



# Her Michigan Mob Boss

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Crime And Mafia

**Description:** I crossed an ocean to find my family. What I found, was so much more than I bargained for...

A strip club in Detroit isn't where I expected my search to lead me, but here I am.

And here he is.

Ciaran Reilly. Tall, gorgeous, with piercing dark eyes and a smirk designed to drive a girl crazy. He tells me to back off my search, to stay away, and when I refuse he puts me over his knee and spansks me until I beg for mercy.

And then he takes me to heights of pleasure I've never known.

But there's more to Ciaran Reilly than just being some hot, bossy guy I met in a bar. Ciaran is the kind of man who demands obedience, no questions asked.

Except, I have lots of questions. Starting with who the hell does he think he is? And what does he know about my family?

The biggest question of all, though, is how the hell I'm supposed to live without him when I leave...

**Total Pages (Source):** 54

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

## ChapterOne

### Annie

Apprehension gripped me as my cab pulled away, leaving me on the sidewalk outside a sleazy-looking club. I couldn't help wondering if I'd made a huge mistake in coming here. So far, I hadn't ventured far from my hotel in downtown Detroit. I'd spent the last week admiring the amazing architecture, shopping in fabulous stores and visiting museums. I relaxed at the manmade beach in the park and tried pizza at a dozen different restaurants. Before I came to Detroit, I preferred a thin crust, but the pizza here was totally addictive. I'd have packed up my life in Scotland and moved to the States for the pepperoni alone.

Everywhere I'd gone, people had been friendly, but something about this place made me think I was about to experience another side of the city. The club looked shady with a capital S.

When I decided to break out of my comfort zone and make the trip across the Atlantic in search of long-lost relatives, I hadn't imagined my quest would lead me somewhere so unlike anywhere I'd been before. It's not that I had some moral objection to strip clubs. It was just that Lucky Lola's Lounge was waving several big red flags at me.

For starters, it was in a run-down area far from the tourist spots. Several buildings on the street had boarded-up windows on the first-floor level. One empty unit looked as if someone had tried to burn it down. Scorch marks blackened the bricks. Most of the cars parked on the street were ready for the scrap heap. One looked as if there was

nothing holding it together but rust. Every second streetlight seemed to be out of commission. If it wasn't for the garish pink neon sign hanging over the door of the club, it would be pretty dark.

The doorman stationed outside the club appeared to be as rough as his surroundings. Heavily set with a severe buzz cut, he looked like he'd gone ten rounds with Anthony Joshua. His nose was flat and squidgy. I guessed it had been broken more than once. With his towering height and muscular build, he was intimidating enough, but he also carried a weapon. One of those jagged-edge hunting knives, it stuck out of the belt of his jeans for anyone to see. Though I knew little about the law in Michigan, I doubted it was legal. It wasn't as if there were any elk in downtown Detroit.

The cab driver who brought me to the club from my swanky hotel in the Book Cadillac building had asked me a dozen times if I was sure this was where I wanted to go. Now that I was here, I understood. The whole place reeked of lawlessness and neglect. Part of me wanted to turn and flee, but it might be my last chance to track down one of the elusive descendants of my mother's great-uncle Johnny, so I resisted the urge. Pulling up my big-girl panties, I walked to the door.

As I approached, the doorman tilted his head to one side and studied me, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"You lost, princess?" The words rumbled up from deep inside him.

A princess, I was not, but I guessed not too many people dressed so demurely to visit a strip club. Wanting to make a good impression if I finally tracked down Danny Mulhearn, I'd worn a cute blue floral dress that fell below my knee. On its own, it screamed innocence. Paired with the fluffy white cardigan I brought in case the temperature dipped below sweltering at any point, it was positively angelic. The virginal vibe it gave off was all wrong for this place.

“Yes, I am, unfortunately.”

The doorman flashes me a grim smile that told me no woman found herself at Lola’s unless she’d been extremely unlucky.

“You twenty-one?” he asked.

“Yes.” In fact, I’d turned twenty-three less than a month ago. I hoped he wouldn’t ask me to prove it, though, because I’d left my passport and driver’s license in the safe in my hotel room. Carrying such important documents around with me seemed like a bad idea.

The doorman looked me over once more. He said nothing, but nodded toward the door. Either he took me at my word about my age or he really didn’t care if I was old enough. I suspected it was the latter.

It was too much to expect him to be a gentleman and open the door for me, so I walked past him and entered the club. Expecting to be immediately thrust into a rabble of leering men staring at bare breasts and other body parts, I was relieved to walk into a quiet reception area. A woman, probably around my age, sat behind a counter that looked like it was made of white plastic. Her bright-pink hair clashed violently with the vivid corset she wore.

“Hey!” She smiled warmly as she greeted me. “You lost?”

Well, that confirmed what the doorman thought. I was totally out of place. “I, eh, I’m looking for someone.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“His name’s Danny Mulhearn.”

Her face fell. It wasn't the first time I'd seen this reaction when I mentioned his name. Clearly, the man was bad news. That should have deterred me, but I'd flown over from Scotland to find a connection with my late mother's family. Even if he turned out to be an asshole, I wanted to meet him.

"Oh, he doesn't really come around here anymore."

Disappointment swamped me as I learned my only lead was out of date, but perhaps it wasn't a totally lost cause.

"Can I go in and see if anyone knows him?"

"Sure." She motioned toward the white-leather-padded door to her left.

As I pushed it open, heavy pounding music hit me. It wasn't as loud as I thought it would be, but I imagined if I stayed in the club too long, I'd end up with a headache. The club seemed busy for a Wednesday night. Dozens of men sat at tables close to the stage. Surprisingly few of them were watching the three scantily clad women who danced for them. Instead, they talked to each other or looked at their phones. A few more people occupied booths at the far side of the room. There was only one guy sitting at the bar, so I took a seat at the opposite end to him. I needed to build up my courage before I asked anyone about Danny.

"What'll it be?" The bartender came over as I tried to haul myself up onto a high stool. Though taller than the average woman, I still struggled to climb up. Were these seats made for giants?

"Do you have any wine?" I asked as I finally got settled.

The older man's arched eyebrow said are you shitting me? He carried the air of someone who'd seen things that would terrify most people.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“Okay, can you make a cocktail, then?” I paused to consider what would be relatively straightforward for him to make. “Like a martini?”

“You want something like a martini, or an actual martini?”

I winced at his gruff tone. The man’s customer service skills were seriously lacking.

“A martini, please.”

He nodded curtly. “That, I can handle.”

The way he rummaged behind the bar made me wonder if he was new. He didn’t appear to know where anything was. Eventually, he found a cocktail shaker and set about making my drink. I noticed he used gin rather than the vodka I prefer. I should have been more specific about my request, but it was too late. There was no way I was asking this guy to start over.

When he was done, he turned to fetch a glass from the shelf behind him. There wasn’t a stemmed glass, so he opted instead to pour my martini into a whiskey tumbler. With a twist of the lips that dared me to challenge him on the presentation and distinct lack of olives, he shoved the glass across the bar to me.

I opened my purse, unsure whether I was supposed to pay for my drink now or if it was the sort of place where I had to start a tab and settle later. I didn’t have to work it out, because a man’s voice suddenly rumbled into my consciousness.

“The lady’s drink is on me.”

“That’s generous, but...” I swiveled in my seat to look at the owner of the deep, seductive voice and found a man standing behind me. Whatever objection I’d been about to raise, it died on my lips the minute my eyes landed on him. He was stunning. Tall, with an athletic build, he wore a beautifully tailored suit in a pale-blue shade that worked well for a warm summer night. His white shirt was open at the neck to reveal lightly tanned skin and a smattering of brown hair, just enough to suggest rugged masculinity but without veering into Yeti territory. If I had to guess, I’d have put him in his late twenties.

His dark, tousled hair gave him that irresistible just rolled out of bed look. His face was angular and clean-shaven. The sharpness of his features might have made him appear mean if it wasn’t for the slightly crooked smile on his full, kissable lips. Thank goodness he had one imperfection because otherwise I’d have thought I was in the presence of a god.

“Mind if I join you?” He was already easing himself onto the stool next to me, so I guessed the question was rhetorical. Something about his manner told me this man didn’t ask permission. He raised his hand to get the bartender’s attention. “Bring me a beer, Jojo.”

He knew the bartender’s name. Did that mean he was a regular at the club? That would be a black mark against him if he was.

“Do you come here often?” I winced as the cliché left my lips.

He shook his head. “I call in now and then, when I have business in the area.”

His attention was diverted from me as the bartender set a bottle of beer down next to him. It wasn’t a brand I recognized. My companion took a sip and grimaced. Why did I think beer was not his usual drink? The bottle didn’t sit right in his hand. It was too casual for a man who carried his air of sophistication. I could picture him with a glass

of the finest whiskey my homeland had to offer, one of the more exclusive Macallans, perhaps.

“I’m Ciaran, by the way.”

“Annie,” I offered in return. It was actually Annabelle, but I’d always hated my full name. Next to the Islas and Sarahs I was at school with, it sounded pretentious.

“Annie? That’s cute.” His smile almost melted my panties. “So, what brings you to a place like this, Annie?”

“I’m on vacation.”

His eyebrows lifted. “You’re staying somewhere around here?”

“No.” I refrained from adding an indignant of course note in case he lived in the neighborhood. The way he was dressed, I doubted it, but you never know. “I’m staying in a hotel downtown.” I didn’t tell him which one. Sexy or not, the man was a stranger.

“This place is off the beaten track for a tourist.”

“Yes, it is.” I sipped my drink, and my eyes widened. It was stronger than I thought it would be, heavy on the vermouth. “It’s certainly different.”

Ciaran nodded. “So, where are you from, Annie?”

“Scotland, a small town just outside of Aberdeen.” There was no point elaborating. He’d probably never heard of Aberdeen, never mind Inverurie. “This is my first trip to America.”



“And you picked Detroit?” He couldn’t hide his disbelief.

“Nothing wrong with Detroit.” Aside from this dump, the city had been amazing, surpassing my admittedly low expectations.

“Of course not.” His tone was defensive. “I love my hometown, but most people would pick New York for their first visit, wouldn’t they? Or Disneyland?”

He had a point. When I told people I was flying to the States, they assumed I’d be going to one of those places. “Maybe, but I’m trying to track down some distant family members who live here.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

Ciaran smiled. “Let me guess. You did one of those ancestry things, the DNA test?”

“No, I mean, yes.” I had done one of those in the past. “But I didn’t find anyone in Detroit through that. I’m going by the stories my mother told me.”

“Oh, did your mom come with you?”

A lump formed in my throat, the loss still raw. “No, she died six months ago.”

Ciaran reached over and rubbed my arm reassuringly before sitting back again, putting some space between us.

“Anyway,” I continued, breaking our moment of connection, “she always wanted to track down her grandfather’s family. I thought it would be nice to find them.”

“Family’s important.” Ciaran took a swig of his beer and grimaced. “So, who is it you’re looking for?”

“A distant cousin. His name’s Danny Mulhearn.”

“Danny Mulhearn.” Ciaran’s tone was suddenly flatter. “He’s Irish. I thought you said you were from Scotland.”

“I am, but my great-grandfather came from Dublin. He moved to Detroit with his brother, but only stayed a month. He didn’t like it much, so he decided to try his luck in Scotland. When he met my great grandma, he fell head over heels in love and married her.”

“But his brother stayed here?”

“He did. He settled down and raised a family. Danny’s the only name my mom could remember. I came here tonight because a guy I met at the ice rink told me I might be able to find him here.”

“Ice rink?” Ciaran asked.

“The arena, uh, Little Caesar’s Arena.” Why did I say that as if I didn’t expect him to have heard of it? The man just told me this was his hometown. “My mother remembered hearing that Danny’s father operated the ice-scraping thing there.”

“You mean the Zamboni?”

“Yes, that’s it. Anyway, he retired years ago, apparently, but this security guard knew Danny. He suggested I try here.”

Ciaran pinched the bridge of his nose with his forefinger and thumb as if I was giving him a headache.

“So, let me get this straight. You’ve been running all over the city, asking about the Mulhearns. Some random guy told you you’d find him at a strip club and you came on your own to this shithole neighborhood to look for him. Is that what you’re telling me?”

I bristled at the tone of his voice. We’d only met a few minutes ago. The man had no right to chastise me.

“I know it was risky, but I’ve gotten nowhere so far, and I fly home the day after tomorrow.”

“Why didn’t you just track your relatives down online?”

Admittedly, that would have been easier and a hell of a lot less expensive.

“I thought it would be more fun to do it the old-fashioned way, you know, putting in the legwork. I suppose I was looking for an adventure.”

“Adventure?” Ciaran scoffed. He set down his beer bottle and leaned closer to me. “Listen, Annie, you seem like a sweet girl, so I’m going to give you some advice. Don’t bother looking for Danny Mulhearn. Whatever it is you need, he can’t give it to you.”

“But...”

“No buts, sweetheart. My associate will take you back to your hotel.” He pointed to a tall blond man roughly the same age as him, who was standing by the door. In a black suit and tie, despite the lingering heat, he looked like an undertaker. The grim expression on his face certainly didn’t help. “Tomorrow, you’ll do a little shopping or visit a gallery, whatever it is you like to do. Then you’ll get on your plane, go home and tell everyone you failed to find your family, but had fun trying.”

My mouth fell open in shock. How dare he dictate to me like that? “I...”

“I’m not done.” The command in his voice killed my protest.

I shouldn’t have found the authoritarian tone hot, but my traitorous thighs clenched anyway.

“If you disobey me, I will find out about it. Be a good girl and our paths won’t cross again. If they do, I’ll spank your ass raw. Do you understand?”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

Shock ricocheted through me. No man had ever threatened to spank me before. I started to ask who the hell he thought he was, but I was frozen. And I couldn't deny the way his offhanded threat had affected me.

"Do you understand?" Ciaran repeated when I didn't answer quickly enough.

I gulped loudly. "Yes, I understand."

"Good." He rose from his chair.

I expected him to walk away, but he didn't. He muttered something under his breath that might have been a curse. Then he bent to kiss me. His lips were soft and warm as they brushed over mine with a tenderness that made my toes curl. He curved a hand around the back of my neck and held me in place as he deepened the kiss. His tongue pushed past my lips, and my breath hitched.

Just as I started to kiss him back, he pulled away, smiling at me with what I assumed was regret. "It was nice meeting you, Annie."

This time, he walked off, leaving me with my heart in my throat and my panties in a bunch. I stared after him like a lovesick schoolgirl as he crossed the club to speak to the man he said would take me home. After a brief exchange, Ciaran disappeared through the exit. The temptation to follow him almost overwhelmed me, but a stronger desire to hold on to my dignity rooted me to the spot.

"Come on, Miss," his employee said as he approached me. "There's nothing for you here."

Sadly, he was right. As he took my arm, his grip was firm enough to show he meant business, but not firm enough to hurt me. A heavy weight settled in my chest as we headed to the door. It was odd. I'd only just met Ciaran, but leaving I felt as if I'd lost something. Him walking away after that bone-melting kiss hurt more than it should have. Tears threatened to fall, but I blinked them back. The sooner I could fly home and put this trip behind me, the better.

## Chapter Two

### Ciaran

Although I was used to navigating legal documents I couldn't make sense of the information on the screen in front of me. I'd arrived at the office earlier than usual but so far had done nothing productive. As I stared at the laptop, I stifled a yawn.

Considering some of the dubious things I'd done in my life, I usually slept surprisingly soundly. Last night, I hadn't. For hours, I'd tossed and turned, unable to find peace no matter what position I tried. I counted sheep, imagined myself walking slowly down a long flight of stairs, and did breathing exercises. I even played sounds of the ocean I found on a meditation app. None of it worked.

It wasn't my conscience that bothered me. The men whose lives I'd taken to protect my family's interests were not the ones that haunted me. It was Annie, the woman I met at Lola's. Every time I closed my eyes, my mind drifted back to her, and I had to fight the urge to go and claim her.

When I'd seen Annie on the security feed, walking into Lola's, my curiosity was piqued. Not a lot of women came to the club, and none that looked as sweet, innocent and obviously out of place as she did. It was clear someone like her didn't belong in that dump. According to the information I'd had my men dig up on her after she left, Miss Annabelle Calder was a twenty-three-year-old teacher at a tiny village school.

Since her mother died, she'd lived alone in the house where she grew up. There was nothing remarkable about Annie's life, but there was no denying the woman herself was something special.

In her flowery dress and cardigan, with that golden hair cascading over her shoulders, she looked like a princess who'd unwittingly wandered into the dragon's lair. There were plenty of men in Lola's last night who'd have taken advantage of her. Thankfully, I got to her first.

It was purely a coincidence I was there. Lola's wasn't somewhere I went unless necessary. It was one of several properties my father acquired before his untimely death and my first thought had been to sell it. I had no interest in owning a sleazy strip club, but my brother, Sean, persuaded me not to. It turned out the club was surprisingly valuable, not so much for the money it raked in, but because the clients often shared information with the dancers. They told them all sorts of things they should definitely have kept to themselves.

I had to drop into Lola's to deal with a staff issue. Several employees had quit after a fight with the manager, a waste of fresh air called Ronnie. When I learned he'd been putting his slimy hands on the female bartenders, I fired him. Then, for good measure, I had my men teach him a lesson he wouldn't soon forget, because shit like that could not go unpunished in my organization.

With nobody there to work the bar, one of my enforcers, Jojo Sullivan, had to step in to serve drinks. That was a disaster waiting to happen. He lacked the sunny demeanor required in the hospitality industry. Thankfully, he hadn't had the chance to drive away too many customers before the regular staff agreed to return.

It was all a pain in my ass, but the silver lining was obvious. If I hadn't had that headache to deal with, I wouldn't have met Annie. Our conversation may have been short, but I enjoyed spending time with her and found myself inexplicably drawn to

her. Annie was beautiful, for sure. She had delicate features and these enormous, beguiling blue eyes, but that wasn't what drew me in. Her warmth and openness appealed to me.

