowing myself to appear disoriented.

"Dead," Sean confirms without emotion. "Two shots center mass. The other Donovan guard is down too."

Declan. Both killed because of me. Guilt claws at my heart.

Sean hauls me to my feet. Three other men sweep the room—all familiar faces from my father's security detail. All armed.

"Father sent you?" I clutch my bleeding arm, playing up the injury.

"Operation Homecoming," Sean confirms, leading me toward the door. "He's been planning since day one. We've had this place under surveillance for a week, waiting

for Donovan to leave."

My father's men killing Cormac's. The temporary truce shattered. War is inevitable now.

"We need to hurry," another man—Brendan—urges. "Donovan's reinforcements were called three minutes ago. Ten-minute response time from the city."

Sean wraps a field dressing around my wounded arm. "Can you walk?"

"Yes." I sway slightly, still playing vulnerable. "Where are we going?"

"Safe house first. Then to your father."

They hustle me through the shattered kitchen, past Connor's body, out to the tree line where a black SUV idles. No Donovan security in sight—all neutralized or drawn to other parts of the estate, no doubt.

The SUV speeds down a service road I hadn't known existed, cutting through Cormac's property toward Dublin. Five men plus me, all armed except for my injured princess act.

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"Did my father authorize lethal force?" I ask, voice deliberately faint.

Sean exchanges glances with the driver. "Necessary force only. But Donovan's men fired first."

A lie. They'd shot through the windows without warning. But why lie to me?

"How did you find me?" I press. "Cormac moved me from the penthouse after the cathedral incident."

Another glance between them. "We've had sources tracking Donovan's movements."

Sources. Plural. The mental image of Murphy's bloodied body in Christ Church Cathedral flashes through my mind. Someone had replaced him already.

"My brother must be relieved." I test the waters. "He and father have been working together to find me?"

Hesitation, just a microsecond. "Of course."

Liar.

As the SUV merges onto a main highway, pieces click into place. Murphy had confessed before dying—Liam initiated the partnership with Finn three years ago. My brother plays both sides, orchestrating conflict while positioning himself for power.

These men might wear my father's colors, but they only answer to my brother.

Which means I'm not being rescued. I'm being recruited—or eliminated if I refuse to join Liam's coup against our father.

"Where exactly are we going?" I ask, checking the SUV's route.

"North Dock warehouses," Sean answers. "Your father's waiting."

Another lie. Patrick Gallagher would never conduct sensitive family business at the docks—too exposed, too many potential witnesses. The docks are Liam's territory, where he handles the shadier aspects of our operation outside my father's direct supervision.

I need time. Need to stall until I can assess options, create an opportunity.

The password.

In Cormac's study, among the documents about Murphy, I'd discovered my father's emergency verification protocols. A password system for situations where identity and authority needed confirmation.

"Sean," I say, voice stronger now. "Verify Parnell Street."

Sean stiffens. The password request represents my right as a Gallagher to confirm the mission's legitimacy.

"What?"

"Verify Parnell Street," I repeat. "Father would have given you the countersign."

Silence fills the vehicle. Sean shifts uncomfortably.



"We don't have time for this, Aoife."

"Verification or I fight you every step." I straighten, dropping the wounded princess act. "You know how my father operates. Security protocols exist for a reason."

Sean sighs. "Fine. Parnell responds with... Easter lilies."

Wrong. The correct response is 'Easter Rising.' The confirmation I needed—these men operate under false orders.

"Thank you." I settle back, mind racing through options. "How much longer to the docks?"

"Twenty minutes in this traffic."

Twenty minutes to plan. Twenty minutes to prepare for whatever awaits me—likely my brother Liam, ready to use me as leverage against both Cormac and our father.

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The SUV weaves through Dublin traffic, eventually turning toward the industrial dock area. Shipping containers stack like building blocks along the waterfront. Cranes stand sentinel against the gray sky. Perfect territory for an ambush—multiple hiding places, few civilians, controlled access points.

We pull into a warehouse complex marked with faded shipping logos. Two more black SUVs waiting, men posted throughout the cavernous space.

"Here we are," Sean announces. "Home sweet home."

I step from the vehicle, noting exit routes, weapon positions, threats. Fifteen men minimum, all heavily armed. No sign of my father—as expected. But no sign of Liam either, which raises more questions.

"Where's my father?" I demand.

"Arriving separately," Sean answers, guiding me toward a small office area partitioned from the main warehouse floor. "Security reasons."

They usher me into the office—desk, chairs, a small surveillance setup monitoring the warehouse perimeter. One door, one window overlooking the main floor. Limited escape options.

"Wait here," Sean instructs, then hesitates. "Are you okay? Your arm..."

"Just a graze," I confirm. "I'll live."

"Good." He pauses at the door. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you're safe. We've all been worried."

The sincerity in his voice gives me pause. Does he truly believe this mission comes from my father? Or is his loyalty to Liam so absolute it's made him stupid?

Once alone, I immediately search the office. The desk drawers yield nothing useful. No weapons, no phone. The window shows clear sightlines to the warehouse floor where Sean talks with another lieutenant I recognize—Martin Byrne, my brother's right-hand man.

Martin's presence confirms my suspicions. This is Liam's operation, not my father's.

Time passes—thirty minutes, then an hour. A purposeful delay, wearing down my nerves before the big confrontation. A classic interrogation tactic my father taught both Liam and me as teenagers.

The office door opens. Martin Byrne enters, sharp-featured and cold as ever.

"Aoife Gallagher," he greets without warmth. "Welcome back to the family."