While people who knew my reputation were rightfully wary of me, she was unguarded. She spoke to me like I was a regular guy and not the ruthless head of the Reilly family, whose ass everyone felt obligated to kiss.

The moment she said she was looking for that scumbag, Danny Mulhearn, my heart sunk. The name of that vile creature should never have touched her soft pink lips. Mulhearn rose from lowly street thug to become second-in-command of the Cleary family, our deadliest rivals. Even among the crime families who operated in Michigan, he was considered a nasty piece of work and he'd been orchestrating moves against my family for months now.

I hoped Annie would heed my warning to drop her search for Mulhearn. Just asking about him could have gotten her into trouble. His name rubbed people the wrong way. If, by chance, someone did point her in his direction, it wouldn't have led to anything good. Unlike me, the lowlife had no problem with hurting women. If he thought there was a way to use a long-lost relative for his gain, he'd have shown no hesitation.

Speaking to Annie was great, but kissing her was a mistake. I shouldn't have regretted tasting those perfect lips, but I did because it left me yearning for more. Sadly, I wouldn't be able to indulge my desire to explore every inch of her beautiful body. She was leaving soon, and I couldn't offer her a reason to stay. A girl like Annie deserved romance, the possibility of a committed relationship. To fuck her and cast her aside would have been criminal.

Several of my men, the older guys mainly, had been hassling me to pick a bride. They believed marriage would show I was serious about the future, stable in a way that my



volatile, womanizing father wasn't. He'd lost the respect of a lot of his men when he left my mother to raise my siblings and me alone. They didn't want to see me following his destructive path.

I'd been giving serious thought to marriage for some time. Annie would suit me well, but there would be no benefit to a union with some random woman I'd just met. I needed a bride with the right connections if I was to expand the Reilly empire, so I didn't know why I was even thinking about Annie in terms of marriage. We'd only talked for a few minutes, and I didn't believe in love at first sight.

Did I?

"Hey, boss!"

I looked up as Max O'Byrne strolled into my office. Aside from my brothers, he was the person I trusted most in our fucked-up world. We'd been friends since middle school, so when I asked him to take Annie back to her hotel, I knew he would deliver her safely.

It was a relief when he reported back that she was staying in a five-star accommodation. I wanted her to be safe. The thought of her roaming about the city asking about a vicious criminal made me shudder. That's why I'd asked Max to have someone watch over her until she got back on her plane.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“Max.” I closed my laptop. I was supposed to be reading over the contracts to buy a parcel of land over in Dearborn that was ripe for development. So far, I hadn’t taken in a single word. “What’s happening?”

“Your girl is up and about.” He dropped onto the chair in front of my desk.

I glanced at the limited-edition Hublot watch on my wrist. It was barely eight o’clock. Annie was obviously an early riser. I liked that. I was always up with the lark myself.

“She’s not my girl,” I denied.

“But you want her to be.”

Max shot me a knowing look, and I shrugged.

“Come on, Ciaran, I saw how much you liked her.”

I aimed for nonchalance when I replied, “She’s a pretty girl.”

“It’s more than that. You were into her.”

“Maybe, but there’s no point pursuing her. She’s headed back to Scotland, and I need to get serious about finding a wife.”

“Hmm.” Max rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I hear Daria Costa’s engagement fell through.”

It had, because her fiancé found out she was spreading her legs for a dozen different men. Her promiscuity didn't bother me too much. I wasn't exactly a virgin myself and, if we married, I'd soon bring her into line.

There were definite advantages to a union with Daria. Marrying into the Chicago mob would have helped my organization expand its interests in Illinois. Unfortunately, that wasn't a bullet I was willing to take for the team. Daria was a spoiled brat. She whined constantly about everything and nothing. After ten minutes in her company, I'd probably have throttled her.

"She's too spoiled."

"You're probably right," Max conceded. "What about Ella Rossi?"

I screwed my nose up. "She's a kid."

"She just turned eighteen."

I shook my head. That was still nine years younger than me. While the age difference wasn't necessarily a deal-breaker, I couldn't consider Ella. She was naïve to the point I worried if she even knew the intimate things that went on between a man and a woman.

"Isabella Graziano?" Max tried.

Though the sister of the most powerful man in Cleveland ticked most of my boxes, I couldn't consider her. To become head of his family, her brother Francesco murdered his own father and two of his brothers. I would never enter negotiations with a man so lacking in honor. Apart from the fact he made me sick, he couldn't be trusted.

"Her brother's a snake."

Max nodded in agreement.

“A Russian, then? Kataryna Belkin is the right age. She’s unattached and not bad to look at. I hear she’s clever and ambitious, so she’ll keep you on your toes. Plus, her family has connections in Chicago, New York and Vegas, not to mention Moscow.”

Making an alliance with the Belkin Bratva wasn’t the worst idea. They had a global reach. Together, we would be a formidable force. I had to admit, the Russian heiress was already at the top of my list of potential brides. We would make a great couple, but now I couldn’t think of anyone but Annie. Perhaps once she’d left the country and was beyond my reach, I’d be able to let go of my desire for her.

Fuck! Who was I trying to kid? Scotland wasn’t beyond my reach. Hell, if Annie moved to the middle of the Antarctic, I would still be able to get to her. I’d just have to push her from my mind.

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to speak to Sergei Belkin about an alliance,” I told Max. “Set up a meeting.”

“You sure?”

Despite the nagging doubt twisting my gut, I nodded. Never one to waste time, Max took his cellphone from his pocket.

“Huh!” he exclaimed as he looked at the screen.

“What?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“Ritchie messaged me. Your girl’s on Woodward Avenue.”

There were several places she could be going, but I’d have bet good money she was headed for the arena. There was only one reason she would be going there, and it wasn’t to watch the Red Wings training. She was looking to speak to the guy who suggested she’d find Mulhearn at Lola’s. She obviously hadn’t heeded my warning.

“That little brat.” Pushing up from my seat, I jabbed a finger at Max. “Tell our guys to intercept her and bring her to my apartment.”

“Okay.” A huge grin spread across Max’s face. The cocky bastard knew me too well. I could never have resisted such a provocation. “And Sergei Belkin?”

“Leave it for now.” I would decide whether I wanted to pursue a relationship with his daughter later. Before I could even think about that, I needed to deal with Annie. She was about to learn what happened when you disobeyed me.

### ChapterThree

#### Annie

Although I was sure Ciaran meant well when he told me to stop searching for Danny Mulhearn, I couldn’t just give up. I’d flown thousands of miles to find my late mother’s relatives. I spent every penny of my savings on this trip, treating myself to first-class travel and a suite at a luxury hotel. Going home and telling everyone I failed was not an option.

I wasn't naïve enough to think I was going to experience some emotional reality-show-style reunion with Danny. The way people spoke about him told me he was unlikely to be interested in developing a relationship with a distant cousin from across the Atlantic. Even if we didn't have anything in common, I was hoping he'd point me toward other family members who might want to get to know me. I recalled my mother thinking Danny had a sister. If he did, it would be nice to meet her.

I walked toward the arena, hoping the security guard I spoke to yesterday would be on duty again. Tony was helpful in pointing me to Lola's Lounge, and he might have other suggestions of where I might look for Danny.

The closer I got to my destination, the more I felt as if I was doing something wrong. Ciaran's warning rung in my ears, and a shudder slipped down my spine as I remembered his words. Though I was startled when he warned me off my quest, I couldn't help being turned on by the stern tone of his voice. It did funny things to my insides when he threatened to spank me if our paths crossed again.

I wasn't entirely sure what to think about that. On the one hand, I was shocked a man would say something so blunt to a woman he'd only just met. On the other, I was intrigued by the possibility of experiencing something new. For a long time, I'd wanted to meet someone who was willing to experiment with some light bondage and the occasional spanking.

Neither of my former boyfriends would have been into it, so I'd never expressed my desires. I'd been too scared they would react with disgust. Jamie was too unimaginative to do any of the stuff I'd read about in books. Colin didn't even want to have the lights on when we had sex. Neither of them had the right personality to make a successful foray into BDSM. They both lacked that necessary air of dominance. If one of them had tried to take me over their knee, I would have died laughing.

Ciaran struck me as someone who knew what he was doing in the bedroom, but even with him I doubted a spanking would be the orgasmic experience it was in romance novels. I'd built up such a life-changing image in my mind, the real thing could only be a letdown.

Not that I'd ever get a chance to find out if Ciaran could deliver. The chances of running into the handsome American again were small. Detroit was a vast city, after all. Unless fate smiled on me, I wouldn't see him again. I'd just have to consign Ciaran and the tantalizing promise of his kiss to memory.

As I sauntered along the street, enjoying the pleasant warmth that would probably turn to unbearable heat later in the day, I realized someone was following me. Last night's visit to Lola's might have made it seem as if I was oblivious to the hazards of being a woman alone in a big city. In fact, I was constantly alert to danger and the hairs at the back of my neck were prickling in warning right now. I didn't turn to see who was behind me, but I could tell from their heavy footsteps it was a man.

Quickening my pace, I hurried toward the building that housed the arena's box office. I was getting close when a black SUV screeched to a halt in front of me and a man jumped out. Tall and muscular, with long dark hair and a scruffy beard, he looked like a barbarian who'd been stuffed into a smartly tailored suit. As I tried to step around him, he moved with me, blocking my path. I turned to find another man hemming me in. Presumably this stocky redhead was the person who'd been following me.

"Get in the car please, Miss Calder," the dark-haired man said.

How did he know my name? I narrowed my eyes as I tried to work out who the hell these guys were. They carried an unmistakable air of authority. Were they police? FBI? Had my search for Danny Mulhearn landed me on some CIA shitlist?

No, that was crazy. My imagination was running away with me. I shook my head to rid myself of those ridiculous thoughts. The man in front of me took the gesture as a refusal to do as he asked.

“Please don’t make this difficult, Miss Calder. I will use force if I have to.”

Shock froze me to the core. He was threatening to use physical means to get me into the car. These guys couldn’t be on the right side of the law, could they?

“Why?” I asked. “What do you want with me?”

“Our employer requests the pleasure of your company.”

As polite as that invitation was, it told me absolutely nothing. “Who’s your employer?”

“Mr. Reilly.” He said that with a level of pride that made me think the man he worked for was someone to be admired, but I had no clue who he was.

“I don’t know anyone called Reilly.”

“Well, he knows you.” The dark-haired man wrapped a hand around my upper arm. “He doesn’t like to be kept waiting, so get in the car.”

As he manhandled me closer to the vehicle, I frantically scanned the street around us. There was nobody who could help me. Lots of cars were passing, but I doubted anyone could see us as we were shielded from view by the enormous SUV. I was being abducted in broad daylight and there wouldn’t be any witnesses. Shit. These men knew what they were doing. I got the distinct impression they’d done this before. Were they mafia? Was there a big mafia scene in Detroit? I didn’t even know, but these guys sure seemed like they’d be some sort of mobster thugs.



I squealed in shock as the man grabbed my waist and lifted me into the car, forcing me out of my musings. Scrambling across the seat, I tried to open the opposite door and found it locked. Damn. I should have expected that. The dark-haired thug slid onto the back seat next to me, but kept a respectful distance.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“Seatbelt,” he reminded me as the other man got into the front seat next to the driver, an older man with a mop of unruly black hair.

I didn’t have to be told twice. Since escape was impossible, I drew my seat belt across my body and clicked it into place. The car pulled away from the curb and merged into the free-flowing traffic.

Breathing in deeply to calm my nerves, I took a moment to assess my situation. Perhaps it wasn’t as dire as it seemed. If these men meant me harm, they wouldn’t be concerned about my safety. So far, they hadn’t done anything too sinister, like putting a bag over my head or tying me up. If I was being kidnapped, they’d mostly been civil about it. Perhaps I should be grateful for that.

We drove in silence, but thankfully not for long. Less than ten minutes passed before we pulled into the underground parking garage of a tall, glass-fronted building. The neighborhood seemed nice. It was clean and modern, with some greenery. Appearances could be deceptive, but this didn’t look like the kind of place where people were brought to be murdered.

As the car drew to a stop next to an elevator, the dark-haired man jumped out and moved around the car to the opposite side. For a brief moment, I contemplated trying to make an escape, but he pulled the door open before I could finish the thought and offered me his hand. Taking it, I let him help me out of the car. The moment I was safely on my feet, he released me.

“The elevator goes to the penthouse.” He keyed a series of numbers into a metal panel at the side of the sliding doors, too fast for me to see what it was. “Mr. Reilly is

waiting.”

The doors opened, and he motioned for me to step inside.

“You’re not coming?”

He shook his head. It was ridiculous for me to be looking at him as a point of safety. The man had intercepted me on the street, shoved me into a car and brought me to this unknown location, yet I still wished he was coming with me. There was something reassuring about his stoic demeanor. Plus, he hadn’t actually hurt me. Who knew what this Mr. Reilly might do?

“Please, Miss Calder.” He gestured toward the open elevator.

I stepped inside and pressed the only button on the shiny gold panel. As the doors closed, I fiddled nervously with the strap of my purse. I reminded myself that Mr. Reilly, whoever he was, had no reason to harm me.

There was nothing to indicate how many floors I’d gone up, but by the time the elevator came to a halt, I’d managed to calm myself somehow. I stepped out into a large, open space that was bright and modern, with hardwood flooring and enormous windows that flooded the space with light. It took a moment for me to realize this was someone’s home. A faint scent of pine hung in the air.

A man stood by the window, hands in the pockets of his tailored beige pants. A white shirt stretched across the broad expanse of his back. He had a great butt, one I recognized.

“Ciaran?” I gasped as he turned around.

“Annabelle Louise Calder.” He acknowledged my presence with a curt nod, his use

of my full name letting me know both that he'd done some research on me and that he was angry

"You're Mr. Reilly?" The answer was obvious, but I wanted confirmation anyway.

"I am."

Indignation coursed through my veins. "You had me kidnapped!"

Ciaran snorted dismissively. "I'd hardly call it kidnapping."

"No, then what would you call having someone snatched off the street and brought to you?"

Rather than answering me, he shrugged. I watched as he crossed the room to sit on one of the enormous brown leather sofas that dominated the space. He set his cellphone down on the low wooden coffee table, unbuttoned his shirt cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. I couldn't help staring. He had strong forearms. His hands were incredibly masculine, too. I found myself wondering what they'd feel like roaming all over my ass.

Blinking away that distracting thought, I focused on my annoyance at being picked up and delivered to him like some object he could have moved around on a whim.

"Why am I here, Ciaran?"

"To answer for your disobedience."

My mouth popped open in surprise. "What disobedience?"

"You were heading to the arena to ask about Danny Mulhearn."

I shuffled awkwardly from one foot to the other, stunned at being caught. “You can’t possibly know that’s where I was going.”

Ciaran fixed me with a harsh stare that made me tremble and not just from fear. There was a familiar fluttering between my legs.

“Were you, or were you not, going to the arena to ask about that asshole, Annabelle?”

“Don’t call me that!” My parents were the only ones who ever called me Annabelle.  
“It’s Annie.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“Okay, Annie,” he conceded, “tell me the truth.”

Crumbing under the weight of his scrutiny, I chose honesty. “Yes, I was going to see if I could find Danny.”

“Didn’t I tell you to drop it?” Ciaran’s voice lowered by an octave and I got the sense I was in trouble.

“You did, but you’re not the boss of me.” That sounded so juvenile, I cringed. Shoving down my embarrassment at sounding like one of the little kids I taught, I folded my arms across my chest. “Did you bring me here just to tell me I shouldn’t have been looking for Danny?”

Ciaran shook his head slowly.

“Not just that. Think about it, Annie. What did I say would happen if I saw you again?”

Heat rushed to my cheeks as I recalled his threat. “You said you’d spank me.”

“That’s right. “Now, come and put yourself over my lap like a good girl.”

He patted his knee, and I thought I might spontaneously combust.

“You’re not serious?” A nervous laugh escaped me.

“I am deadly serious.” If his tone didn’t confirm he meant it, his unflinching gaze

would have. “Now, what’s it to be, sweetheart? Are you going to put yourself over my knee voluntarily, or do I have to come over there and get you?”

## ChapterFour

Ciaran

If looks could kill, I had no doubt the glare on Annie’s face would send me six feet under. She may not have realized it, but when I warned her there would be consequences if she continued her search for that asshole, I was deadly serious. It seemed I hadn’t gotten my point across. Perhaps I’d gone too easy on her at Lola’s. I hadn’t wanted to scare her. However, if I’d been firmer, maybe she wouldn’t have disregarded my warning. Of course, then I wouldn’t have had an excuse to see her again.

“How did you even know where I was?” Annie demanded.

“My men were watching you.”

Annie huffed in outrage. “You had people spying on me?”

“You wouldn’t even have known they were there if you’d done as you were told.”

She pursed her lips. “Actually, I was aware I was being followed. It gave me the creeps.”

Hmm. Either she was more aware of her surroundings than the average person or my men were slipping. There was no way she should have detected their presence. I’d need to have a word with Max and find out who he had trailing her because they clearly needed to do a better job.

“Well, I’m sorry if you felt uncomfortable, but I won’t apologize for ensuring your safety.”

“My safety is none of your concern.”

That was where she was wrong. For some inexplicable reason, the safety of this woman I barely knew was important to me. I was about to tell her as much, but she didn’t give me a chance.

“I mean, who the hell do you think you are, Ciaran Reilly?” Her cute Scottish accent became more pronounced as her anger rose. “Who do you think you are to dictate what I can and can’t do?”

There was something adorable about the way she spat at me like an irate kitten. She had a point. I had no right to tell her what to do, but I also had no intention of backing down, especially not when she was giving me attitude.

“I think I’m the man who’s going to take off his belt and whip your ass with it if you don’t get over here by the count of three.”

Annie’s entire body tensed. Rather than jumping to obey, she glanced back over her shoulder. She was probably calculating if it was worth the risk to run. It wasn’t. Even if she made it to the elevator before I caught her, she would need to enter the security code to gain access.

“One.” I started the count, deciding not to draw it out. “Two.”

With a resigned bob of the head, Annie dropped the small white purse she’d been clutching onto the table by the elevator and walked toward me. I was almost disappointed she surrendered so easily. Chasing her would have been fun.



“I... How do I do this?” She stopped in front of me and pulled her long, blonde ponytail over her right shoulder, twisting it with trembling fingers.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“You’ve never done this before?”

She shook her head. It wasn’t a surprise, since her nervousness was palpable. Few women I met outside of Dominion, the BDSM club my brother owned, had experienced a spanking. Usually, I was happy to introduce them to the dual sensations of pain and pleasure a good thrashing could bring.

“Just lie across my lap. I’ll take it from there.”

Annie hesitated for only a moment longer before stepping closer. She bent at the waist and draped herself over my knees. Her movements were tentative, yet graceful. This woman carried herself with an innate elegance. As she settled herself, with palms flat on the floor, she pushed up on her toes, putting her ass into just the right position.

Conveniently, she’d worn a dress. A vibrant blue, it made her eyes shine brighter. Fitting tightly at the top to emphasize her curves, it flared out over her hips. She’d worn white sneakers with it. I wasn’t sure if that was a fashion statement or a sign of a practical nature. Perhaps she’d intended to do a lot of walking.

The fullness of her skirt made it easy for me to flip it up over her waist, revealing white silk panties trimmed with lace. That was a pleasant surprise. I thought she would wear something simpler. Cotton, perhaps. This wisp of fabric that barely covered her ass was sexy, while still retaining an innocence. They were a reflection of the woman herself.

As I drew her panties down and let them drop around her ankles, Annie shifted

restlessly on my lap. Whether she realized it or not, my girl was eager for a spanking. I took a moment to admire her pale skin, the swell of her firm buttocks.

“Since this is your first time, I’ll use my hand, and we’ll start with twenty.”

“T-Twenty?”

“That’s right, sweetheart.” The trepidation in her voice gave me pause. Although this was a punishment, I didn’t want the pain I inflicted to be more than she could bear. I didn’t know Annie well enough to be confident I’d be able to read her reactions correctly. I needed to give her the power to call a halt if she needed to. “Choose a safeword.”

“Beetroot.”

She didn’t have to ask what I meant, and she came up with a word fast. Though she said she hadn’t been spanked before, she must have thought about it. I wondered if she’d wanted to experiment in the bedroom with some other guy. The thought made me irrationally jealous. Was she already involved with someone? That seemed important to know.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” I asked.

“No.” Her tone was indignant. “I wouldn’t be lying on your lap if I did.”

I didn’t bother to tell her she wouldn’t have had much choice, even if she was involved with someone else. She was here to learn a lesson, after all, and a boyfriend back home wouldn’t have deterred me from delivering it. However, it would have made me think twice about the other downright dirty things I wanted to do to her. I wasn’t interested in breaking up a committed relationship, no matter how much I might want a woman. The sort of drama that would bring wasn’t something I needed

in my life.

“Good. Now, brace yourself and remember to use your safeword, but only if you really need to.”

While I wanted to provide her with the security of being able to apply the brakes if I went too hard on her, I wouldn't be pleased if she abused the privilege. Drawing my arm back, I brought my hand down on her right butt cheek. The flesh rippled beneath my palm. Annie squealed, but the sound was one of surprise rather than pain.

Alternating between her left and right buttocks, I spanked her six times in quick succession. Annie wriggled on my lap, and I had to fight to ignore the arousal she sparked inside me.

“Quit moving, sweetheart.” My voice came out huskier than usual.

“Sorry.” Her tone was anything but apologetic. The little minx probably knew damn well the effect she was having on me.

I spanked her harder, the crack of my palm on her tender flesh resounding off the walls. Annie hissed sharply. She must have felt that one. She pushed up onto her toes and wriggled her hips, but she didn't use her safeword. I was glad, because I was nowhere close to being satisfied. Her skin had turned a beautiful shade of pink and was warm to the touch, but I wanted it red-hot. Perhaps then she'd take the lesson about staying away from Danny Mulhearn to heart.

She let out a low whine as I delivered another harsh slap to her gorgeous ass.

“Ciaran,” she protested, “that hurts.”

“Wouldn't send the right message if it didn't, sweetheart. Now, relax or it will hurt

more.”

She unclenched her muscles, and I continued the spanking, making sure to pay equal attention to both sides of her bottom. Her mewls grew frantic, but she didn't beg me to stop. As I reached number fifteen, she grabbed my right leg and sunk her nails in. Even through my pants, I could feel them making indentations in my skin. I didn't care. Annie obviously needed to anchor herself and, honestly, the pain kept my mind on the task at hand. It stopped my thoughts from drifting to how mercilessly I'd fuck this woman if she let me.

With each moan she emitted, I came closer to losing control. My cock throbbed painfully, and I stifled an urge to claim her as primal desire trickled through my veins.

By the time I was almost done with her, Annie was sobbing.

“Just one more. You're doing well, sweetheart.”

I had to admit I was impressed by her fortitude. Despite this being her first spanking, I hadn't gone easy on her. Getting my point across was too important to do this halfheartedly. Fortunately, she'd coped well.

Bringing my palm down on her ass for the last time, I felt a rush of protectiveness toward the woman lying limp across my knee. As soon as the last swat had been laid down, I pulled her up, arranging her so she was sitting on my lap. She whimpered as her poor, punished bottom landed on my knee and burrowed against my chest.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

With a tenderness I wasn't usually capable of, I stroked her face, wiping away her tears. While I always made sure a woman I spanked was okay afterward, there was something different about taking care of Annie. I was doing it not from a sense of obligation, but because it felt entirely natural to look after her.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She sniffed back a tear and nodded. "Yes. It doesn't even hurt that badly. I'm just...."

"Overwhelmed?" I filled in for her.

"Yes. That was so...." She waved a hand around as she tried to find the right word. "Different."

I wanted to ask her if she meant that in a good or a bad way, but she didn't give me the chance. To my surprise, she grabbed my face and kissed me. It was sweet and tender, just as I would expect from her. Too stunned to do anything else, I let her control the kiss for a moment.

As she parted her lips, I took over, plunging my tongue into her mouth. She moaned as I slipped a hand between her thighs to find her pussy drenched. Someone had clearly enjoyed their spanking. Returning my kiss with equal passion, Annie wound her arms around my neck as I played with her clit, flicking my finger lazily back and forth over the swollen nub. As I pushed two fingers into her tight channel, she pulled away. Eyes closed, she dropped her head down, concealing her reactions from me.

"Look at me, sweetheart. I want to see you when you come apart."

Obediently, she lifted her gaze to mine. Her eyes were dark with desire as I fucked her slowly with my fingers, drawing out her pleasure. Her mouth fell open. Her breaths became faster, sharper, and she clutched my shoulders for support.

“Ciaran!”

“I know, sweetheart.” Shoving my fingers deeper, I circled her clit with my thumb. “Come for me.”

Something about my command spoke to her on some primal level, because she clenched around my fingers. Her hips bucked violently. Her head fell forward onto my chest. Withdrawing my fingers from her quivering pussy, I held her tightly as her tremors subsided.

“That was beautiful, sweetheart.” I’d never seen anything that thrilled me as much as watching this woman in the throes of ecstasy.

Annie pulled back and smiled. Catching me off guard once more, she slid off my lap and dropped to her knees on the floor. She shuffled close, reaching for my belt.

“What are you doing?” I asked, though her intentions were clear.

“I’m returning the favor.” She glanced up at me, a mischievous glint in those big, blue eyes. “Don’t you want me to?”

“Of course I do.” The last thing I’d expected was for Annie to make the next move. “But you don’t have to.”

I must have been insane to not jump at the offer of a blowjob from such a beautiful woman, but I needed her to be sure. If she stood up and walked away from me now, I’d probably implode. My cock was rock-hard and eager for her hot little mouth.

Fortunately, she smiled, coyly sinking her teeth into her bottom lip.

“I want to.”

Wrapping her slender fingers around my shaft, she pumped up and down twice, harder than I'd anticipated. It was almost painful, but totally arousing. My eyes rolled back as she took the head of my cock into her mouth and sucked. It was teasing at first, like she was trying to fuel my desperation. Then she applied more pressure, experimenting until my involuntary moans let her know she'd got it right. It was sheer heaven as she pulled me in deeper and swirled her tongue around my length. I didn't even want to think about how she got to be so good at this.

“Fuck, Annie!” I groaned. “That's incredible.”

She hummed contentedly, sending a vibration along the length of my cock, straight to my balls. Her lips and tongue teased me until I was close to losing control. When the urge to take over became unbearable, I wrapped her ponytail around my fist and held her in place.

“Tap my leg twice if you need me to stop.” It would take all the effort I could muster, but I would pull out if she needed me to.

Annie gagged as I thrust in deep. I withdrew just enough to let her suck in a breath before plunging in once more until my cock hit the back of her throat. Using my grip on her hair, I tugged her head back, so she was forced to look up at me while I drove my cock back and forth between her lips. Tears ran down her cheeks, but there was a gleam of desire in her eyes she couldn't hide.

I pumped my hips two more times before I felt a familiar tingle at the base of my spine. My cock swelled in her mouth.



“Fuck, Annie!”

Like a good girl, she swallowed every last drop as I came. I released my grip on her hair, and she rocked back on her heels. For several long seconds, she stared down at the floor. She was silent, but her shoulders shook as she cried. Had I pushed her too hard? She didn't tap out when I fucked her mouth, but perhaps she forgot my instruction. I watched closely as she wiped away her tears with the back of her hand, got to her feet and then bent to pull up her panties. She offered me a tremulous smile, before turning and walking away.

“Where are you going, sweetheart?” I asked as she headed for the door. She couldn't get out unless I called the elevator for her, but I didn't like that she was trying to leave without a word.

She spun around to face me. Her sorrow seemed to have been replaced by anger. “I thought we were done here.”

“Done?” Getting to my feet, I tucked myself back into my clothing.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“Yes, I mean, I thought you wanted to... uh ....” Her voice trailed off, and she lifted one shoulder in a lazy shrug. Her emotions seemed to be all over the place. She sounded dejected now, as if she imagined I’d already had my fill of her.

“What? You thought I wanted to use you and send you on your way?” A touch of annoyance infused my words. I couldn’t deny I’d selfishly used women to fulfill my needs in the past, but it irritated me that Annie might think that instant gratification was all I wanted from her. There was something special about this woman, and I needed to make her see that.

“Well, I mean, we used each other, right?” She was trying to sound nonchalant, but I detected a touch of sadness in her tone. Was that why she’d cried after giving me the best blowjob of my life? She thought this was a meaningless transaction. “It was just a bit of fun.”

“No, sweetheart.” I strode across the room, needing to be closer to her. “That’s not what it was.”

“Then what was it?”

Fuck if I knew. There was no way to explain the pull I felt toward this woman. It was visceral. If I believed in fate, I’d call it that.

“That was just a warm-up.” Cupping her cheek, I stroked the soft skin with my thumb. My heartbeat quickened as she leaned into my touch.

“A warm-up?”

“That’s right, sweetheart. It was a mere taster of what’s to come, because I am nowhere near finished with you.”

A flash of panic crossed her face, and she stepped back. I dropped my hand to my side.

“What if I’m done with you, Ciaran?”

Her challenging glare stunned me. I’d assumed she was as drawn to me as I was to her. Perhaps I’d read it wrong when she went down on me. Though I wanted Annie desperately, I wasn’t about to force her into anything. That wasn’t my style.

“Then you’re free to go.”

“And you’ll ask your men to stop following me?”

“If that’s what you’d prefer.” The concession didn’t come easily. Her safety was important to me, and I hated the idea of her being left without protection, especially since I didn’t trust her not to look for Mulhearn.

“It is.”

“Then I’ll tell them to stand down if you decide to leave.”

She cocked her head to one side. “What’s the alternative?”

“Well, you could choose to stay with me until you get on that plane tomorrow. For twenty-four hours, you’d be mine to do with as I please.”

Her eyes widened. “What would that entail?”

“Nothing you wouldn’t enjoy,” I assured her. “If you stay, you’ll give me complete control for the rest of our time together. In return, I’ll show you the greatest pleasure you’ve ever felt.” I gave her a minute to digest what I said. “So, Annie, what’s it to be? Will you stay, or will you go?”

## ChapterFive

Annie

As Ciaran waited for an answer, I tried to untangle the thoughts swirling in my mind. Giving a man I barely knew complete control over me for twenty-four hours seemed crazy, yet a part of me wanted to do it. There was no denying I was attracted to Ciaran in a way that was raw, powerful and unlike anything I’d experienced before. That wouldn’t normally be enough to convince me to say yes to that sort of proposition from a total stranger, but somehow, despite his heavy-handed tactics to get me here, I trusted Ciaran.

Even with us being alone in his apartment, I felt safe. He could have done anything he wanted, but he hadn’t hurt me. When he spanked me, he told me to pick a safeword. Of course, I didn’t need to use it, so I couldn’t be sure he would honor it. Something told me he would have.

“Okay.” I took a deep breath to calm myself. “I’ll stay.”

“And you’ll follow my instructions without question?”

“Uh.” Needing to be sure about this, I paused. “Yes, if my safeword still applies.”

Ciaran nodded. “It does. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, just say beetroot and we’ll take a pause to discuss your concerns.”

His willingness to allow me a safety net was all the assurance I needed. Why shouldn't I give in to him and have a little fun on my last day in Detroit? I may not have achieved my goal of finding my long-lost family, but at least I'd have a story to tell my friends back home. A wild fling with a handsome American was way more interesting than meeting a third cousin once removed, or whatever Danny Mulhearn was to me.

“Okay, then.” It was an easy decision to make. “I’ll stay.”

The ghost of a smile crossed Ciaran’s lips. “Good girl. Now, strip.”

It was a command, not a request. It felt like he was testing me. He wanted to see if I really was committed to doing as he said. If I showed hesitation, he might end this right now.

Reaching behind me, I lowered my zipper and pulled my arms free from the capped sleeves. Wiggling my hips, I shimmied out of my dress. It was one of my favorites, bought on my last shopping trip with my mother before she became too ill to leave the house. She persuaded me to buy it because the cornflower blue brought out the color of my eyes. I liked the fit-and-flare style. It emphasized my breasts, which were small but nicely rounded, and pinched in at my waist. The swish of fabric against my bare legs as I walked made me feel like I was floating on air.

As I stepped out of the pool of fabric at my feet, I wished I’d chosen better footwear. The white sneakers I’d worn because I thought I’d be walking a lot were comfortable, but the black kitten heels I’d discarded in favor of them were sexier. I kicked off my sneakers, hoping Ciaran didn’t think I was frumpy.

When I looked up to meet his searing gaze, I felt anything but plain. This incredibly attractive man wanted me. He was practically drooling, but in a manly, controlled way.

“Remove the rest of it,” Ciaran commanded when I paused a moment too long.

His impatience gave me a thrill. He might be the dominant one here, but his desire for me gave me power.

Immediately obeying, because there was nothing else I could do in the face of his deliciously stern tone, I stripped off my bra and panties. My movements were rushed, uncoordinated. I almost lost my balance as I stepped out of my underwear and only just stopped myself from stumbling. Perhaps I should have taken it slower, attempted a seductive dance. No, that wasn't my style. I'd have looked like an even bigger idiot.

When I was fully clothed, I'd felt good about myself. I knew I looked great in the dress. Now that I was totally nude, my confidence dissolved in a puddle of insecurity. My cheeks burned as Ciaran walked around me slowly, inspecting every inch of my naked body. I'd never been put under such intense scrutiny before, and it took an immense effort not to squirm.

Suddenly, a list of all my imperfections scrolled through my mind. There was that weird, dark brown freckle under my right breast. From a certain angle, it looked like a map of Germany. My stomach had a bit of a paunch. A scar cut a jagged path across my shoulder, the result of a cycling accident when I was a teenager.

Ciaran said nothing as he cast an assessing gaze over every inch of me. He finally came full circle to stand in front of me, staring down at my pussy. As a personal preference, I waxed regularly, but I wondered whether he preferred a more natural look. It didn't matter. I could hardly grow my hair back on command. My mind whirling as I awaited his judgement, I wrung my hands together. My previous boyfriends had found fault with my body. It would kill me if Ciaran did the same.

“You're so fucking beautiful.”

The reverence in Ciaran's tone gave me a sense of power. I was a goddess he wanted to worship.

“And for the next twenty-four hours, you’re mine.” He stared at me expectantly, seeming to want a response.

“Yes, Ciaran, I’m yours,” I said, only too willing to put myself in his hands.

“Good girl. Now, turn around, bend at the waist and grab the edge of the table.” Ciaran’s voice was husky with desire.

As I followed his instructions and assumed the correct position, I noticed the gilt-edged mirror hanging above the table for the first time. I winced as I saw my face. My eyes were puffy, my lips swollen. Red streaks ran down my pale cheeks from when I’d cried. I didn’t know why I’d been so overcome with emotion after Ciaran fucked my mouth. Perhaps it was because I felt a connection to him that would never have the chance to flourish. The thought saddened me, and I did my best to banish it. I couldn’t allow my time here to be soured by the knowledge that this wouldn’t last.

Despite the mess I was, Ciaran still wanted me. The evidence of that prodded me in the back as he stepped closer to nuzzle my neck. He kissed me softly, then trailed his lips down his spine to the small of my back. I shuddered as his lips tickled that sensitive area.

Straightening, Ciaran nudged the inside of my ankle with his foot, a silent instruction to spread my legs wider that I immediately obeyed. As I adjusted my stance, he retrieved his wallet from his pocket and fished out a condom. Quickly lowering his pants and boxer shorts, he ripped open the foil packet with his teeth. His concentration as he rolled the condom onto his impressive length made me smile.