"Where's my brother?" I counter, dispensing with pretense.

Martin's lips twitch. "Direct as always. Liam will be here shortly."

"And my father?"

"Unavailable at present."

"Meaning he doesn't know about this extraction," I reply.

Martin shrugs. "Family politics are complicated. Liam felt it best to secure your safety before involving Patrick. Given your... delicate situation with Donovan."

"Delicate?" I arch an eyebrow. "That's one word for abduction."

"Is it abduction when you're spotted acting as Donovan's date at Kilmainham?" Martin counters, pulling out his phone. "Our source provided quite the interesting account of your behavior."

So, they had someone inside the Donovan gathering. The betrayal web stretches in all directions.

"Stockholm syndrome makes for convincing theater," I reply smoothly. "Survival requires good acting skills."

"Indeed." Martin slides his phone across the desk. "Though acting rarely includes such... enthusiasm."

The screen shows a grainy image—Cormac and me in the alcove at Kilmainham, his body pressed against mine, my hands clearly clutching his shoulders. The kiss captured in perfect, damning detail.

"Surveillance photography?" I keep my voice steady despite the hammering of my heart. "How gauche."

"Evidence." Martin reclaims the phone. "Liam was quite disturbed by these images."

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"I'm sure he was." I move toward the window, surveying the men below. "Nearly as disturbed as I am to learn my brother orchestrated a three-year betrayal with Finn Donovan. But no one likes to see their sister getting off."

Martin's surprise registers in his sudden stillness. "You're misinformed."

"Murphy confessed before the Cassidys killed him," I counter. "Told me everything about Liam's arrangement with Finn. About how my kidnapping wasn't part of the plan, but proved useful for Liam's ambitions."

"Murphy was compromised." Martin dismisses the accusation. "Whatever he told you?—"

"Was confirmed by Finn before Cormac executed him," I finish. "So, tell me, Martin, which brother am I supposed to trust? The one who kidnapped me? Or the one who used me as a pawn in his power play?"

Martin sighs, dropping the facade. "Liam did what was necessary for the future of the Gallagher organization. Your father's leadership has grown outdated. His feuds with the Donovan's, wasteful. Progress requires new vision."

"And that vision includes killing Connor and Declan? Declaring open war on the Donovan's when we had a temporary truce?"

"Calculated risk." Martin shrugs. "Donovan was getting too comfortable with you. Too attached. It compromised Liam's leverage."

So that was it—Liam feared losing control of the situation as Cormac and I grew closer. My usefulness as a bargaining chip diminished with every day I spent willingly in Cormac's bed.

Voices rise from the warehouse floor. A commotion at the main entrance draws Martin's attention.

"Wait here," he orders, moving toward the door. "Liam's arrived."

Once alone again, I press against the window. Below, not Liam but a bloodied guard staggers through the entrance, collapsing as others rush to him. Shouts echo through the cavernous space. Men take defensive positions, weapons drawn.

Not Liam's arrival. An attack.

Cormac.

The realization hits as the first explosion rocks the building. The main warehouse doors blow inward, shrapnel and smoke filling the space. Gunfire erupts—Donovan's men storm the breach, led by a massive figure in black tactical gear.

Even from this distance, I'd recognize Cormac's methodical violence anywhere.

The office door flies open. Sean rushes in, panic evident. "We're compromised. Donovan's here with at least twenty men. We need to move you now."

"To where?" I demand, backing away. "My brother? Or are you delivering me to another bidder in this fight?"

Sean grabs my arm. "No time for questions. Now!"

I allow him to pull me from the office, down a metal staircase to the warehouse floor. Chaos reigns—smoke, gunfire, men falling on both sides. Sean drags me toward a back exit, using shipping containers as cover.

"This way!"

A bullet strikes the container beside us, spraying metal fragments. Sean curses, pushing me lower as we run. The back exit is up ahead—just twenty meters through gunfire and smoke.

"Stop." Another man blocks our path—Martin, weapon drawn. "Change of plans. Liam wants her at the secondary location."

"There's no time," Sean argues. "Donovan's men are everywhere."

"We still have the south exit," Martin insists. "Four men waiting with a boat. Water escape while they're focused on the road."

Sean hesitates, then nods. "Fine. South dock."

They hustle me through a maze of containers, the sounds of battle receding slightly. The docks open up ahead—gray water churning against concrete barriers, a small speedboat idling with armed men aboard.

"Get her on board," Martin orders. "I'll cover."

Sean grips my arm, pulling me toward the water. This is it—my last chance before being delivered to Liam, before becoming a permanent pawn in his game against both Cormac and my father.

I stumble deliberately, falling against Sean. "My arm?—"

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"Come on, Aoife, we don't have time?—"

His words cut off as I drive upward, my right hand plunging the ballpoint pen I'd palmed from the office desk directly into his throat. Not a lethal strike, but disabling—through the soft tissue beneath his jaw, rupturing blood vessels, inducing shock.

Sean drops, hands clutching his throat as blood pumps between his fingers. His scream comes out as a wet gurgle.

"Aoife!" Martin shouts, spinning toward us.

I'm already moving, dropping low, grabbing Sean's fallen weapon. The Glock feels familiar in my hand—similar to the one I practiced with on the family property.

Martin raises his gun. I fire first—one shot. He staggers backward, shock registering before he collapses.

The men on the boat react instantly, weapons swinging toward me. I dive behind a concrete bollard as bullets chip stone around me. Three shooters, semi-automatic weapons, poor cover between us.

The odds aren't great.

A burst of gunfire erupts from behind the shooters. Two drop immediately. The third turns, only to meet a bullet between the shoulders. He pitches forward into the water.



Cormac emerges from the smoke, weapon raised, tactical gear spattered with crimson both his and others'.

For a heartbeat, neither of us moves. Enemy or ally? Captor or rescuer? The roles blur beyond recognition.

Then he's running toward me, closing the distance as shouts echo from within the warehouse. More Gallagher men approaching.

"Boat," he orders, voice gravel rough. "Now."

I don't hesitate, sprinting toward the vessel as Cormac provides cover fire. We leap aboard, Cormac immediately taking control. The engine roars to life as bullets strike the water around us.

The boat surges forward, cutting through Dublin harbor as the warehouse shrinks behind us. Only when we're safely beyond rifle range does Cormac slow, turning to me with cold assessment.

"You killed Sean McKinney." Not a question. "Your father's man."

"My brother's man," I correct, still gripping the Glock. "Using my father's name to deliver me to Liam."

Understanding darkens his expression. "Your brother orchestrated this rescue?"

"To use me against both you and my father." I release a shuddering breath, adrenaline still coursing through my veins. "How did you find me?"

"Tracker in your sweater." He gestures to the bloodstained cashmere. "Safety is a thing for me, and I have trust issues we can get into later."

Of course. I should have expected nothing less from the man who bugged the priest's rosary beads.

"Connor? Declan?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"Dead." His voice flattens. "Five of my men total."

Guilt surges through me. "I didn't know they were coming. I swear it."

"I know." Cormac navigates toward a small marina at the north end of the harbor. "You wouldn't have killed McKinney otherwise."

The observation hangs between us—acknowledgment of a line crossed. I've killed before, but never someone from my own side. Never someone who'd known me since childhood.

Cormac docks the boat at a private slip. A black Audi waits nearby, engine idling. "We need to move. Your brother will be looking for you."

I follow him to the car, legs unsteady from adrenaline crash. Once inside, he hands me a burner phone.

"Call your father," he instructs. "Confirm it wasn't his doing."

I dial from memory, heart pounding as it rings. My father answers on the third ring.

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"Who is this?" His voice, so familiar yet distant after weeks of separation.

"It's Aoife."

Silence, "Prove it."

"The first horse you bought me was named Cúchulainn," I answer. "You taught me to ride at the Kildare property when I was six."

A sharp intake of breath. "Aoife. Are you hurt? Where are you?"

"I'm safe." I glance at Cormac, who drives like a rally cross driver through side streets. "Not with the Donovan's anymore, but not with Liam either."

"Liam?" Confusion colors his tone. "What does your brother have to do with this?"

"He orchestrated a false rescue today. His men killed Cormac's security, claimed they were acting on your orders. They were taking me to Liam, not to you."

Silence stretches, heavy with my accusations. When my father speaks again, his voice has hardened to the tone that makes the underworld tremble.

"Where are you now, daughter?"

I hesitate, meeting Cormac's gaze. He nods once.

"With Cormac Donovan. He... rescued me from Liam's men."

A humorless laugh. "Rescued. From one captor to another."

"It's complicated," I answer, the understatement of the century. "Father, Liam has been working with Finn Donovan for years. The feud between our families—he's been orchestrating it, playing both sides."

"Convenient accusation while in Donovan's custody."

"Murphy confirmed it before he died. Check his accounts—offshore transfers from a shell corporation. Liam's been positioning himself to take control of the family."

My father's silence speaks volumes. He's already suspected something, perhaps noticed inconsistencies in Liam's reports, unexpected leaks of information.

"Come home, Aoife," he says finally. "Whatever's happened, we'll fix it as a family."

Cormac's hand tightens on the steering wheel.

"I can't," I answer. "Not yet."

"Because Donovan won't release you?" Steel enters my father's voice. "Put him on."

I offer the phone to Cormac, who takes it without slowing the car.

"Patrick," he greets, coolly formal.

I can't hear my father's response, but Cormac's jaw tightens.

"Your daughter remains under my protection by necessity, not force," he replies.

"Your son's actions today escalated things well past our temporary understanding."

More from my father, voice raised enough that I catch fragments—"return her" and "consequences."

"She's free to leave whenever she chooses," Cormac responds, surprising me. "But given Liam's betrayal of both our families, she is safest with me."

He listens a moment longer before passing the phone back to me.

"Aoife," my father says, voice gentler now. "Is what he says true? Are you staying willingly?"

The question pierces deeper than expected. Am I? What began as captivity has changed into something undefined, dangerous, addictive.

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"Yes," I answer. "For now. I need to know what Liam's planning before I come home."

"And Donovan? He hasn't hurt you?"

Heat floods my cheeks at the implied question. "No, but I fear my brother might."

My father sighs heavily. "Twenty-four hours. Then we meet—you, me, and Donovan. Neutral ground."

"Agreed."

"And Aoife? Be careful who you trust. Even Donovan's who appear to help you might have their own agenda."

"I know." I glance at Cormac's profile, all hard angles and controlled danger. "I haven't forgotten who he is. And just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I don't have an agenda either."

After ending the call, silence fills the car. Cormac drives through Dublin's outskirts, eventually turning onto a private road I don't recognize.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"A safe house. Unknown to most of my organization."

"You don't trust your own men?"

"After Finn?" His laugh holds no humor. "I trust no one. Told you, trust issues."

We arrive at a modern lake house, glass and steel nestled among trees. Isolated, defensible, beautiful in a cold, clinical way that matches its owner.