My mouth fell open as he slid his hand over my ass, caressing the still-tender flesh. When I’d thought spanking would be a disappointment after what I’d read in romance novels, I was wrong. It was so much better than I’d imagined. Lying across Ciaran’s knee with my bottom exposed had made me vulnerable, but it also opened me up to



the new sensations surrender could bring. For the first time in my life, I relinquished control, and the payoff was incredible. Ciaran had unleashed something inside of me and I wanted more.

“Gorgeous,” he murmured, no doubt referring to the marks I was sure his punishment had left on my pale skin.

Ciaran’s hand slid between my legs, and I moaned as his fingers glided through my soaked flesh. I met his gaze in the mirror as he held his hand up, his fingertips glistening with my arousal.

“Is this for me?” The cockiness in his tone told me he knew the answer to his own question.

“Yes.” I’d never been so turned on so quickly. One touch from Ciaran seemed to be all it took to make me desperate to be filled. I pushed my hips back, so ready for him, it hurt.

“Greedy girl,” Ciaran scolded, though his tone suggested he was secretly amused.

“Just fuck me already.” I didn’t know where my boldness was coming from. Something about this man was making me act in uncharacteristic ways.

Putting his hands on my hips to hold me just where he wanted me, Ciaran eased his rigid cock into me at an agonizingly slow pace. I whined, but a sharp smack on my already sore ass told me to exercise patience. It wasn’t easy. I craved this man’s domination. He pushed forward one tantalizing inch at a time until he was finally fully seated inside me. I’d already known he was big, but once he was all the way in, I felt like I was being split in two.

He pulled back and thrust gently a couple of times. Slow and steady was safe. It was

what I was used to. It wasn't what I wanted right now.

“More,” I demanded. In the past, I'd been afraid to ask for what I needed, but with Ciaran I felt safe to lay out my desires. There was no cause for embarrassment here. We were two consenting adults having a fling. It wasn't as if I was going to run into him a week from now and regret being so pushy. “I want more.”

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“Whatever my lady commands.” Ciaran dragged his cock almost the whole way out of me and then slammed in hard. He grabbed my ponytail, twisting it around his fist, and tilted my head back. My eyes met his in the mirror, and the intensity of his gaze sent my pulse racing. “Watch as I wreck this tight little pussy.”

A shudder jolted my body as I almost came from his words alone. No man had ever stated his intentions so starkly to me before. I loved it. Holding onto the edge of the table, my knuckles whitened as he drove into me with ruthless force. My lips twisted in agonized bliss as Ciaran fucked me as if he hated me and revered me in equal measures. His thick cock slid effortlessly through my slickness to hit a spot deep inside, where pain and pleasure collided in an explosion of ecstasy.

As I edged closer to my peak, I pushed my hips back to meet his furious thrusts. Ciaran palmed my right breast and squeezed so hard my eyes watered. His rough handling spurred me on toward the edge. I moaned as the pressure inside me built.

Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I gasped. Who was this wanton woman? Was that really me writhing with such abandon against a man I barely knew?

My eyes were glazed over with desire. My mouth formed an O-shape as Ciaran picked up his pace. He fucked me so hard my hips crashed painfully against the table. I’d probably bruise but, at that moment, I didn’t care. This was what I’d craved, the intensity my sex life had been missing.

“Fuck, Ciaran!” I yelled as he pinched my nipple with one hand and teased my swollen clit with the other. Sensations fired through me from all directions, meeting at the core to set off the most devastating orgasm. As my body convulsed violently, a

startling truth registered. Nothing could ever match this moment. I was ruined for all other men.

Light flashed before my eyes and blood thundered in my ears as my pussy clenched around Ciaran's cock. My arms shook, and I dropped forward onto the table, glad it was there to hold me up. Ciaran wrapped an arm around my waist and pumped his hips two more times. He held himself deep inside me and let out an animalistic roar as he came.

He collapsed over me, and we lay there, bodies slick with sweat, slowly coming back to our senses. Just as I was about to complain he was getting too heavy, Ciaran stood up. I watched through bleary eyes as he removed the condom from his still semi-erect cock and reached past me to drop it in a waste basket under the table.

As I straightened, Ciaran tucked himself back into his pants. I smiled at him in the mirror as he stepped up behind me, put his hands on my shoulders, and dropped a tender kiss on the top of my head.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?"

I was shattered, in the best possible way.

"I'm good." Turning to him, I grinned. "So, Mr. Reilly, what will we do now?"

The world was knocked off-kilter as Ciaran swept me up into his arms. "Now," he said as he strode across the room, "I'm going to take care of you, and you're going to lie back and let me."

"Hmm," I murmured, snuggling closer to him and inhaling his masculine scent. "I like the sound of that."

## ChapterSix

Ciaran

As I carried Annie along the corridor to my bedroom, I felt a deeper sense of contentment than I had for many years. There was something so right about having her nestled close to my chest. It was where she belonged. I loved her softness, the peachy glow of her skin. I'd fucked a lot of women, too many to remember them all, but I'd never experienced anything like I did with Annie. Her responses to my voice, my touch, had fueled my desire to give her pleasure. I wanted to own every part of her.

It was crazy how strongly I felt about this woman I barely knew. Annie seemed perfect, and not just because she was incredibly beautiful. I was drawn to her on a deeper level. She offered me both submission and challenge. I needed that.

From the first moment I set eyes on Annie, I wanted to protect her. Now I'd kill anyone who tried to hurt her. I must be delirious after coming so hard inside her deliciously tight pussy because I was having dangerous thoughts about keeping this woman, whether she liked it or not.

I took Annie into my bedroom and set her down on the edge of my bed, a California king I'd only ever occupied alone.

"Wait here," I told her, before heading into the en suite bathroom.

An enormous tub dominated the space. To the right of the room was a shower cubicle, large enough to accommodate a dozen people, not that it ever had. I might like to experiment in the bedroom, but I wasn't into orgies.

The walls of the shower were tiled in a vibrant emerald green, a nod to my ancestral

homeland. I'd visited Ireland as a child. My parents, both the children of Irish immigrants, felt it was important to keep in touch with our heritage. My memories of Dublin were bittersweet. While I'd enjoyed the sights and learning about the history of my people, the tension between my parents had been palpable. They'd tried not to fight in front of my siblings and me, but we'd known their marriage was falling apart. When we returned to the States, my father moved out of the family home. He never divorced my mom, but he didn't return to her either. He spent the rest of his life building his mafia empire and screwing his way through the female population of Michigan.

Though I was tempted to shower with Annie, I knew I wouldn't be able to resist shoving her against the wall and fucking her. I needed to pace myself and allow her time to recover. The last thing I wanted was for her to see me as a sex-crazed monster. We had all day, and it would be nice for us to get to know each other better.

Rolling up my sleeves, I put the plug in the tub and turned on the water, making sure it was nice and warm. I found a bottle of scented bubble bath in the cabinet under the sink. My sister Emily stayed here on the rare occasions when she ventured into the city, and she preferred my tub to the smaller one in the room she'd commandeered for her use. A delicate floral scent filled the air as I poured a generous amount of bubble bath under the running water.

When the tub was full, I turned off the faucet and went back to the bedroom where Annie was sitting at the edge of the bed. Her smile warmed me to the core.

"Are you planning to take a bath?" she asked. She'd obviously heard the water running.

"No, it's for you. I thought you might like to soak in the tub for a while."

"You thought right."

Taking my proffered hand, Annie allowed me to lead her into the bathroom. I helped her to step into the tub and she sighed contentedly as she sank into the water, leaning her head back and letting her eyes drift shut.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“How is it?”

“Perfect. I love orange blossom.”

Ah, that’s what the scent was. I’d recognized it but would never have been able to name it.

“I wouldn’t have had you down as a lover of bubble bath, though.” She cracked an eye open to peer at me.

I wondered if that was her subtle way of probing me for information about my love life.

“It’s my sister’s. She stays here sometimes.” I felt the need to reassure her, so I added, “No other woman has ever been here.”

“Really?” Now both of Annie’s stunning blue eyes were fixed on me as she searched my face for evidence of a lie.

“Well, apart from my sister and my cleaner, that is.”

Annie smiled, obviously pleased by my response, before closing her eyes once more. Beneath the bubbles, her chest rose and fell as she breathed in a slow, steady rhythm. Her face was serene, the very picture of relaxation. I envied her the ability to let her guard down so easily. Obviously, she’d had a very different life than mine. She didn’t have to be wary of most of the people around her. There was nobody plotting to topple her throne. For a moment, I considered whether I should tell her I’d changed



my mind about spending the day with her. I should let her go before I got any more attached. But I couldn't say goodbye. Not yet.

Removing my watch, because I didn't intend to test its claims to be waterproof, I grabbed a washcloth and dipped it into the fragrant water. I ran it slowly across Annie's body, from one shoulder to the other, skimming over the thin skin covering her collarbone.

"Hmm," she murmured, "that's nice."

I lingered for a moment on the faded scar on her shoulder. The injury that caused it must have been a nasty one. "What happened here?"

She opened her eyes and glanced at the jagged mark. "Oh, that happened when I was thirteen. I was biking through the woods with friends and hit a stone. I went over the handlebars and somehow ended up impaled on a sharp stick." She shuddered. "I can still feel it now."

"Jesus! I can't imagine."

"You've never been in an accident?"

"Nothing beyond a few cuts and bruises." Considering my line of business, I was extremely lucky never to have been badly injured. Both my brothers had been badly hurt. Sean, the next oldest after me, had been stabbed twice and shot once. Will, our youngest sibling, was slashed across his chest a few years ago by a debtor unwilling to pay what he owed. It was an occupational hazard I would hopefully continue to avoid. "Now, relax and let me take care of you."

Annie closed her eyes. A smile curved her lips as I moved the cloth lower to wash her plump breasts. Her pretty pink nipple poked out from the milky-white bubbles and

peaked beneath my touch. As I dragged the cloth down over her abdomen, Annie wiggled restlessly, making ripples in the water. I knew what she wanted, but she would have to wait.

I carefully washed her left leg, going all the way down to the tips of her toes, and then worked my way back up the right. When I reached the apex of her thighs, Annie looked up at me.

“Ciaran.” My name was a plea on her lips.

Discarding the cloth, I parted her thighs and drew my fingers along her slit. She lifted her hips, molding herself against my palm as I cupped her feminine mound.

“Are you sore?” I asked.

“A little.” As I withdrew my hand, intending to leave her alone until she recovered, she grabbed my wrist. “But not too sore.”

She dragged my hand back between her legs.

Fuck! This woman was incredible. She wasn't afraid to let me know exactly what she wanted. That didn't mean I was going to let her dictate how things would be.

“Play with your breasts,” I instructed. “I want both those nipples nice and hard.”

Annie sunk her teeth into her bottom lip, a sign of uncertainty, but she cupped her breasts for me anyway, arching her back to lift them from the water so I could see what she was doing. She kneaded her delicate flesh and made circles around her nipples with her forefingers, gradually drawing them up into taut peaks.

As she moaned with pleasure, I pushed two fingers inside her and curled them toward

me, searching for that sweet spot that would drive her wild. When she sucked in a sharp breath, I knew I'd found it.

“Fuck yourself on my fingers, sweetheart. I want you to get yourself off.”

Flicking her tongue out to wet her lips, Annie looked me dead in the eyes as she ground her hips against my hand, pushing my fingers deeper into her tight channel. She felt incredible, and I wondered absently what it would be like to fuck her ass.

“That’s it, sweetheart.” I dragged my mind back to the present. “Take what you need.”

“Ciaran.”

She whimpered as I held my hand still. She was going to have to do the work for now.

Water splashed out of the tub as she raised and lowered her hips at an increasingly frenzied pace. Annie chased her climax, but her whine of frustration as she tugged her nipples told me she wouldn't reach it on her own. Grabbing her hair, still half up in a ponytail, I pulled her to me for a bruising kiss. As my tongue tangled with hers, I drove my fingers in and out of her pussy. I pressed my thumb down hard on her clit, noting how it throbbed.

“Come for me, Annie.” I knew she was close. “Show me what a good little slut you are.”

It seemed she responded well to a little dirty talk. Her pussy clenched around my fingers. A strangled cry ripped from her throat as she convulsed violently, splashing water out of the tub. My pants were soaked, but I didn't care. Watching this woman come apart was the greatest thing I'd ever witnessed. I leaned over to kiss her through her orgasm, then, as the tremors in her body subsided, I pulled back, stroking her face.

“That was beautiful, Annie.”

She grinned, a slightly goofy, dazed look on her face. I got to my feet and moved around the tub to stand behind her.

“Sit up, sweetheart.”

She did as she was told, and I removed the elastic holding her hair in a loose ponytail. It wasn't easy to free it from her hair now it was wet, and she hissed as I accidentally tugged too hard.

“Sorry, sweetheart.” Tossing the elastic band aside, I teased out her hair, then grabbed a plastic jug my sister had left on the shelf by the tub and filled it with water. “Lean back a little.”

She tilted her head back, and I poured water over her hair. When it was wet through, I grabbed a bottle of shampoo. Its sandalwood scent was on the masculine side, but it was all I had to hand. I squirted a generous amount into my palm and then massaged it into Annie's hair.

“This reminds me of a film,” she said. “Robert Redford was in it, and Meryl Streep, I think.”

I knew the movie she was talking about. “Out of Africa.”

“Yes.” She smiled as I continued to work the shampoo onto her scalp. “You know it?”

“My mom's a movie buff. She used to make the whole family watch movies together every Saturday night.”

“You have a big family?”

“Two brothers, two sisters.”

“Wow. Are you still close to everyone?”

“My mom moved to Florida after my father died.” I didn’t give Annie the chance to offer the inevitable condolences. “My brothers and my sister Emily still live in Detroit. My other sister, Erin, is at school in New York. She’s doing her Masters in Fine Art.”

“Wow, that’s impressive.”

“Yeah, I’m really proud of her.” Erin had incredible talent. I had no idea where she got it from. None of the rest of us were artistic. We used to joke she was a changeling left by the faeries. “What about you? Any siblings?”

I already knew from the research I’d asked my cousin Jace to do on her that she was an only child, but I wanted to hear it from her.

“No, it’s just me.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Yeah.”

“So, what do you do for work?”

“I’m a teacher.”

“You like your job?” I asked as I filled the jug with water to rinse her hair.

“It’s fun most of the time. The kids are great. It’s the parents that are a handful.”

I laughed at the dramatic shudder she gave.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“I’ll bet.” It wasn’t a job I could see myself doing. “So, you’re on summer break right now?”

“Yes. I’ve had two weeks’ holiday already. There’s four and a half to go.”

So, she didn’t have to rush back to Scotland for work. That piqued my interest. I tilted her head back a little more as I poured another jugful over her hair. I didn’t want to get shampoo in her eyes.

“Any plans for the rest of your vacation?”

“No, I’m just going to read, relax, meet friends for lunch, that sort of thing.” She pursed her lips as if an annoying thought had occurred to her. “I have to paint my kitchen, though.”

“You’re not going to hire someone to do it?” I couldn’t think of any woman I knew who would get hands-on with a project like that.

“Of course not. I can paint a few walls easily enough.”

“Sure, but you didn’t sound enthusiastic about it.”

“I’m not, but I can’t afford to not do it myself. I spent most of my savings to come here.” She glanced over her shoulder at me. “So, if you were planning to seduce me for my money, you’re out of luck.”

I laughed loudly at that. “It’s okay, sweetheart. I have a little of my own.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Annie waved a hand around the room. My apartment was luxurious. “What do you do exactly?”

There’s no way I was about to tell her I headed up one of the most powerful mafia organizations in the Midwest. I didn’t want to scare her off. “I run a couple of businesses.”

“They must do well if you can afford to pay men to kidnap unsuspecting tourists.”

“They do all right, and that’s not something I make a habit of.”

“Glad to hear it.”

She closed her eyes and hummed quietly to herself as I finished rinsing her hair. When I was done, I helped her out of the rapidly cooling water and wrapped her in a fluffy black towel. I grabbed a second towel and dried her hair the best I could. As I finished, she yawned widely. Clearly, the bath had relaxed her more than I intended.

“You need to change,” Annie said, motioning toward my soaked-through pants.

“Yeah, and we need to get you dressed. I’d like to take you to one of my favorite spots for something to eat.”

“Sounds good.”

I steered Annie back into the bedroom. “Wait here. I’ll go fetch your clothes.”

She took a seat on the edge of the bed, and I went to the living room to retrieve her clothing. Her dress lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. She couldn’t wear that. Fortunately, Emily kept some clothing here for when she stayed over. I didn’t think Annie would want to wear another woman’s lingerie and, to be honest, I didn’t like



the idea of rummaging through my sister's underwear to find something suitable.

Scooping up Annie's bra and panties, I headed along the corridor, past my bedroom, to the room Emily used. Her closet contained only a dozen different items, but I found a pair of jeans and a shirt that would probably fit my girl.

Mygirl. I should not be thinking of her that way, but I couldn't help it.

With the borrowed clothing, I made my way back to my bedroom. I pushed open the door and stopped dead at what lay before me. Annie was curled up on the bed, the towel still wrapped around her, fast asleep. I walked over, as quietly as a man of my size could, to get a closer look at her. She was so peaceful. Like this, she appeared almost angelic, with wisps of golden hair framing her face.

I could picture myself waking up next to her every morning. The thought shocked me, and I paused to ponder it. My reputation with women wasn't good. I wasn't normally one for any sort of romantic gesture, but I imagined myself bringing Annie flowers, buying her pieces of jewelry. Already I was a different person around her. Though my desire to dominate was still there, I also wanted to show her a softer side I thought had been buried years ago.

Saying goodbye to her tomorrow would kill me. I had to find a way to make her stay.

## ChapterSeven

### Annie

Walking along the street with two incredibly tall, muscular men a couple of paces behind us was a strange experience. I felt as if I'd done something wrong, that I was being marched off to answer for some crime I'd committed. They didn't speak, and neither did we. I was too self-conscious to chat with Ciaran, knowing his bodyguards

would hear every word. He made no attempt to initiate a conversation either, so I assumed he was happy with the increasingly awkward silence.

The looming presence of the two impeccably dressed members of his security team made me question how wealthy the man I was strolling along the street beside actually was. Surely only the richest people needed this level of security to walk a mere two blocks from their apartment.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

A part of me welcomed the silence. My head was still a little fuzzy after the unscheduled nap I'd taken. The amazing orgasms Ciaran had given me, combined with the soothing way he washed my hair and then dried me after my bath, had wiped me out. I'd curled up on his bed, intending to shut my eyes for a couple of minutes, and drifted off. When I woke two hours later, I was embarrassed at having made myself so comfortable in the home of a man I barely knew. Ciaran didn't seem to mind. He assured me I was welcome to treat his home as my own. He lent me some of his sister's clothes and announced he was taking me to his favorite place to eat.

Sleeping during the day didn't suit me. It knocked me completely off balance so getting food was probably a good idea. As we stopped outside a little brick building with faded red curtains on the windows, Ciaran held his arms out.

"This is it. Mara's."

When he said he was taking me to his favorite restaurant, I'd expected something fancier. He seemed like the sort of man who'd enjoy a good steak. With its shabby wooden door, Mara's was out of place amid the tall, glass-fronted structures that surrounded it. If I was being honest, I was glad he'd brought me somewhere more down to earth. I'd been staying at a five-star hotel all week and I felt like a fish out of water. Though I liked a few luxurious touches here and there, I didn't enjoy having to use the internet to work out what would be good to eat in the super-fancy restaurant.

As Ciaran and I walked inside, the two bodyguards positioned themselves outside the door. Shaking off their looming presence, I felt as if a weight had been lifted from me. I was sure they were both very nice men once you got to know them, but boy, were they intimidating.

The restaurant was just how I imagined an American diner would look, with faded red-and-white tiles on the floor and several stools with red leather seats lined up along a chrome-topped counter. Serving staff in pink uniforms with white aprons milled about, checking their patrons had everything they needed. Black and white photographs of Detroit hung on the walls, and there was even a jukebox in the corner. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen one of those.

Bypassing the half-dozen booths by the window, Ciaran led me to a quiet table at the back of the room. The moment we sat down an older woman rushed to greet us. Her white hair was gathered in a tight bun.

"Ciaran! It's good to see you!" Her warm smile dropped into an admonishing pout. "It's been a couple of weeks."

"Yeah, I'm sorry, Mara." He accepted a menu from her and immediately set it down on the table. "I've been busy."

"You work too hard." The older woman nudged his shoulder. There was a level of familiarity between them I wouldn't have expected. "So, who is this lovely young lady?" she asked, handing me a menu.

"This is Annie. She's visiting from Scotland." He flashed me a panty-melting grin. "Annie, this is Mara. She owns this place."

"Nice to meet you, Mara. Your restaurant is great."

"Thanks, hon. Now, can I get you started with a couple of drinks?"

"I'll have a bubbly orange juice." Ciaran winked at her, and she grinned at what was clearly a private joke.

“One bubbly orange juice.” She turned to me. “And for you, hon?”

“I’ll take an unbubbly orange juice, please.”

Mara threw her head back and laughed.

“Unbubbly? You got yourself a good one there, Ciaran.”

“I sure did,” he agreed.

As Mara walked off to get the drinks, I arched an eyebrow. “Bubbly orange juice?”

“I’ve been coming here since I was a kid,” Ciaran explained. “One day I asked for bubbly orange juice instead of orange soda. Mara teased me about it every time I came in after that, so it’s kind of become our thing.”

“You come here a lot, then?”

“Yeah, I grew up a block from here. Our old house is gone. Everyone sold out to developers. Mara refused every offer they made, so they had to build around her.”

“That’s why you chose your apartment? You wanted to stay in the neighborhood you grew up in?”

“I did. The apartment’s where I live during the week, but my actual home is up on Orchard Lake.”

“Oh, right. You don’t have a wife and kids stashed up there, do you?”

Ciaran shook his head. “I wouldn’t be here with you if I did. If there’s one thing I firmly believe in, it’s fidelity.”

The look he gave me was so sincere, I wished it was me he was pledging faithfulness to. But how could it be? I was leaving in the morning.

“So.” I cleared my throat to alleviate the strange tension Ciaran’s declaration had caused and motioned toward my menu. “What would you recommend? What do you like?”

“The meatballs, meatloaf, burgers.” Ciaran rattled off half the menu. “They do a mean Coney Island hotdog, the best you’ll find outside of New York.” His brow furrowed. “You’re not a vegetarian, are you?”

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“I’d be in the wrong place if I was, unless I was in the mood for...” I scanned the menu, which was a carnivore’s dream. “A grilled cheese sandwich.”

“The grilled cheese is good, but if you want something to keep you going for the rest of the day, go for the bacon cheeseburger. Mara makes her own relish. You’ll love it.”

“Okay, that sounds good.”

A moment later, Mara returned to the table with our drinks and Ciaran placed an order for two bacon cheeseburgers.

“Want me to make yours a double?” she asked him.

“Yeah, sure. I worked up a bit of an appetite this morning.”

My cheeks heated as he shot me a meaningful glance. Mara grinned and headed for the kitchen.

“So. Annie, tell me a bit about where you live.

“Uh, it’s a small town about fifteen miles outside of Aberdeen, called Inverurie.”

“Inver.....How did you pronounce it?”

“Inver-oooh-ree.”

“Inverurie.” Ciaran’s American twang distorted the pronunciation, but I wasn’t about to correct him. “Have you lived there long?”

“All my life. I still live in the house my parents bought when they got married.”

“So, you’re quite attached to the place?”

I shrugged, not wanting to go into how I didn’t feel the same connection with my home now that both my parents were gone. Thankfully, before Ciaran could probe any farther, Mara came to the table with our meals.

“That was fast,” I remarked, as soon as Mara left us once more.

“She probably told the cook to make ours a priority.” Ciaran was unapologetic about the prospect of other people having to wait so we could get our food first. “She knows I’m a busy man.”

“Yet you’re taking the day off to spend it with me?”

“I think you’re worth it. Now stop fishing for flattery and eat your burger.”

There was no point in denying I was looking for him to say something nice about me, because that was exactly what I was doing. Embarrassed at being caught, I turned my attention to the plate in front of me. There was a huge portion of fries sitting next to the biggest burger I’d ever seen. I couldn’t work out how I was going to eat it all and Ciaran’s was double the size of mine.

“I’m not sure how to tackle this,” I said.

“Just pick it up and take a bite.”



That might be easier said than done. I somehow managed to keep the burger from falling out of the bun as I lifted it to my mouth. Grease dripped down my hand as I took a bite. Delicious was an understatement. The savoriness of the beef patties along with the saltiness of the bacon, the creaminess of the cheese and the tartness of the relish made for a perfect bite. Unfortunately, it was incredibly messy. Setting it down on the plate, I wiped my hand on a paper napkin.

“That is so good,” I said with a happy sigh as I balled up the napkin and dropped it on the table. “But I have no idea how I’m going to finish it with my dignity intact.”

“I mean, you could eat it with a knife and fork, but Mara would probably run you out of town.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want that.” Picking up the burger again, I took another small bite then set it down and tried one of the French fries. Crisp on the outside and fluffy on the inside, they weren’t the same as the thick-cut chips I was used to back home, but they hit the spot. After I’d eaten a few, I realized Ciaran was watching me.

“You’re staring,” I pointed out.

“You’re fascinating to watch.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “I’m only eating.”

Ciaran shrugged. “You can tell a lot about a person by how they eat.”

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“Oh, yeah? What can you tell about me?”

“You eat slowly and take dainty little bites. That tells me you never had to compete with siblings for your share.”

“Ah, but you already knew I was an only child.”

“True, but even if I didn’t, I’d be able to tell by how you eat.” Ciaran spoke so confidently I didn’t want to argue. He squeezed some ketchup onto the side of his plate and dragged a fry through it. “Did you ever wish you had siblings?”

“Of course. Did you ever wish you didn’t?”

Ciaran rolled his eyes. “All the time. My sisters can be a real pain in the ass.”

“But not your brothers?” I sent him what I hoped was a pointed glare.

“Yeah, they have their moments, but I wouldn’t trade them for the world.” He took a sip of his orange soda and asked nonchalantly, “Would you like a big family?”

The question caught me off guard. It felt more like something you’d ask once you’d got to know a person better. I supposed since we didn’t have much time before I went home, Ciaran was skipping ahead.

“Uh, yes. I love kids.”

“Yeah?” Ciaran grinned broadly. “How many are you thinking?”

“Three, maybe four. You?”

“At least six. Three boys and three girls with your beautiful eyes.”

Assuming he was joking, I laughed. Ciaran didn’t join me, and I suddenly realized he was picturing a future with me. My pulse picked up and a tremor of excitement went through me.

“It’s too soon to be talking kids, don’t you think?” My voice was remarkably steady, belying my true feelings.

Before he could answer, preferably to agree with me, the door opened behind us, drawing Ciaran’s attention. His shoulders sagged, then he got to his feet.

“Excuse me, sweetheart. I need to see what Max wants.”

I glanced behind me as Ciaran walked up to Max, the man who’d driven me back to my hotel last night. Although I couldn’t hear what they were saying, I could tell from their hand gestures and the way they huddled together that whatever they were talking about was extremely important.

Turning back to my meal, I carried on eating, enjoying every mouthful of the insanely good burger. A few minutes passed before Ciaran returned. He didn’t sit down, and my heart sank.

“I’m sorry about this, sweetheart, but something’s come up.”

Disappointment swamped me. “You have to go?”

“I do.” He curved a hand around my cheek. “But I’m going to call a friend who runs a spa on Washington Boulevard. It’s close to your hotel. You can get whatever

treatment you like, on me.”

“You don’t have to do that.” I didn’t need a parting gift to ease my sadness that our day was coming to a premature end.

“Sure, I do. I’m not ditching you halfway through lunch without making it up to you.”

“It’s not necessary.”

Ciaran stroked my cheek. “Maybe not, but I want you to do something nice for you. Spend the afternoon at the spa and we’ll meet for cocktails at your hotel.”

Was it pathetic that my heart soared when I heard his plans? Perhaps, but I didn’t care. I wanted to spend as much time with Ciaran as possible before I headed home to my real life.

“Okay,” I agreed. “Sounds good.”

“Great.” He took a few bills from his pocket and dropped them on the table. “This will cover the check. When you’re ready, Jace will be waiting to take you to the spa.” He pointed to the first of two black SUVs parked outside. “He’ll be with you for the rest of the day.”

Though I was sure I didn’t need my own personal bodyguard, I didn’t argue. If Ciaran wanted one of his men to accompany me, I guessed I could put up with their presence.

“Okay.”

“Good girl.” Ciaran dropped a kiss on the top of my head and left.

I ate a few more French fries before deciding I’d had enough. I’d never been to a spa before, but I doubted it was a good idea to get a massage or whatever if my stomach was too full.

Offering my thanks to Mara, who stood behind the counter talking to an older gentleman, I headed outside. A man got out of the SUV. He wasn’t as tall as the other members of Ciaran’s security team I’d met so far, but his muscles were on full display beneath a black t-shirt. He had several tattoos of skulls, guns, and crossed swords. It painted a violent picture, and I wondered how safe I really was around him.

When he smiled, his face softened, and I felt a little more comfortable.

“Hey, Annie, I’m Jace. I’ll be chaperoning you this afternoon.”

“Sorry you got stuck with babysitting duty.”

“Ah!” He waved off my concerns with a flick of the wrist. “Anything for family.”

“You’re related to Ciaran?”

“One of many, many cousins.” Jace grinned broadly as he opened the back door of the car. “Hop in and I’ll tell you all Ciaran’s deepest, darkest secrets.”

Returning his smile, I got into the back seat of the car. It looked like this afternoon was going to be fun.

## ChapterEight

Ciaran

As Max had pointed out a hundred times since I left Mara's with him, there was no real need for me to be here. My men were capable of interrogating a traitor without me, especially as my brother Sean, the most bloodthirsty member of our organization, was with them. Though I would have preferred to spend the afternoon with Annie, I couldn't leave this to others. I had to be the one to end this treacherous bastard's life.

Ricky Lawson had been with my family for years, working under my grandfather and then my father before me. When I took over five years ago, I didn't expect him to cause any issues. He'd already proved his loyalty many times. He'd sworn to follow me as faithfully as he had my father, and I believed him. Perhaps it was because I'd looked up to him as a kid that I didn't consider him when we knew we had a traitor in our ranks. I'd been blinded by the image of an honorable man who probably never really existed.

Hearing from Max that Ricky was the one selling information to the Clearys was like a dagger to the heart. When our weapons shipments had failed to reach their destinations, he'd advised me to look among our newer recruits for a rat. It hadn't even crossed my mind that he, himself, was responsible for the trouble we were having. But I knew Max wouldn't have brought him in for questioning if he wasn't certain he was our rat.

With lorries getting hijacked on an almost weekly basis, our partners were starting to worry we were no longer reliable. I needed confirmation of who was behind it. My primary suspect was Danny Mulhearn. Though Jimmy Cleary was technically still in

charge of the family that bore his name, rumor had it he'd backed away from the business now he was receiving chemotherapy for prostate cancer. Hopefully, Ricky could tell us who was calling the shots.

Following Max through the warehouse we used to store electronics and other goods sold through some of our legitimate businesses, I headed for the room at the back where we interrogated prisoners. Barely bigger than a prison cell, it had a stale, unpleasant smell that no amount of bleach could mask. With the windows boarded up, the only light came from a single fluorescent strip light that cast a harsh white glow over the center of the room. Two of my men were in the room, my brother Sean and his usual partner in crime, Marcus. They were the family's chief enforcers, both tall, muscular and tattooed over every available inch of skin. Alone, each man was enough to give someone nightmares. Together, they looked as if they could bring down Armageddon.

Ricky was in the center of the room. He hung by the wrists from manacles attached to a hook on the ceiling. From the look of him, he wouldn't last much longer. Sean and Marcus had clearly had their fun already. Their victim's head hung low, but I could see he'd been badly beaten. His torso was bare, revealing dozens of slash marks. Blood pooled at his feet, so much of it I was surprised he was still alive. But he was still breathing. His pained groans filled the air.

I glanced at the floor and suppressed a shudder. Though I wasn't squeamish, I didn't rejoice in seeing the evidence of a man's torture, either.

"At least tell me you got what we needed from him before you cut out his tongue," I said wryly.

"Of course." Sean motioned for Marcus to give us the room, and the other man left immediately. My brother stepped forward and gave me a hug I could have done without since his clothing was soaked in blood, and I was wearing a white shirt. He

didn't seem to notice the red streaks he left all over me. "Have I ever let you down?"

No, he hadn't. Both he and our brother Will had been my strongest supporters since our father's death propelled me into leadership of our organization when I was twenty-four. They'd stood shoulder to shoulder with me through every challenge I've faced. While Will preferred to oversee our legitimate businesses, using his charm to facilitate deals, Sean thrived in the thick of the action, buying and selling weapons and keeping our men in line. His thirst for violence was unmatched among our men, but he was also a decent strategist.

"So, what did he tell you?"

"His boy's an addict. He got into debt with one of Cleary's dealers, a bottom-feeder called John Canavan. Ricky tried to pay off the debt, but they wouldn't take cash."

"They preferred information?" Max guessed.

"Yeah. He gave them dates and times of shipments, told them the routes."

Anger swelled in my chest. One of our drivers had been shot a couple of weeks back when his truck was hijacked. He was still in hospital and would need extensive rehab when he got out. He was an older guy with a wife and kids. I intended to track down everyone involved in his shooting and make them pay.

"He kept babbling that he had no choice." Sean spat on the floor, his disgust palpable.

"Bullshit!" Max scoffed. "He could have spoken to me, to Ciaran."



*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

“Yeah.”

“Did he deal with Cleary or Mulhearn?” I asked.

“Mulhearn. He thinks the asshole’s positioning himself to take over when Cleary dies.”

That matched up with what we already knew.

“Is Cleary sicker than we thought?”

Sean nodded. “Got weeks rather than months, apparently.”

Shit. Cleary didn’t have a son to pass his business onto, but he had a daughter. Leadership rarely passed to a woman in our old-fashioned world. I didn’t know much about his daughter, but she’d left the country a couple of years ago and seemed an unlikely successor. When Cleary died, Mulhearn would take over, and I didn’t relish that prospect. Unlike his boss, he lacked a code of honor.

“That’s a problem for another day,” I said. “Let’s deal with one thing at a time.”

I held my hand out to Sean. Because I’d planned on being with Annie, I hadn’t brought a gun when I left the house. Coming from the U.K, she probably wasn’t used to weapons, and I wasn’t ready to explain to her why I needed one. The presence of my security team already freaked her out. She didn’t say anything, but I could tell how uncomfortable she was around them. If I’d told her I was an Irish mafia boss, she’d probably have run for the hills. Well, she’d have tried to. There was no way I’d

have let her go.

Sean passed his Beretta M9 to me. It was a decent weapon. I liked how it felt in my hand, solid and dependable, but not too heavy. I walked up to Ricky, wrinkling my nose at the foul stench of piss. Putting the barrel of my gun beneath his chin, I used it to tilt his head until he faced me. Fuck! My brother really had done a number on him. He was unrecognizable. His nose was broken, his eyes swollen shut. There was a lot I wanted to say to him, but I doubted a lengthy speech would have the desired impact on him. I decided to keep my last words to him short and sweet.

“You could have come to me, Ricky. I’d have protected your kid, but now....”

I let that thought drift on the air. I wouldn’t go after his son, not unless he became a problem for me, but Ricky didn’t have to know that. Let his dying moments be in fear that he’d signed his only son’s death warrant.