Inside, Cormac immediately activates security systems before turning to look at my injury for the first time since the docks. His gaze tracks over the blood on my sweater—some mine, some Connor's, some Sean's.

"Your arm needs cleaning," he notes, voice deliberately neutral.

"It's just a graze."

"Still needs cleaning. Bullets are filthy things." He moves toward a cabinet, retrieving a first aid kit. "Sit."

I obey, perching on a bar stool as he cuts away the sweater sleeve, revealing the shallow gash beneath. His touch is soft as he cleans and bandages the wound, but tension radiates from his massive frame.

"You didn't hesitate," he says finally, smoothing medical tape over gauze. "With McKinney. With Byrne."

"Neither would you."

"No." He disposes of bloodied supplies. "But they were your father's men. Men you've known for years."

"They weren't my father's men anymore," I correct. "They chose Liam. Chose betrayal."

"And you chose to kill them rather than go with them." His attention holds mine. "Why?"

The question hangs between us, heavy with implication. Why indeed? Why choose Cormac over my own brother? Why trust my kidnapper over my blood?

"You chose to kill your own brother, why? Liam would use me as a weapon against both you and my father," I answer. "At least with you, I know where I stand."

"Do you?" Cormac steps closer, into my personal space. The scent of gunpowder and blood clings to him, oddly intoxicating. "Where exactly do you stand with me, Aoife?"

The question strips pretenses bare. Where do I stand? Captive? Lover? Ally? Enemy? The lines blurred beyond recognition weeks ago.

"I stand where I choose," I answer, rising to meet him. "Today, I chose you over Liam. Make your own assumptions."

Something shifts in his mood—predatory gaze narrowing to deadly intensity. "You killed for me today."

"I killed for myself," I correct. "You were just lucky I didn't kill you."



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His hand rises to my throat, not squeezing, just resting there—feeling my pulse, asserting dominance, or perhaps simply connecting with something alive after dealing so much death.

"I felt you drive that pen into McKinney's throat," he says, voice dropping lower. "Witnessed you shoot Byrne without even a breath. Do you know what that did to me?"

My pulse jumps beneath his palm. "Tell me."

"It made me want to fuck you right there on the docks," he confesses, crude words wrapped in velvet darkness. "Blood on your hands, gun in your hand. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

The words ignite something wild within me—validation of the darkness I usually keep hidden. With Cormac, I don't need to pretend to be less than I am, to hide the parts of myself shaped by Gallagher blood and legacy.

I press against him, feeling the solid wall of his chest. "So why didn't you?"

His grip tightens slightly. "Because we had fifteen Gallagher soldiers to escape. Because your arm was bleeding. Because?—"

I silence him with my mouth, rising onto tiptoes to claim his lips. He responds instantly, arms encircling me with bruising force. The kiss is all teeth and tongue and desperate need fueled by adrenaline and bloodshed.

His hands tear at what remains of my sweater, ripping the cashmere like tissue paper. My bra follows, joining the ruined garment on the floor. I attack his tactical vest with equal fervor, releasing buckles and zippers until his upper body is revealed—sculpted muscle marked with fresh cuts and forming bruises from the dock battle.

"We should clean up," he murmurs against my neck, even as his hands work at my jeans. "Shower."

"Later." I push him backward toward the sofa, need overriding propriety. "Now I want you to deliver on that dockside fantasy."

Something dangerous flashes across his features—restraint snapping like a taut wire. He lifts me, spinning to press me against the nearest wall. My legs wrap around his waist instinctively as he fumbles with his tactical pants, freeing his erection.

"Tell me you want this," he demands, cock poised at my entrance. "Say it."

"I want you," I gasp, body thrumming with need. "Now, Cormac."

He enters me in one powerful thrust, the burn of insufficient preparation only heightening the sensation. My back scrapes against the wall as he thrusts with a punishing rhythm, each thrust bottoming out inside me. The delicious friction sends shocks of pleasure-pain radiating through my core, my body struggling to accommodate his size.

"You're mine," he growls against my ear. "Say it."

"I'm yours," I agree, too far gone to argue semantics. In this moment, I belong to him completely—body clenching around his cock, nails scoring his back, teeth marking his shoulder.

He adjusts his angle, hitting the spot inside that makes stars burst behind my eyelids. The head of his cock drags mercilessly against my g-spot with each thrust, building pressure at an alarming rate. My thighs begin to tremble around his waist, muscles tensing as pleasure coils tighter.

"Again," he commands, his rhythm becoming more erratic, more desperate.

"Yours," I repeat, the word torn from me as pleasure builds to unbearable heights.

"Fuck—Cormac!"

"That's it." His pace increases, driving me higher. One hand braces against the wall while the other slides between us, finding my clit. "Come for me. Show me who you belong to."

His fingers circle my sensitive bundle of nerves as his cock continues its relentless assault on my inner walls. The dual stimulation is overwhelming, pushing me toward the edge with frightening speed. My head falls back against the wall, exposing my throat, which he immediately attacks with teeth and tongue.

"You feel so fucking good," he groans, biting the junction between my neck and shoulder. "So tight. So wet. Made for me."

The possessive words combined with the physical onslaught trigger my release. I shatter around him, pussy clamping down as waves of pleasure crash through me. The orgasm is violent, robbing me of breath, of thought, of everything except the white-hot ecstasy pulsing through every nerve ending.

"Fuck—I can feel you coming," he groans, thrusts becoming erratic. "Squeezing my cock so tight?—"

He follows moments later, burying himself deep as his release pumps hot inside me.