Suddenly animated as a surge of panic whipped through him, Ricky jerked upright. He struggled in his chains, babbling some incoherent threat he wouldn’t have the chance to carry out. Stepping back, I aimed and fired off three shots in rapid succession. I should have felt bad for the relief his death brought me, but I didn’t. On the rare occasions I took a life, it was out of necessity. Anyone who became a threat to my family would suffer the same fate.

“Have the body dumped outside Cleary’s new restaurant.” An upscale joint like that wouldn’t weather the storm of a mutilated body being found on its doorstep. “And have someone pay a visit to Mulhearn’s truck depot.”

It was time to hit back hard for the disruption they’d caused us these past few months. I didn’t have to spell out to Sean that I wanted every last truck that asshole owned blown to kingdom come. My brother would take care of it. Some of his men were ex-paramilitaries from the old country. They knew how to blow shit up.

“I’ll get my best lads on it,” Sean confirmed, following Max and I outside. “You’re still coming to the house tonight?” he asked, making it sound as if we had plans.

“What?” I furrowed my brow in confusion as I wracked my brain for what I’d apparently forgotten.

“It’s Emily’s birthday, remember? She’s making dinner.”

Shit! I’d forgotten all about that when I arranged to spend the evening with Annie. Letting my sister down wasn’t ideal, but I didn’t want to miss out on the chance to be with Annie, either.

“I can’t make it.”

“What do you mean, you can’t make it?” Sean demanded, his tone bordering on hostile. With family, he was even less compromising than I was. We both adored our younger sisters, but Sean had made it his mission in life to make sure nobody ever hurt them. His protectiveness put Will and I to shame.

“He met a girl,” Max chipped in helpfully.

Sean’s demeanor changed immediately. A grin spread across his face as he fixed an appraising eye on me. “A girl, huh? Who is she?”

“Just a woman I met.” I tried to sound casual about it. “I said I’d meet her tonight.”

“And you can’t put it off?” Sean asked.

“She’s leaving tomorrow,” Max said. “She’s from Scotland. He met her at Lola’s.”

“What was some girl from Scotland doing at Lola’s?” Sean knew as well as I did that

the place was a shithole.

Mac grinned. “She was looking for her long-lost cousin, Danny Mulhearn.”

I rolled my eyes as Max filled my brother in on the details.

Sean burst out laughing. “And you’ve fallen for this lass?” He sobered when I glared at him. “Bring her to the house.”

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

I shook my head. “No way. You know Emily. If I bring a woman home for dinner, she’ll be picking out bridesmaids’ dresses before the food’s even on our plates.”

“Aye,” Sean agreed, because he’d been on the receiving end of Emily’s well-intentioned matchmaking as well. “But you can’t blow off dinner. Ma’s not flying up for it and Erin’s got an exhibition in New York that’s apparently too important to miss. You can’t leave poor Em with just me and Will for company.”

I rolled my eyes at his obvious attempt at manipulation. Our sister had just Sean and Will for company most nights and so far, she’d survived just fine.

“I’ll send her something nice to make up for it.”

“Fine.”

The disapproval in that one word almost crushed me. I hated to hear such disappointment in my brother’s voice.

“But you’d better make it good,” he added. “You know flowers and shit won’t fly with Em.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll get Marcie on it.” My personal assistant was better at choosing gifts than I was, and she’d known my sister since the day she was born.

Sean sighed dramatically, then pulled me in for another hug. “If you decide to keep this woman around, I want to meet her.”

“Sure.” I patted his back, and he released me from his embrace.

Max and I got into the back of the car we came in. Anthony, our driver, met my eye in the rearview mirror.

“My place,” I instructed him. I needed to get changed out of my now-bloody clothes before I went into the office. With Annie relaxing at the spa, I could get a few hours’ work in before it was time to meet her.

As we drove off, I reconsidered my plans. Seeing me with my family could be a good thing for Annie. If I was going to keep her, and I was sure I was, then meeting them would help ease her into her new life. Perhaps taking her to the lake house wasn’t the worst idea after all.

## ChapterNine

### Annie

My afternoon at the spa had been sheer bliss. The manager, Lisa, had organized an incredible schedule of pampering for me. I started with a hot stone massage, which I found bizarre but relaxing. Then I was treated to a facial which was finished off with a cream I would swear was made from angel’s tears. With an indecipherable scent that was pleasantly soothing, it left my skin feeling softer than it ever had.

After that, I’d been treated to a manicure and a pedicure, both of which involved an element of massage. I’d never liked people touching my feet because I’m ticklish, but Zara’s hands may have changed my mind.

I’d been plied with an endless supply of non-alcoholic drinks, including a cleansing juice that tasted way better than its lurid green color had suggested. Presented with a lavish fruit platter, I’d feasted on strawberries, dragon fruit and papaya. By the time I

left the spa, I felt rejuvenated.

When I returned to the hotel with Jace, who'd waited patiently in the spa's reception area for me, I found a note on my bed. It was from Ciaran, telling me there was a dress hanging in the closet for me to wear tonight. I had mixed feelings about that. Was it a romantic gesture for him to pick out clothes for me, or was it a sign of a controlling nature? Wanting to make the most of this evening, I chose to see it as the former.

The dress was beautiful and something I'd have picked out for myself. Though Ciaran had only seen me in a couple of outfits, he'd clearly realized I favored a feminine style with floaty skirts. In a cream floral-patterned chiffon, the dress was clearly more expensive than anything I could afford. Perhaps if I had a summer wedding to go to, I'd have splashed out on something like this.

When I put the dress on, I felt like a princess. The only trouble was, I didn't have shoes to go with it. Sneakers would be all wrong with such a delicate fabric and my black pumps would be too stark against the cream. The moment I mentioned that to Jace, who'd plonked himself down on the sofa in my suite, he got on the phone. I don't know who he called, but fifteen minutes later, a pair of delicate cream-colored high heels arrived. They were perfect with the dress, if a little higher than I'd usually wear.

Now sitting in the hotel bar, I sipped my drink and looked around to see Jace still standing in the doorway. He'd excused himself to take a phone call two minutes ago. As I scanned the room, playing my favorite game of guessing which couples were in a full-time relationship and which were conducting an illicit affair, my eyes landed on a short balding man in a gray suit, who was heading straight for me.

Picking up the drinks menu from the table, I studied it with exaggerated concentration, hoping he would get the message I wasn't interested. It didn't work.

He kept coming. As he stopped next to me, I glanced over at Jace, who was still engrossed in his phone call. It looked like I'd have to get rid of this man myself. I wasn't afraid to tell someone to get lost, but I hated to sound rude.

"Miss Calder?" he asked, before I could tell him to take a hike.

I relaxed a little. If he knew my name, he must work at the hotel. "Yes."

"I work for a man I believe you're interested in meeting."

"Oh." My eyes widened in surprise. He wasn't a hotel employee, after all. "You work for Danny Mulhearn?"

He offered me an oily smile that made my skin crawl. "That's right. I'm James O'Hara, Mr. Mulhearn's driver. He sent me to pick you up."

I couldn't explain why, but I got a bad feeling, and my brain screamed at me not to go with him. Still, finding Danny was what I'd come here to do, and I couldn't help but be a little bit curious. "How does he know I want to meet him?"

"A friend of his made him aware of your search. She said you believe you're his cousin."



*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:57 am*

She? It must have been Lisa who told him. When I was getting my manicure, we'd chatted a bit. I explained to her why I'd come to Detroit. I must also have mentioned I was staying at this hotel, because this man wouldn't have found me otherwise.

"Distant cousin."

"Right." Mr. O'Hara gave me another of those intensely creepy grins. "We also heard you got mixed up with Ciaran Reilly."

I didn't have the chance to ask what he meant by mixed up as Jace stormed over. Though he'd put on a jacket to meet the bar's strict dress code, he still looked intimidating.

"Fuck off, O'Hara," Jace snarled.

The shorter man flinched, but didn't back off. "I'm just having a word with the young lady."

"Not anymore, you're not," Jace spat. "Now get out of here before I break your fucking neck."

The threat of violence I knew he would follow through on startled me. O'Hara reached into his pocket and Jace tensed. I did too, wondering what he thought was about to happen. O'Hara pulled out a white card and dropped it on the table.

"That's Mr. Mulhearn's number. He's waiting for your call."

O'Hara cast a scathing glance at Jace and scurried off. Before I could pick up the business card, embossed with gold lettering, Jace snatched it and tore it to shreds.

"What did you to that for?" I demanded.

"Danny Mulhearn is bad news. You don't need to be messing with him."

I rolled my eyes. "So I keep hearing, but why? What is so awful about this man?"

Jace eased his six-foot-four frame onto the seat opposite me. "What has Ciaran told you about his business, the family?"

"Not much." We hadn't talked much about anything so far. I thought about it for a moment and put two and two together. "Are he and Danny rivals?"

Jace nodded. "They're in a similar line of business, but Ciaran's got integrity. He does things a certain way, maintains a standard. In our family, we conduct ourselves with honor. You understand?"

"Yes. So, what, Danny doesn't follow the rules?"

"Danny Mulhearn's a lowlife. He doesn't care who he hurts to get what he wants. That would include you."

"Okay, but that still doesn't give you the right to tear up his business card."

"Yes it does, sweetcheeks. Ciaran told me to protect you, and that's what I did."

"By removing my choice?"

"Your choice to do what?" a familiar voice asked from behind me.

I looked over my shoulder to find Ciaran standing there. He was wearing a different suit than the one he'd had on at lunch. It, too, was immaculately tailored. A pale gray, he'd paired it with a white shirt and a black tie. I swallowed hard as I let my gaze trail over him. Damn, that man could fill out a suit.

"I'll let Annie fill you in." Jace got to his feet.

"Go help Max," Ciaran said. "He's upstairs."

"Sure thing, boss."

"Upstairs?" I queried as Jace walked off.

"Max is doing me a small favor. It will go faster if Jace helps him." Sitting in the seat Jace had just vacated, he offered no further explanation. He pointed to my almost empty glass. "What are you drinking?"

"French martini."

He raised a hand and a young woman in a black shift dress hurried over. When I'd wanted to order, I waited for over five minutes. With one gesture, Ciaran had her rushing to do his bidding.

“What can I get for you, sir?”

Her eager tone pissed me off. I knew it was her job to schmooze with the customers, but she looked as if she wanted to lick whipped cream off Ciaran’s bare chest. I supposed I couldn’t blame her. Now that the thought had occurred to me I wanted to do the same.

“Another French martini for the lady and I’ll take a Balvenie Portwood.”

“Ha, I knew it.” I jabbed a finger at Ciaran as the server hurried off to fill out the order. “I knew you were a whiskey drinker.”

“Yeah, I know I should honor my heritage and go for Jamesons, or something, but I’ve always liked Scotch.”

“Don’t worry.” I leaned across the table to whisper conspiratorially. “I won’t alert the Irish embassy.”

“I’m in your debt.” Ciaran laughed. “So, how was the spa?”

“It was amazing, thank you. I feel so revitalized.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Did Jace behave?”

“He was a perfect gentleman.”

“Hmm.” The face Ciaran made suggested he hadn’t expected his cousin to be on his

best behavior. Jace had the air of someone who could be a bit of a rogue. “Then what were you arguing about when I came in?”

“Oh, it was nothing.” It hardly seemed worthwhile to get into it, but Ciaran raised his eyebrows, waiting for an explanation. “A man approached me. Said he was Danny Mulhearn’s driver. He gave me a business card and said Danny was waiting for my call. Jace ripped it to pieces.”

Ciaran hummed approvingly. “How did Mulhearn’s driver know you were here?”

“I think Lisa must have told him. We talked a fair bit when I was at the spa. I must have told her where I was staying and that I was meeting you in the bar.”

“Hmm,” Ciaran mused, annoyance flickering across his otherwise perfect face. “I’ll have to have a word with her.”

I didn’t like the thought of the woman getting a dressing-down from someone who could be as stern as Ciaran. At the same time, I wasn’t happy with her for sharing information about me. Surely, clients at a spa could expect some level of confidentiality. If she knew Danny, she could have told me how to get in touch with him rather than going to him behind my back. That seemed odd.

“Is it really such a big deal if I speak to the man?” I asked.

“I’m afraid it is.” Ciaran nodded his thanks to the server as she set our drinks down on the table. “Now, can we drop the subject and just enjoy our evening?”

“Of course.” Chastened by the scolding tone of Ciaran’s voice, my mood darkened. I smiled to cover my hurt. “So, what do you have in mind?”

“Well, I was hoping you’d agree to join me for a family dinner.”

“Family dinner? You’re not about to spring your wife and three kids on me, are you?”

“Fuck, no!” Ciaran snorted dismissively. “I mean with my brothers and my sister, Emily. It’s her birthday and I...”

“Say no more,” I cut in. “I’d love to have dinner with them.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course.” I wanted to spend the evening with Ciaran, but I didn’t like the thought of him missing his sister’s birthday. “Where is this family dinner?”

“At our house up on Orchard Lake.”

I gnawed my bottom lip. “Is it far? I have to be at the airport by eight a.m.”

I could stretch it to nine o’clock, but I liked to be checked in as early as possible. The thought of missing a flight and then having to rebook it made me anxious. I didn’t have savings left to play with.

“I wouldn’t worry about that.” Something in Ciaran’s expression gave me pause. A look I couldn’t decipher flickered in his eye and then disappeared. “The house is only a thirty-minute drive from here, forty if traffic’s heavy.”

That didn’t sound too bad. “Okay, but I haven’t packed yet. Perhaps I should do that before we leave.”

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

It wouldn't take me long if I didn't worry about folding everything properly. Ciaran shook his head, though. "I'll get that taken care of. Why don't you just relax and enjoy the evening?"

"Oh, okay." I guessed it wouldn't hurt to let the hotel staff take care of my packing. It wasn't my favorite thing in the world to do.

Ciaran raised his glass. "To us, and whatever the future might bring."

"To us," I echoed, clinking my glass against his.

As Ciaran drained his whiskey in a single gulp, I couldn't help wondering what he meant about the future. It wasn't as if we had one, since I was leaving tomorrow. A strange sense of unease coiled in my stomach. Mr. O'Hara's words bothered me. What had he meant by mixed up with Ciaran? Was he suggesting that Ciaran was the bad guy? Perhaps I was making a mistake.

"You know, I'm not sure I should come to your family dinner. I mean, it's your sister's birthday. She won't want a stranger there."

"Nonsense, she'll love you. They all will." Ciaran got up and held out a hand to me. "Now, come on. We don't want to be late."

Setting my drink down on the table, I took his hand and allowed him to pull me to my feet. As he led me from the bar, I shook off my concerns. That horrible little man had put ridiculous doubts in my mind, but Ciaran had been nothing but wonderful to me. Tonight was going to be great. I'd meet Ciaran's siblings, have a nice meal, and if I

was lucky, after dinner, I'd score another couple of orgasms. Then, tomorrow, I'd get on my plane and head home with amazing memories and no regrets.

## Chapter Ten

Annie

When Ciaran said we were going to his family's lake house, I imagined a cabin in the woods, something no frills but comfortable. I thought we'd have to bump over miles of dirt track to get to it. Instead, our destination was a community of enormous houses with meticulously landscaped gardens.

We drove past several impressive-looking homes before coming to a stop at a huge set of wrought-iron gates. One of two guards, who I was pretty sure were armed, acknowledged Ciaran's driver with a nod and pressed a button to open the gates. As we drove through, I could have sworn he saluted.

The property was surrounded by a high brick wall, and I spotted several security cameras. As I thought about it, I realized just how well protected Ciaran was. He had a lot of different men working for him. I hadn't seen the same ones twice. His apartment could only be accessed with a special code, and this one had more security than my local bank. Who on earth was Ciaran that he needed to be shielded like this?

As we pulled up outside a mansion, my jaw dropped. The house was stunning. It looked as if it had been plucked from the English countryside and set down in the middle of Michigan.

"How far is the lake?" I asked as Ciaran opened my door and helped me out of the car. So far, I hadn't seen the body of water for which this area was named.

"It's about a hundred feet from the back of the house. We have a small boat moored



off the jetty.”

I suspected his idea of small differed from mine. It was clear from this place that Ciaran didn't do things by halves. As I looked at the glass-fronted door before me, I sucked in a breath. Ciaran squeezed my hand reassuringly.

“Ready to face the Reilly clan?”

“I suppose so, but I wish you'd have let me stop to pick up a gift for your sister.” I'd been brought up to consider it rude to turn up at someone's home empty-handed, especially if they were celebrating something.

“It'll be fine. She'll be too pleased I brought you to care about anything else.”

“Okay, then,” I said, somewhat mollified. “Let's do this.”

I clung tightly to Ciaran's hand as we walked through the front door. Meeting his family made me inexplicably nervous. It wasn't as if I'd see them again if I embarrassed myself somehow.

I was surprised by how bright and modern the house was. The brick façade on the exterior was very traditional, and I expected the inside to match. It didn't. The floor was white-washed wood, and the walls were painted pale blue. A large round table sat at the center of a spacious foyer adorned with a beautiful arrangement of pink roses.

Ciaran led me past a wooden staircase and along a hallway, leading from the foyer toward what I assumed was the back of the house. Beautiful paintings lined the walls.

“Someone has a thing for wildflowers,” I remarked.

“Ah, yes. Those are my sister Erin’s. She’s been painting since she was a kid. She did those in her senior year of high school.”

“You’re kidding!” I paused to study an image of poppies swaying in the wind. Each brush stroke seemed to have been meticulously placed to create a photo-realistic image. There was such a sense of movement in the picture, I could almost feel the breeze whispering over my skin. It was incredible to think a teenager had created something so evocative. “These are amazing.”

“She moved on to portraits after high school.”

“Has she ever painted you?”

Ciaran nodded. “From a photograph, though. I can’t sit still long enough for someone to paint me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“I’d love to see the painting.”

Ciaran moved behind me, wrapped his arms around my waist, and leaned in close to whisper in my ear. “Then you’re in luck because it’s hanging in my bedroom.”

“Hmm, that is lucky.”

My spine tingled with anticipation as Ciaran nibbled my skin lightly at the place where my neck and shoulder met. I couldn’t wait until we were alone to explore our burning attraction further, but first we had to have dinner with his family. It was why we’d driven out here, after all.

With some reluctance, I shrugged Ciaran off. He grabbed my hand and led me through to the kitchen. As an avid cook, I dreamed of having a space like this in my home. It was perfect. The cabinets were light blue and the stove, which was a few shades darker than them, had eight burners and a massive oven. A vibrant backsplash tiled the wall behind the stove and the floor was a gray marble. Everything was modern, apart from the copper pots hanging on a rack over the large kitchen island. They looked as if they’d seen decades of use. I had similar ones that had passed from my grandmother to my mother to me.

The savory aroma that filled the air was incredible. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until my stomach growled loudly. Ciaran chuckled next to me, letting me know he’d heard, and I elbowed him lightly in the ribs.

“Will, can you grab....?” The woman emerging from the pantry with a loaf of bread stopped when she saw us and set the loaf down on the nearest counter. “You’re here.”

The slender brunette, who was unmistakably Ciaran's sister, crossed her arms over her chest. "Sean said you weren't coming."

"Changed my mind." Ciaran's response was flippant. I hoped we weren't putting her out by turning up unexpectedly. "Come and meet Annie."

Smiling broadly, Ciaran's sister rushed across the room. She startled me by flinging her arms around me. I wasn't used to being greeted so effusively by a stranger.

"It's great to meet you, Annie. I'm Emily." She stepped back and turned to Ciaran, pulling him in for a hug. "Thank you for the gift you sent."

"You're welcome, princess."

Emily pursed her lips. "I'll give you a thousand bucks if you can tell me right now what you got me."

Ciaran hesitated, making it obvious that whatever gift his sister received, he wasn't the one who sent it.

"Of course, it was a gold...."

"Silver," Emily interjected, using the same wry tone I'd heard from her brother.

"Silver...." He grimaced as he thought about it. "Necklace?"

"Bracelet." She slapped his chest. "You're such an asshole. Just be grateful Marcie knows what I like."

"Marcie?" I questioned.

“My assistant.”

“More like his second mother,” Emily said. She threaded her arm through mine. “Come on, let me introduce you to the boys.”

As we walked into the dining room, it was apparent that these were no mere boys.

“That’s Sean.” Emily pointed toward a gigantic man who looked as if he wrestled bears for sport. Wearing a white shirt stretched tight over a muscular torso, he had the sleeves rolled up to reveal several tattoos. There was some sort of vine creeping up his arm. At his neck, there was an intricately drawn Celtic knot. He was as attractive as Ciaran, but in a more rugged way. There was something dangerous about him. “And that one’s Will.” The younger man was skinnier than his brother, but next to any other man, his physique would have been impressive. “Guys, this is Annie.”

“So, you’re Ciaran’s girl.” A smile curved Sean’s lips as his eyes trailed over me. “Yeah, I can see it.”

“Don’t even look at her.” Ciaran hugged me close to his side as if he was afraid his brother was going to throw me over his shoulder and run off.

Sean laughed. “Don’t worry, brother. She’s pretty, but you know I only fuck redheads.”

“Well, thank goodness for that,” I said with mock indignation, while inwardly taken aback at his rough language, “because I’d never be able to resist your charms.”

Sean grinned. “And she talks back. I like her.”

“Ignore my dumbass brother.” Will stepped forward and leaned in to kiss my cheek. “He likes to flirt, but he wouldn’t know what to do with a woman if she flirted back.”

“Oh, I’d know what to do, little....”

“Right!” Emily’s firm voice interrupted her brother. “Let’s stop this before you idiots really get going and scare Annie away. Dinner’s nearly ready, so make yourselves comfortable.”

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“Can I help you with anything?” Manners dictated that I offered, though I really didn’t want to leave Ciaran’s side.

“No, but he can.” Emily jabbed a finger in Sean’s direction.

“I don’t know how to cook.”

“I don’t need you to cook, just to carry something heavy. That’s within your limited capabilities, yes?”

The way Sean trooped out of the room after her gave me the distinct impression that Emily wielded a lot of power around here. She probably had to assert herself with such intensely masculine brothers to contend with. I’d only been in the presence of all three Reilly men for a couple of minutes and I was already suffocating from the testosterone.

“Annie.” Ciaran pulled out a chair on the left side of the table. He helped me to sit and then took his own seat at the head of the table. I was glad he’d put me closest to him. “Will, set a couple of places for yourself and Emily and pour the wine.”

His imperious tone set my teeth on edge, but Will either didn’t notice or he was used to being bossed about by his older brother. Being an only child, I didn’t understand sibling dynamics, so I held my tongue and watched as Will fetched silverware from a drawer in the dresser at the side of the room. He found plates in the cabinet and set two more places. Then he grabbed both bottles of wine from the center of the table.

“What’s it to be, Annie? We’ve got red or...” He glanced at the label on the second

bottle. “Red.”

“Then I guess I’ll have red.”

He filled my glass first, then the others, starting with Ciaran’s. He took a seat just as a crash came from the kitchen, followed by Emily yelling at Sean about being an idiot. I bit my bottom lip, but nobody else seemed concerned by the noise.

“The answer is yes, before you ask,” Will said. “We are always like this. We can be loud, but I promise you, we’re all good friends here.”

I sighed in relief. “That’s good. I’m an only child, so I don’t really get the whole brothers and sisters thing.”

“Give it a couple of weeks and you’ll be joining in,” Will said.

“Oh, I won’t be here in a couple of weeks.”

“You planning on breaking up with my brother already?”

“No, it’s just that I’m heading home tomorrow.”

Will glanced at Ciaran, whose expression was unreadable. I wasn’t sure, but I thought I might have detected a little tension around his mouth.

“Yeah? Where’s home?”

“Scotland.”

“Ah, I wondered about the accent. I thought it might be Irish.”



It was interesting. I'd always imagined my accent was distinctly Scottish, but since I arrived in Detroit, several people had asked where I was from.

"I have some Irish connections in Detroit, though."

Beneath the table, Ciaran's hand landed on my leg. It felt like a warning.

"Anyone we'd know?" Will asked jovially.

"Perhaps. I'm distantly related to...."

"Not now, sweetheart." Squeezing my leg in a definite command to drop the subject, Ciaran cut me off. "We're here to enjoy my sister's birthday, not to untangle your family tree."

His rebuke stung, but I supposed he was right. He'd already made his opinion of Danny Mulhearn clear and if his siblings felt the same way, it would sour the mood. I'd accepted at this point I would never meet my American relatives, anyway.

With the atmosphere in the room dampened, we didn't speak again until Sean came into the room, carrying a casserole dish out in front of him as if he was displaying some grand prize. He held it up for us all to see and then set it down at the center of the table with a flourish. It seemed Ciaran's brother had a flair for the theatrical. Emily came in a moment later with a basket of bread and a dish of steamed cabbage.

"It's nothing fancy, I'm afraid, Annie, just a coddle."

"Coddle?" I had a vague recollection of the dish. "That's a stew, isn't it?"

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“It’s sausages, bacon, potatoes and carrots,” Ciaran explained. “We like to have traditional Irish dishes on special occasions.”

“Well, it smells amazing, and I could use a good home-cooked meal after all the junk I’ve eaten this week.”

“Annie’s on vacation,” Will said as Emily held her hand out for Ciaran’s plate. “She’s leaving tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Emily’s face fell. “But you and Ciaran look so good together. I thought this was the start of something amazing.”

“You never know what might happen,” Ciaran replied cryptically. He stared at me for a moment, an intensity in his gaze that had me shifting uncomfortably in my seat. That strange sense of dread nagged at me once more, but it disappeared as quickly as it had arrived when Ciaran smiled broadly. “Come on, let’s eat. I’m starving.”

### ChapterEleven

#### Annie

As we headed upstairs after dinner, with a generous slice of Emily’s birthday cake to share, I couldn’t banish a twinge of embarrassment. While the others were going out to a club to celebrate, Ciaran had made no secret of what he wanted to do instead. His declaration that we had better things to do and weren’t to be disturbed made it obvious he intended to fuck me. Though I wasn’t a prude, I was uncomfortable with the thought of Ciaran’s siblings knowing we’d stayed home to have sex.

I wouldn't let mild discomfort ruin what had been a perfect night, though. I loved Ciaran's siblings. Though I was wary of Sean at first, he turned out to be warm and funny. Will was a total sweetheart, and Emily was kind and welcoming. She'd been happy to share funny stories from their childhood.

Ciaran had stepped out halfway through dinner to take a call from Jace. He'd been pensive, but a glass of wine and some of his brothers' banter had soon loosened him up. The rest of the evening had made me sad I wouldn't be able to stick around and get to know the Reilly family better.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I discovered there were corridors leading off in two different directions. Ciaran led me along the passageway to the left.

"This is my part of the house," he explained. "The rest of them have rooms in the other wing."

"That's mean," I teased. "You've got all this space to yourself, and they have to share."

"Yes, my heart bleeds for them." He raised a hand to his chest in an insincere gesture of pity.

"Well, the perks of being the oldest brother, I suppose."

"And their boss."

We hadn't gone into any details about his business, but I had ascertained through snippets dropped into the conversation at dinner that Sean and Will both worked for him. His cousin Jace did, too. That made it quite the family affair.

"Do they like working for you?" I asked, as we stopped at the second door to the

right.

“It’s not a question of liking it. They do it because that’s how families like ours operate.”

“Right.” Something about that struck a chord with me. It was like the tangled pieces in my mind were finally coming together. The hints I’d picked up here and there were forming into a coherent thought. I didn’t have time to unravel it, though, because Ciaran opened the door to the most incredible bedroom I’d ever seen. “This is...” Words escaped me. “Wow!”

The entire upstairs of my house would have fit into this room. Decorated in a calming palette of neutral tones, it was masculine, but not overwhelmingly so. An enormous wooden bed dominated the space, but it was the windows on either side of it that caught my eye. Though it was dark now, I could see lights twinkling on the water outside. I’d bet the view was amazing in the daytime.

“You like it?” Ciaran asked, setting the plate with the birthday cake down on the nightstand as I walked around the space.

“I do.”

There was a fireplace off to the left, with two large leather armchairs placed at either side of a wooden trunk that doubled as a coffee table. A long, padded bench lay at the end of the bed. There were a set of small dressers on one side of the room, with a rectangular mirror above them.

On the right side of the room were two doors. One was open, revealing a closet that seemed to stretch back for at least twelve feet. The other door was closed, but I assumed it led to a bathroom whose level of luxury probably matched the bedroom.

I stopped my tour of the room when I came to the portrait of Ciaran on the wall. It was a perfect likeness. She'd captured not just his physical presence but an aspect of his character I'd had several glimpses of. His attire was formal, a three-piece suit with a tie. His stance was rigid, and his smile wasn't reflected in his dark gaze. It reminded me of the portraits of wealthy landowners that hung in stately homes. This was a man in command, perhaps to be feared.

Ciaran came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my chest.

"What do you think?"

"She's so talented." Something about the image unnerved me. "She's made you look forbidding."

"Perhaps that's how she sees me." He twirled me around so I was facing him. "Do you see me that way?"

“Well, you can be stern.”

Ciaran arched an eyebrow. “When have I been stern with you?”

He had to be kidding. “When you warned me off Danny. When you spanked me. You were stern at dinner when you told me to drop the subject of my American relatives.” I almost laughed at the puzzled expression on his face. “You don’t think you were stern then?”

“Not particularly.”

“Then I hope I never see you when you are stern.”

Ciaran put a hand beneath my chin and tilted my face up to him. “Don’t give me a reason to be stern with you.”

“Well.” I moved closer to him. “You can be a little stern with me.”

“In that case, Ms. Calder, turn around.”

I did as he asked, giving him my back. His knuckles trailed down my spine as he slowly unzipped my dress. He slipped it off my shoulders and tugged it over my hips, letting it fall to the floor. Then he unclasped my bra. As it hit the floor on top of my dress, my skin tingled with anticipation. There was something incredibly arousing about being undressed by such a powerful man.

When he slid his hands down to my panties, I expected him to remove those as well.

He didn't. Instead, he bunched the silk in his hands, pulling the fabric tight. The friction as he rubbed the panties against my pussy started a pulsing sensation between my legs. My clit throbbed as he teased me. I dropped my head back against his solid chest, my heart beating rapidly as my arousal grew. Then, as suddenly as he'd begun the sensual onslaught, he stopped. A disappointed whine slipped from my throat.

Ciaran spun me around and kissed me. His lips were punishing, his tongue ruthless as it pushed into my mouth to take possession. There was nothing tender in it. This was about dominance, and I submitted to it all too easily, clinging to his shoulders as he demonstrated who was in control.

When he pulled back, my lips were bruised, my legs trembling.

"Sit at the edge of the bed," Ciaran commanded.

I did as he asked, sitting on the bed, my knees pressed together as he stripped off his clothes. It occurred to me that, despite the fact we'd fucked, I hadn't yet seen him naked. Settling back on my elbows, I enjoyed the show. He stripped his shirt off to reveal his muscular torso in all its glory. He had a single tattoo, a shamrock strategically placed over his heart.

After kicking off his shoes, he removed his socks and unbuckled the belt of his pants. He took his sweet time drawing down his zip and then sliding his pants and boxer shorts down his legs. When he straightened, I blew out a breath. I knew already his cock was an impressive size. I'd had it in my mouth and my pussy, but seeing it like this damned near made my eyes water. Sensing my interest, Ciaran smirked.

"See something you want, sweetheart?"

"Yes."

He stepped closer. "Tell me."

I swallowed as I steeled myself. No man had encouraged me to ask for what I wanted from him before.

"I want your cock."

Ciaran reached out and curved a hand around my cheek. "No need to be shy, sweetheart. You can have it, but I want a taste of something sweet first." Reaching over to the nightstand, he grabbed the piece of cake off the plate. He took a bite and groaned with delight before scooping a blob of frosting onto his finger and holding it to my mouth.

Obediently parting my lips, I grabbed his wrist as I sucked the creamy vanilla frosting from his finger. "Mmm, delicious," I murmured.

"I can think of something that tastes better." Ciaran gathered more frosting on his fingers and set the plate aside. "Be a good girl and lie back for me."

Whatever he had in mind, there was no way I was going to say no to it. I flopped back on the bed as Ciaran looked down at me, a searing heat in his gaze. He smeared frosting across my breasts. Caging me with his arms, he lowered his head and kissed me. His touch was tender. He dragged his lips slowly down to my breasts. He lapped up the frosting from my skin, then drew my nipple into his mouth. I yelped as he nipped me with his teeth. He kissed the pain away, then dropped to his knees on the floor.

Putting his hands on my thighs, he spread my legs apart. Without warning, he dived right in. My back arched off the bed as he swiped his tongue over the sensitive flesh of my pussy. I grabbed a fistful of the sheets beneath me, needing something to cling to as he lapped and sucked, feasting on me like I was his last meal. He flicked his



tongue back and forth over my clit and I trembled as tension coiled inside me. There was something about this man. The merest touch sent me hurtling toward an orgasm.

Ciaran wrapped his lips around my swollen clit and sucked hard. My hips lifted off the bed, but he splayed a hand across my abdomen to hold me down. My clitoris throbbed and pleasure rippled through me.

“Ciaran!” I cried out as I came. It wasn’t one of those earth-shattering climaxes, but it left me with a strange warmth deep inside, a sense of completion.

As Ciaran got to his feet, the glint in his eye assured me he was nowhere near done with me yet. He took my hand and pulled me up from the bed. Kissing me with a fervor that left me breathless, he backed me up against the wall. He broke our kiss and looked down at me, eyes dark with barely leashed lust.

“I’m clean. Do I need a condom?”

I shook my head. “I’m protected.” Despite my lackluster love life in recent months, I’d continued to use birth control.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

Though soaked and ready for him, I whimpered at the brutal invasion as he lifted my left leg around his waist and shoved his cock into me, going all the way in. We could do this a thousand times, and I'd never get used to the way he filled me. He'd fucked me before, but there was something about him being bare that made it more primal. With no barrier between us, it felt like he was claiming me.

He held still for a moment, giving me time to adjust to his size. Then he withdrew until only the head of his cock remained inside me, before slamming back in. I clung to his shoulders as he set a furious pace, fucking me like he was trying to imprint himself on my soul.

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” he commanded.

I did as he asked. As he pounded into me, I pressed my hips toward him, welcoming him as deep as he could go. I panted breathlessly as my need built.

“Ciaran, please.” Pleasure was so tantalizingly close I could have cried.

Slipping his hand between us, he pinched my clit, hard. Pain twisted its way to my core, magnifying the sensations already swirling within me. My back arched off the wall as I came harder than before. As my body convulsed, my head dropped to Ciaran's shoulder, and he caught me as I plummeted over the edge into mindless ecstasy.

Awareness returned to me, and I winced as Ciaran pulled out of me, his cum trickling down my thigh. I was so caught up in my orgasm, I'd missed the moment of his.

He cupped my ass as he held me to him. I jerked in surprise as his finger probed the tight hole that was, so far, unclaimed.

“This ass will be mine,” he declared as he carried me to the bed.

He set me down gently with my head on the pillows, then climbed onto the bed. He straddled my legs, his knees caging my thighs.

“I want to take things to the next level.” He stared down at me, watching my expression carefully. “I want you to submit to me completely.”

“Okay?” My tone was cautious. I’d already let him control things. What more was he going to ask of me?

“But before we get to that, I need something from you.” He reached down and brushed the hair back from my face, a tender gesture. “I need your trust and your commitment.”

“Commitment?” I didn’t understand what he was asking for.

He smiled at me. “I want you to stay.”

“What?” The word burst from my lips.

“I want you to stay here with me.”

“But we only just met. I don’t know you.”