His whole body shudders against mine, muscles tensing as he empties himself with a guttural groan that sounds almost pained. I feel each pulse of his cock as he fills me, marking me as his.

We stay connected, breathing heavily as aftershocks ripple through us. His forehead rests against mine, sweat mingling, an unusual tenderness in the gesture given the violent passion preceding it.

"You could have gone with them," he says finally, voice rough. "With your brother's men. The safer choice."

"Nothing about my life has ever been safe." I trace a fresh cut along his collarbone. "Why start now?"

He withdraws slowly. His come trickles down my thigh, a visceral reminder of what just happened between us. Without the heat of passion, reality begins to intrude—the shattered glass surrounding us, my ruined clothes, the dangers still out there.

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Cormac lifts me down from the wall with surprising gentleness, carrying me through the house to a master bathroom. He sets me on my feet before turning on the shower.

"You're not as bad as they say," I admit as steam rises between us.

He tests the water temperature. "Neither are you."

"What now?"

"Now?" He pulls me into the shower, the warm water soothing aches I didn't realize I had. "Now we get cleaned up, and see how to make this all work."

"We?" I sink deeper into scented water. "Are we allies now, Cormac?"

His powerful body envelops mine as he pulls me against his chest.

"We're not enemies," he answers, lips brushing my temple. "I don't know what we are."

## CHAPTER11

### CORMAC

### SACRIFICE & SURRENDER

My father's estate sprawls across ten acres of Dublin countryside, a monument to blood money and generations of Donovan rule. The security checkpoint recognizes

my car—allows passage despite my four-year absence from this place. Some systems run too deep to be easily erased.

Beside me, Aoife stirs from uneasy sleep, the events at the dockyard still fresh hours later. The emergency meeting with her father has been set for tomorrow noon. Tonight belongs to another confrontation—one long overdue.

"Where are we?" she murmurs, straightening in the passenger seat.

"Donovan ancestral home." I navigate the winding driveway. "My father's domain."

Her posture changes immediately, tension radiating from her slender frame. "Your father? Why?"

"Unfinished business." The mansion looms ahead, gothic stone against darkening sky. "You were right about Seamus at Kilmainham. His challenge wasn't isolated. Nothing happens in Dublin's underworld without a reason."

"You think he orchestrated the power play?"

"I know it." Gravel crunches beneath tires as I park before the main entrance. "Just as I know his fingerprints are all over your brother's betrayal."

Two security men approach—old guard, loyal to the old man rather than his sons. They halt, recognition widening their stance.

"Mr. Donovan," the senior one acknowledges. "Your father isn't expecting you."

"He never does." I exit the vehicle, circling to open Aoife's door. "Yet somehow he's always prepared."

The guard's attention shifts to Aoife, understanding dawning. "Sir, protocol requires?—"

"Stand down, McPherson." I place my hand at the small of Aoife's back. "Miss Gallagher is under my protection."

"But sir?—"

"Call ahead if you must. We're going in regardless."

The massive oak doors open before we reach them. Seamus stands in the entryway, surprise quickly masked by fake hospitality.

"Nephew," he greets coldly. "And... guest. Your father will be?—"

"Save it." I guide Aoife past him. "He's in the study."

"This is unprecedented," Seamus protests, following. "Bringing a Gallagher into the family home?—"

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"A day for firsts," I cut him off. "I'm here to tell my father his empire's bleeding."

Seamus hesitates, calculation evident in his stillness. "I'll announce you."

"Don't bother."

I lead Aoife through marble-floored corridors lined with priceless art—spoils from generations of Donovan conquest. Her fingers press against mine, questioning.

"Your father's alive?" she whispers. "I thought?—"

"That he died years ago?" I squeeze her hand. "A convenient fiction. He officially retired after his stroke. Unofficially, he's been pulling strings from this gilded prison for years."

We pause before carved double doors. Memories assault me—childhood summons to this chamber, knuckles bloody from defending Finn, my father's cold judgement.

"You don't have to come in," I tell Aoife.

She meets my gaze unflinching. "I didn't survive today to hide away now."

The study hasn't changed—leather and mahogany, the smell of expensive cigars and old money. Bookshelves line the walls, each volume placed with the same order my father demands in all things.

He sits in his wheelchair near the fireplace, silver hair immaculately styled despite his



isolation. The stroke that officially removed him from power left his right side paralyzed, but his mind remains razor-sharp. If his enemies knew he was alive—like this—they'd pull him apart.

"The prodigal son returns," he says, voice slightly slurred but still commanding. "And with Patrick Gallagher's daughter, no less. How theatrical of you, Cormac."

"Father." I stop several feet from his chair, Aoife beside me. "You look well for a dead man."

His laugh rasps through the quiet room. "Death has its advantages. People speak more freely about the deceased." His focus shifts to Aoife. "Miss Gallagher. My condolences on your recent difficulties."

"Mr. Donovan." Her voice remains steady. "Curious to meet the mastermind behind so much of my family's suffering. Rather underwhelming."

"Business, my dear. Nothing personal." He gestures to the seating area. "Join me. Since my son has broken decades of tradition by bringing you here, we might as well be civilized."

I guide Aoife to the leather sofa, sitting beside her. My father maneuvers his wheelchair to face us, the effort costing him more than he'd admit.

"Seamus tells me you made quite the impression at Kilmainham," he says to Aoife. "Unusual, for a hostage to defend her captor so eloquently."

"Stockholm syndrome," she replies smoothly. "Or perhaps simply recognizing the superior Donovan in the room."

My father's lips twitch—the closest he comes to genuine amusement. "Bold. Like

your mother." He shifts toward me. "You didn't bring Patrick Gallagher's daughter to my home for social niceties. What war are you declaring today, son?"

"No war. A reckoning." I lean forward. "Liam Gallagher's men tried to take Aoife today. Five of my men died, including Connor."

"Regrettable." No emotion colors the word. "But hardly surprising. The Gallaghers want their princess back. You killed your own brother, you don't see me starting a war."

"It wasn't Patrick Gallagher's orders," I counter. "It was Liam's. Working with your blessing, just as Finn did."

The accusation lands in perfect silence. My father's expression doesn't change, but his left hand tightens on the wheelchair armrest.

"You always did have a vivid imagination."

"Finn confessed before I put a bullet in his heart." The memory still burns. "Three years of betrayal, feeding information to the Gallaghers. The same timeline as your convenient 'retirement.'"

"You executed your brother on a suspicion?" My father clicks his tongue. "Hasty."

"On a confession," I correct. "The same one that points to you as the architect. Divide and conquer—your favorite strategy. Pitting families against each other while positioning your own pieces."

"If I wanted the Gallaghers destroyed, I'd have done it decades ago." His dismissal comes too quickly.

"Destruction was never your goal," I press. "Control was. You've been orchestrating this showdown for years—Finn feeding information to Liam, keeping the conflict simmering without boiling over. Maintaining equilibrium while you positioned Seamus to challenge me."

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Aoife shifts beside me. "The succession traditions he mentioned at Kilmainham."

My father focuses intently on her. "Perceptive. Your father mentioned your intelligence. How God damned annoying it is."

"My father discussed me with you?" Surprise colors her tone.

"Patrick and I have maintained...communication over the years." A smile toys with his lips. "Know your enemies, and all that."

The admission confirms my suspicions. "You've been working with Patrick Gallagher all along."

"Working with? No." He adjusts his position with practiced dignity. "Maintaining balance. Dublin prospers when power is distributed evenly. No one should have it all. Your kidnapping of Miss Gallagher disrupted that balance."

"Yet you didn't intervene," Aoife notes. "Even knowing where I was. Not one attempt to stop me."

"Intervention proved unnecessary when the outcomes aligned with interests." My father gestures vaguely. "Your captivity accelerated certain... long term plans."

The implications ripple through me. "You wanted me to discover Finn's betrayal."

"I wanted you to grow beyond blind loyalty to family." His tone hardens. "The Donovan-Gallagher feud is outdated, expensive, and counterproductive. Your

grandfather's vendetta, your obsession. I indulged it while useful. That time has passed."

"So, you sacrificed Finn," I state flatly. "Your own son."

"Finn sacrificed himself through poor choices." No remorse shadows his words. "As did your brother Liam," he adds to Aoife.

She straightens beside me. "What do you mean?"

"Liam overplayed his position. The arrangement was controlled conflict—not the assassination of Donovan soldiers. Not your kidnapping." My father turns back to me. "Actions have consequences. Liam's choices forced your father's hand, just as Finn's forced yours."

Understanding dawns, cold and crystalline. "Tomorrow's meeting with Patrick Gallagher—you arranged it."

"Suggested the timing, perhaps." My father's non-answer confirms everything. "This city needs stability. The Donovan's and Gallaghers tearing each other apart benefits only our competitors."

"And what role did you envision for me in this grand design?" Bitterness edges my question.

"Leadership, of course." He speaks as if addressing a slow child. "Once you outgrew your vendetta against the Gallaghers. Once you recognized the value of an alliance over endless bloodshed."

"Alliance." I taste the word, glancing at Aoife. "You couldn't have predicted this."

"Predicted? No." My father's assessment turns calculating. "Hoped for? Perhaps. The Gallagher girl has certain qualities this family needs. Qualities your children might inherit."

Aoife's sharp intake of breath matches my own disgust. "You orchestrated all this—Finn's betrayal, Liam's coup attempt—to arrange a marriage alliance?"

"Orchestrated is too strong. Influenced. Nudged." He shrugs his good shoulder. "The board was set. Pieces moved."

"We're not your chess pieces." Aoife's voice turns glacial. "Not your bloodline savior, or breeding stock."

"My dear, everyone in Dublin is my chess piece. Have been for forty years." No arrogance in the statement—simple cold fact. "The question is whether you'll play the role assigned, or futilely resist the inevitable."

I stand, unable to contain the fury building beneath my skin. "You made Finn betray me. You knew I'd kill him for it."

"You chose how to react." No mercy softens his assessment. "Just as you chose to take Miss Gallagher rather than negotiate with her father. Just as you chose to bring her here tonight. Free will exists, son. I merely set the guardrails so you move in the right direction."

"You made me a monster," I whisper, the realization breaking something loose inside me. "Everything I am—the violence, the control, the inability to trust—you crafted it. Deliberately."

"I made you strong," he corrects. "Capable of leading this family through troubled waters."

"No." I shake my head. "You made me in your image. Cold. Calculating. Willing to sacrifice anyone—even family—for power."

Aoife stands beside me, her hand finding mine. The simple gesture centers me, anchors me against the rage threatening to consume everything.

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"You made me a monster," I repeat, voice stronger. "She's teaching me I can be someone else."

My father shifts in his chair—surprise, perhaps, or disappointment. "Melodrama doesn't suit you, Cormac."

"Neither does being your puppet." Decision crystallizes, sudden yet inevitable. "I'm done."

"Done?" His laugh holds no humor. "One doesn't simply walk away from family responsibilities."

"Watch me." I turn to leave, Aoife's hand still in mine.

"If you walk out that door," my father calls, "you forfeit everything. The business. The territory. Your birthright."

I pause at the threshold, turning back one final time. "Keep it. I've paid enough for the Donovan name."

"You'll have nothing," he warns. "No protection. No resources. Every enemy you've made will come hunting."

"I'll have what matters." I glance at Aoife, finding strength in her unwavering support. "The rest is just decorations."

Outside, night has fallen dark. Seamus stands near my car.



"Your father?—"

"Is no longer my concern," I cut him off. "Congratulations, Uncle. The Donovan empire is yours, as you've always wanted."

Confusion flickers in his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm out." The words taste like freedom. "The title, the business, the blood feud—all yours. May it bring you joy. Or death, I truly don't give a fuck."

Understanding dawns. "You can't just walk away."

"Already have." I open Aoife's door, then circle to the driver's side. "Consider this my formal abdication."

"The associates won't accept this," Seamus protests. "The territory arrangements, the alliances?—"

"Your problem now." I start the engine. "One piece of advice, don't underestimate Patrick Gallagher. Or his daughter."

As we pull away, Aoife's hand finds my thigh. "You just gave up your entire inheritance. Your family legacy."

"Legacy." The word tastes bitter. "What legacy? Blood and betrayal? Children sacrificed for power? Some inheritances are not worth the sacrifice."

The estate shrinks in my rearview mirror—thirty years of memories, duty, and obligation fading with each mile. Strange hollowness fills my chest, not quite grief, not quite relief.

"What now?" Aoife asks as Dublin's lights appear on the horizon.

"Now we prepare for tomorrow's meeting with your father." I navigate toward the lake house. "And hope like fuck he likes me."

My phone vibrates—unknown number flashing on the screen. I answer on speaker.

"Where are you?" a voice asks without preamble. "Seamus is calling everyone, saying you've lost your mind. That you've renounced your position." My brothers never call me—not the ones that are hiding from dear old dad.

"It's true," I confirm. "I'm out. The Donovan empire belongs to Seamus now. He called you, so you are on his good side."

Silence stretches between us. "Because of the Gallagher girl?"

"Because I'm tired of becoming my father to please my father." The admission comes easier than expected. "What's your status?"

"Complicated. Seamus wants everyone to report to the estate immediately. Loyalty test, I'm guessing."

"Then go," I tell him. "Your position doesn't need to change."

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"Fuck that." The vehemence surprises me. "I don't work for dad. I work for you. Always have."

Unexpected emotion tightens my throat. "This won't be the comfortable arrangement you're used to. I've walked away from everything. I can't keep you safe, or hidden now. Things will change."

"Not everything," he counters. "Where are you? I'll bring what supplies I can before Seamus locks down the accounts."

I provide the lake house address, disconnecting with newfound appreciation for loyalty freely given rather than coerced.

Aoife is silent until we turn onto the private road leading to the lake house. "Your brothers might not be your only allies. Giovanni Russo seemed impressed at Kilmainham. The younger associates too."

"Allies require something worth allying with," I remind her. "I've just surrendered everything of value."

Her laugh—unexpected, genuine—fills the car. "You surrendered a name and some property. The most valuable asset in your arsenal sits right here."

"My car?"

She swats my arm. "Your brain, idiot. The connections you've built. The respect you've earned separate from the Donovan name. It's a nice car, though."

We park outside the lake house, darkness shrouding the modern structure. Inside, Aoife immediately activates security systems while I check entry points—a synchronized dance we've perfected in our short time together.

"Tomorrow changes everything," I note, sensing her movement through the space with growing familiarity. "Your father will want you home."

"Probably." She approaches, stopping just beyond my reach. "Is that what you want?"

The question carries weights beyond its simplicity. What do I want? Twenty-four hours ago, the answer seemed clear—victory over the Gallaghers, consolidation of power, continuation of the Donovan legacy.

Now, having abandoned that legacy, the answer shifts.

"I want you safe," I begin, honest in ways I've rarely allowed myself. "I want Liam to pay for his betrayal—both of you and your father. I want..."

The words falter. Some truths remain difficult to articulate, even now.

"What do you want, Cormac?" She steps closer, challenge in every line of her body. "Say it."

"I want you." Simple truth, complex implications. "Not as leverage. Not as a treaty condition. Just you."

Her smile—slow, dangerous—sends heat curling through me. "Then take me."

The invitation ignites something primal. I close the distance between us, lifting her against me in one fluid movement. Her legs wrap around my waist as I carry her toward the bedroom, her mouth hot and demanding against mine.

I deposit her on the mattress, following her down until my weight pins her to the sheets. Her hands make quick work of my shirt buttons, pushing fabric aside to expose skin she maps with greedy fingers.

"All that power," she murmurs, nails scraping lightly down my chest. "All that control. Surrendered because of morals."

"Disappointed?" I capture her wrists, pinning them above her head.

"Intrigued." She arches beneath me, the friction against my hardening cock nearly unbearable even through layers of clothing. "The monster with a conscience. The captor who sets himself free."

I release her wrists to strip her sweater over her head, exposing black lace beneath. "Not entirely free." My mouth finds the pulse point at her throat.

Her hands fumble with my belt as I unhook her bra, exposing perfect breasts to my hungry mouth. I lavish attention on each nipple, alternating between gentle suction and sharp nips that pull delicious sounds from her throat.

"Too many clothes," she gasps, shoving at my pants. "Need you. Now."

The desperate edge in her voice shatters remaining restraint. I strip us both with efficient movements, settling between her spread thighs. My fingers find her center, slick and ready for me. I circle her entrance teasingly, gathering her wetness before sliding two fingers deep inside her velvet heat.

"Christ," I growl, feeling her inner walls clench around my fingers. "So, fucking wet already."

"Because of you," she pants, hips rising to meet my touch. "What you did

tonight—walking away from everything—it was the sexiest thing I've ever witnessed."

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I curl my fingers inside her, finding that ridged spot that makes her thighs tremble. "Turned on by rebellion, princess?"

"By strength," she corrects, a moan escaping as I add a third finger, stretching her. "True strength, not the kind your father pretends to have."

Her words feed something dark and desperate within me. I withdraw my fingers, replacing them with the head of my cock, teasing her entrance without pushing inside. Her wetness coats me, hot and slick against my sensitive tip.

"Tell me what you want," I demand, needing to hear her surrender.

"You," she gasps, hands clutching my shoulders. "All of you. Hard. Deep. Now."

I push forward in one powerful thrust, burying myself to the hilt in her tight heat. The sensation nearly undoes me—wet, velvet walls gripping my cock like a vice, her body stretching to accommodate my size. I freeze, buried deep, fighting for control.

"Fuck," I groan, forehead pressed to hers. "You feel incredible."

"Move," she commands, nails digging into my back. "Please, Cormac."

I withdraw slowly, savoring the drag of her flesh against mine, before driving back in with enough force to shift the mattress beneath us. Her moan—half pleasure, half pain—sends a fresh surge of blood to my already aching cock.

I establish a punishing rhythm, each thrust deeper than the last. The headboard slams

against the wall as I pound into her, claiming her with a ferocity born of the day's revelations. Each stroke drives home what words can't express—that she's mine, that I'd give up empires for her, that nothing matters but this connection between us.

"Touch yourself," I command, lifting slightly to create space between our bodies. "Show me how you make yourself come when I'm not inside you."

Her hand slides between us, fingers finding her clit while I continue thrusting into her. The sight of her pleasuring herself while taking my cock is obscenely erotic—her fingers working quick circles while her other hand grips my bicep for support.

"That's it," I encourage, reducing my pace to deeper, more controlled strokes. "Show me what you need."

"Just like this," she breathes, fingers working faster as her inner walls begin to flutter around my shaft. "So deep... feels so full..."

I angle my hips to hit that perfect spot inside her with each thrust, grinding against her on each downstroke. Her breath comes in short gasps, body tensing beneath me as she approaches the edge.

"Come for me," I growl, fighting my own release. "Let me feel your pussy squeeze my cock when you shatter."

My crude words push her over. Her back arches off the bed, a strangled cry tearing from her throat as her inner walls clamp down on me in rhythmic pulses. The sensation is exquisite torture—her body milking my cock with each wave of her orgasm.

I continue thrusting through her climax, prolonging her pleasure while chasing my own. When her spasms begin to subside, I flip her onto her stomach in one fluid movement, pulling her hips up as I drive into her from behind.



"Oh God," she moans, face pressed into the mattress as I mount her. "Cormac!"

This position allows me to penetrate even deeper, the head of my cock pressing against her cervix with each thrust. I grip her hips hard enough to bruise, holding her in place as I take her with primal possession.

"Mine," I growl, one hand sliding up her spine to tangle in her hair. I pull gently, arching her back at a more severe angle. "Say it."

"Yours," she gasps, pushing back against each thrust. "Completely yours."

The submission, freely given, triggers my release. I drive into her one final time, holding deep as my cock pulses, filling her with hot spurts of my seed. The orgasm tears through me with unexpected force, pleasure radiating from my core through every nerve ending.

For long moments afterward, I remain inside her, unwilling to break our connection. My body drapes over hers, both of us slick with sweat, breathing synchronized in the aftermath of shared pleasure.

Eventually, I withdraw carefully, rolling to my side and bringing her with me. She nestles against my chest, heartbeat gradually slowing against mine.

"What happens tomorrow?" she asks finally, voice soft in the darkness.

"We meet your father," I answer, fingers tracing patterns on her bare hip.

"And us?" The question carries weight beyond its simplicity.

"Complicated," I admit. "Your father won't approve. My family will consider it a betrayal. The old guards of both organizations will resist."

"Since when do you care about approval?" Her hand finds mine, fingers interlacing. "The man who just walked away from his birthright?"

"Fair point." I press a kiss to her forehead. "What do you want, Aoife? After all this?"

She considers the question, silence stretching between us. "Freedom," she says finally. "Not from you. From expectations. From legacies built on blood. From becoming what our fathers wanted rather than who we could be."

The answer resonates deeper than expected. "Freedom," I repeat, testing the concept. "I'm not sure I'd recognize it. My father wanted me to marry you?"

"We'll learn together." Her confidence warms something long cold inside me. "Starting tomorrow. Your father's an idiot."

As she drifts toward sleep in my arms, I contemplate the day's revelations. Twenty-four hours ago, I was Cormac Donovan, heir to Dublin's most powerful criminal enterprise. Now I'm simply Cormac—still dangerous, still wealthy from personal accounts, but untethered from generations of obligation.

The meeting tomorrow is no longer about restoring Donovan supremacy or punishing Gallagher treachery. Instead, about charting a course neither family has traveled—one where enemies are allied.