“That would be the point of staying,” Ciaran said patiently. “We can get to know each other, explore what we have between us.”

More than anything, I wanted to say yes, but I couldn't. My flight was booked for first thing tomorrow and I had a life to get back to. It wasn't all I wanted it to be, but I liked my home, and I enjoyed my career.

"I can't Ciaran," I said regretfully. "I wish I could, but...."

"But what, sweetheart?"

As I listed my objections mentally, I could imagine his rebuttal to each one. Couldn't afford a new ticket? He'd pay for one. Had a job to get back to? Take a leave of absence. My heart could get broken if this didn't work out between us? Well, life was all about risk. Did I really want to deny myself the chance to find out if he and I were meant to be? The argument could go on and on and I really didn't want to drag this out, so I knew I had to be firm and give him nothing to fight against.

"No, Ciaran, I'm sorry. It's not going to happen."

"But sweetheart...."

"No." As much as I hated to do it, I cut him dead. It was my turn to be stern. "It's not happening. End of story."

He slowly blew out a breath and nodded as if he'd expected my answer all along. "In that case, sweetheart, I'm sorry, but you leave me no choice."

Before I could even register what was happening, Ciaran got up off the bed, hauled me over his shoulder, and walked from the room.

"Ciaran!" I shrieked as he carried me along to the end of the corridor. He opened the door, and we entered another room. It was dark, but I felt the softness of a mattress beneath me as he set me down. I guessed that meant we were in another bedroom.

As my eyes adjusted, I saw him silhouetted against the light coming in from the corridor. Though I couldn't see his face, his wide-legged stance and crossed arms told me he meant business.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“I gave you a chance to do this the easy way. Now, we’ll do it my way.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re staying here, Annie. Your life is in danger, and I’m the only one who can protect you. The sooner you get used to that, the better.”

What the hell was he talking about? I scrambled off the bed as Ciaran turned and strode from the room. I didn’t make it to the door when he walked through and closed it behind him. The unmistakable sound of a key scraping in the lock sent a prickle of fear through me. Although I knew it would be futile, I tried the door. Of course, it didn’t budge.

“Ciaran!” I beat my fist on the door. “Let me out!”

Even as I yelled the words, I knew it wouldn’t happen. I was stuck in here until he decided to free me. Perhaps he would come to his senses and let me out in time to catch my flight. I wouldn’t hold my breath.

Fumbling around on the wall, I found the light switch and flicked it, bathing the room in a yellow glow. I leaned back against the door and looked around. A king-sized bed sat in the center of the room. There was a wooden dresser under the window and a nightstand by the bed, but otherwise it was pretty bare. A door at the side led into what I hoped was a bathroom.

With nothing else to do, I returned to the bed Ciaran had dumped me on. I climbed under the covers and curled up on my side. As prisons went, at least it was a

comfortable one.

Closing my eyes, I tried to calm my nerves. Why did Ciaran say I was in danger? Did he really believe that or was it a ploy to make me do as he asked? I guessed I'd just have to wait and see.

## ChapterTwelve

### Ciaran

As I walked into the breakfast room the next morning, I sensed the hostility radiating from my sister who was sitting at the table with Sean and Will. Last night, I'd told my brothers that I was keeping Annie here. They needed to be aware because her stay required us to enhance our security measures. From the scowl on Emily's face, it was obvious one of them had told her my intentions. Predictably, she was pissed.

"What the fuck, Ciaran?" she demanded, leaning forward to glower at me across the table. "You're holding Annie prisoner?"

I scrubbed a hand over my face. After another restless night, I was weary and in no mood for a fight. A certain pretty Scot was wreaking havoc on my sleep. My decision to lock her in the guest bedroom had been a split-second one. I hadn't wanted to be so heavy-handed with her, but she'd left me no choice. A credible threat had been made against her. Though she didn't understand it yet, her safety came first.

"Annie's not a prisoner. She's here so I can protect her."

Emily snorted derisively. She'd often railed against the measures our brothers and I took to keep her safe. Though we didn't drag innocent women into our business, some of our rivals, Danny Mulhearn included, were less scrupulous.

“And you had to lock her up to do that?”

I blew out a breath, my impatience already wearing thin. I hated it when my siblings questioned my judgement. All of them pushed me occasionally, and I allowed it to an extent, but they knew better than to interfere in my personal life.

“I’m going to let her out this morning. She can have the run of the house.”

“The run of the house? You’re talking about the girl like she’s your pet.”

Surprisingly, that comment came from Sean. I’d have expected Will to be Annie’s champion, but not our brother. Sean usually didn’t give a shit about how anyone treated a woman as long as he wasn’t abusing her.

“She’s not a pet. She’s a cherished guest.”

“Yeah, sure, Ciaran.” Will added his two cents’ worth. “A cherished guest who can’t come and go of her own free will.”

The way all three of my siblings were ganging up on me was unusual. It was an indication of how much they liked Annie. She’d fit right in with us at dinner last night. Sure. She’d been nervous at first, but she soon relaxed and joined in the conversation. Emily had been disappointed when I insisted on staying home rather than joining them at the club. She wanted Annie around as much as I did.

“It’s for her own good. Danny Mulhearn is looking for her. If he got hold of her...”

Shaking my head, I left the others to fill in the blanks. My brothers had seen firsthand what Mulhearn was capable of, and my sister had a vivid enough imagination to work it out.



“I don’t know,” Emily said. “Are you sure you haven’t manufactured a crisis as an excuse to make Annie stay?”

Was I exaggerating the risk? I considered for a moment and dismissed the idea. Mulhearn had a lot to gain by backing me into a corner and he could use Annie to do it. I’d been careless when I showed interest in her at Lola’s. I should never have kissed her so publicly. Sending her to the spa only made things worse. I’d never done something like that for a woman, and Lisa Sullivan had clearly realized Annie was important to me. The spa manager would pay for selling me out to Mulhearn when Jace finally tracked her down.

“No, the threat is real.”

“Did you explain it to her?” Emily asked.

“I told her she was in danger.”

My sister pursed her lips. She looked so like our mother when she was annoyed, it was uncanny. “Okay, but did you explain why? Did you tell her the type of man Danny Mulhearn is and what he’s capable of, or did you just issue one of your decrees?”

My shoulders slumped as I acknowledged internally that I could have handled things with Annie a lot better than I did. I wasn’t accustomed to having my authority questioned and my fear that she could be used as a pawn against me had made me act rashly.

“Do you want me to bring her some breakfast?” Emily asked, apparently gathering the answer from my lack of response.

“No, I’ll do it.”

I moved over to the table at the side of the room to fill a plate. Despite us employing a full-time housekeeper, Emily insisted on preparing all our food herself. She was one of those people who showed her love through cooking. I selected a couple of pastries and some fruit for Annie. Then I poured a cup of coffee. Not knowing how Annie liked it, I added a splash of cream and hoped for the best.

As I headed upstairs, I wondered whether Annie had slept as poorly as I had. I stopped outside the bedroom and balanced the plate on top of the cup as I unlocked the door.

When I walked into the room, I found Annie sitting on the bed, her back to the wall. The covers were pulled up to conceal her beautiful body from me. The ferocity of her glare told me everything I needed to know about her mood this morning. She wasn't happy.

"Good morning, sweetheart." My greeting was met with the stony silence it no doubt deserved. "I brought you some breakfast."

I held up the plate to show her, then set it down on the nightstand by the bed.

"What time is it?" Her tone was sullen.

Glancing at my watch, I replied. "Seven thirty."

A hopeful look spread across her face. "I can still make my flight."

I sat on the edge of the bed, and Annie inched away from me. "No, sweetheart, we've been through this. You're staying here."

"In this room?"

"No, you can leave the room whenever you want."

Her jaw worked furiously as she tried to contain her anger. "But not the house?"

"No." I spoke softly, hoping she would hear that I didn't want things to be this way. "My guards have instructions to stop you if you try to leave."

Annie shook her head. "This is insane."

I reached over and laid my hand on hers, but she quickly pulled it away. She needed

time to accept how things were going to be, so I let her withdraw. For now.

“Am I really in danger?” Annie asked.

“Yes. That phone call I took at dinner last night was about you. Our informants told us Danny Mulhearn will try to use you to get to me.”

“Use me how?”

“I believe he’d threaten to kill you unless I gave up territory to him.”

Annie narrowed her eyes. “What sort of business are you in, exactly?”

“The type of business where people get killed if they cross the wrong person.”

The corners of her mouth turned down. “Mafia business.” Her tone was flat.

“I’m a powerful man, sweetheart.” I neither confirmed nor denied the conclusion she’d drawn. “People will do anything to hurt my family, to take what’s mine.”

Annie stared at me long and hard. I could almost hear the thoughts racing through her mind.

“Okay. Suppose I am in danger because of your business?” It was impossible to miss the disdain in her voice. “Wouldn’t I be safer if I went home?”

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

It had occurred to me that if I sent her away, Danny might assume I was no longer interested in her, but the stakes were too high to take the risk.

“No. a man like him can get to you anywhere.”

Her face blanched. She stared at the bed for a moment and then looked up at me, determination clear in the clenching of her jaw.

“I’ll take my chances. Let me go home. If I feel like I’m in danger, I’ll call the police.”

“You don’t know the type of men Mulhearn has working for him. They’d have you bound and drugged before you could even reach for the phone.”

Annie threw her hands up in despair. “Am I supposed to take your word for all this? I don’t trust you, Ciaran. As far as I can see, you’re the bad guy. You’re the one who had me dragged off the street and brought to your apartment. You’re the one who locked me in a room when I wouldn’t give you what you wanted.”

Frustrated, I shoved my fingers through my hair. “All I’ve done is try to protect you from a man who’d have no qualms about slitting your throat. I hate to say it, but from the moment I kissed you at Lola’s, you became a target.”

“But we’ve only just met. Surely using me to hurt you would be pointless.”

“Are you suggesting I don’t care enough to hand over everything I own to save your life?”

My declaration startled Annie. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. “You can’t possibly feel so strongly about me already.”

“I can assure you, I do.” The truth of that pressed down on my chest. “I couldn’t bear to see you hurt. I’d kill any man who tried.”

Annie sighed. “But you’re hurting me by keeping me here.”

I shook my head. This was going nowhere. “Look, Annie, you’re staying here whether you like it or not. It’s up to you if you enjoy it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you can either sulk in this room or you can enjoy the swimming pool, the gym, the library. You can spend time with my family, get to know them.”

She gestured toward her body with her hand. “How am I meant to do that without clothes?”

“I’ll have your luggage brought to you.”

Her face darkened. “You have my luggage?”

“Yes, I had it brought here last night.”

“Unbelievable,” she muttered.

I stood up from the bed. “What’s it to be, Annie? Are you a prisoner locked in this room or a guest with the run of the house?”

“It seems I’ve no choice. I’ll accept your hospitality, but I don’t want to see you or

“speak to you until you come to tell me I can go home.”

I bowed my head, resigned. “If that’s how you want it.”

She pursed her lips and turned away. It seemed the silent treatment would begin immediately.

“I’ll get your things brought to you straight away. When you’re dressed, come downstairs. Emily will show you around.”

She didn’t even nod in response. Deflated by our encounter, I headed back downstairs to find my sister hovering in the hallway.

“How did it go?”

“She’s upset with me.”

I expected Emily to tell me it’s what I deserved, but instead, she put a hand on my arm in a gesture of reassurance. “You really like her, don’t you?”

“I do.” Though I barely knew Annie, my gut told me we were meant to be. “I’ve told her she can go wherever she wants inside the house. When she comes down, can you show her around?”

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“Of course.” Emily was quick to agree. “And I’ll talk you up a bit. Let her know there’s more to you than your tendency to be an overbearing asshole.”

“I’d appreciate it,” I said dryly. “Can you see that her luggage is brought to her? Max dropped it at the gatehouse last night.”

As Emily walked off, I wondered if I was doing the right thing. What if Annie didn’t come around? She might never see the situation from my perspective. The urge to run back upstairs and tell her I was letting her go was strong. I could send someone to Scotland to watch over her until I was sure she was safe. I just couldn’t do it, though. As selfish as it was, I needed her here. For better or worse, she was mine.

### ChapterThirteen

#### Annie

For three days, I held my resolve to not speak to Ciaran. I didn’t utter a single word to him, even though we inevitably ran into each other in the corridors. At first, he tried to engage me in conversation. When I refused to respond, he eventually got the message and gave up. It was childish, but I was determined to drive home my point. He couldn’t take away my freedom and expect me to make nice.

While I’d eaten breakfast and dinner with one or more of his siblings, Ciaran had taken his meals in his study. It was a thoughtful gesture on his part, allowing me to socialize with his family while he ate alone.

I tried not to feel bad for freezing him out, but I did. Ciaran masked his emotions



well, but the way his shoulders drooped whenever he saw me betrayed how dejected he was feeling. It made it harder for me to consider him a monster for refusing to let me go home.

If I said I was happy not speaking to Ciaran, I'd be lying. Although I enjoyed spending time with his siblings, I wanted to bridge the gap with him. I understood now that he genuinely wanted to protect me. Emily had convinced me Ciaran believed I was in danger and couldn't bear the thought of me being harmed. His desire to keep me safe showed he cared. The problem was, he went about showing me that in entirely the wrong way. If he'd told me everything up front, I'd probably have agreed to stay.

On the fourth morning after Ciaran brought me to the lake house, Emily and I sat at the table in the breakfast room. The entire house was beautiful, but this was my favorite spot. Smaller and more intimate than the formal dining room where we ate our evening meals, its walls were painted a warm yellow, and the carpet was blue. The wooden table had space for six to sit comfortably. But the best part was the bay window with views out over the lawn to the lake.

"Are you up for a bit of shopping today?" Emily asked as I sipped my coffee. "There's a great outlet mall not far from here."

Though I wasn't sure Ciaran would allow it, I nodded. "Sounds good."

"We'll have to take guards with us."

"That's okay." I'd expected as much. On my first day here, I'd spotted several armed men patrolling the grounds and realized just how important security was to the Reilly family. I guessed it was part of the mafia world I was now certain they were involved in. "If it means we can get out of here for a while, it's worth it."

Emily had been great over the last few days. Although she must have had better things to do, she hung around the house with me. When I preferred to have space, she backed off, but didn't go out in case I needed her.

She shot me a sympathetic look. "You're going stir-crazy, aren't you?"

I couldn't deny it. In the last couple of days, I'd swum in the luxurious pool in the basement, run on the treadmill in the gym, and spent time in the library, which was every avid reader's dream. It still wasn't enough to keep me occupied. I was used to doing more about the house, to coming and going as I pleased. Being stuck indoors was getting to me.

"I could use a change of scenery." Picking up a croissant, I took a bite and almost moaned at how deliciously buttery it was.

"We'll make a day of it," Emily said. "We'll do some shopping, have some lunch." She clapped her hands enthusiastically. "Ooh, can go to the aquarium."

"There's an aquarium at the shopping center?"

"Yes. It's amazing. They have all these different fish there."

"Well, I'd hope so," I said dryly.

Emily laughed, then fell silent as Ciaran came into the room. I couldn't miss the dark shadows beneath his eyes, nor the stubble at his chin. Though he was dressed smartly, he looked as if he hadn't even run a comb through his hair. He acknowledged us both with a nod.

"Good morning."

“Hey, big brother.” Emily returned his greeting with her usual warmth.

Like me, she watched him closely as he went to the table at the side of the room and helped himself to a couple of pastries. He poured himself a cup of coffee and walked to the door.

Something inside me snapped. Ciaran looked so forlorn, I couldn’t bear to shut him out anymore.

“Aren’t you joining us?” I asked.

Ciaran turned back to me, eyebrows raised. “Do you want me to?”

“It’s your home.” I cursed myself for my response. Why couldn’t I just have admitted I wanted him there?

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“Yes, join us,” Emily said more enthusiastically.

Ciaran took his usual seat at the head of the table, and Emily beamed.

“Where are Sean and Will?” Ciaran asked.

“Haven’t seen them this morning.” Emily pursed her lips. “I don’t think Sean came home last night and Will had an early start. Said he had a breakfast meeting over in Dearborn.”

“Yeah, he’s going to meet with the architects for the new hotel.”

“Great.” Emily’s shoulders rose and fell as she took a deep breath. “So, I, eh, I want to take Annie to Great Lakes today.”

Ciaran put down the coffee cup he was about to take a sip from. “Why do you have to shop at that place? It’s too big, there are too many stores and too many people. It’s a security nightmare.”

“Yes, but you know I love a bargain.” Emily flashed her best puppy-dog eyes at him. “I really want to go. Please?”

Ciaran looked at me. “If Annie wants to go.”

I shrugged. “I could do with some new clothes.”

“Okay. Max and four of my men will accompany you.”

“Max?” Emily’s face fell. “But he’s such a killjoy.”

“What you mean is that he doesn’t take your shit,” Ciaran said. “Either he goes with you, or you don’t go.”

“Fine,” Emily huffed, “but he’d better not try to boss me around.”

Ciaran smirked. “I’m sure he wouldn’t dare.” He reached into his inner jacket pocket. I was starting to wonder if he owned any casual clothing. He fished a credit card out of his wallet and slid it across the table to me. “Buy whatever you want. No limit.”

Emily grinned as I picked up the credit card and stared at it as if it was going to bite me. “You’re not going to be dull and say you don’t want to spend his money, are you?”

“Oh no, I intend to spend as much as I can.”

“Is this where you hit my bank balance to get revenge for me being an asshole to you?” Ciaran asked.

Was it an acknowledgment that he’d treated me badly? I liked to think it was.

“No, I understand why you acted the way you did.”

Ciaran stared at me for several long seconds. I squirmed in my seat as the scrutiny became almost unbearable. Then he spoke. “Buy yourself a dress. I want to take you out tonight.”

Though we still had issues to overcome, I jumped at the chance to repair our relationship. “Where?”

“A club I’m a member of.”

“Ooh,” Emily teased. “Do you mean Dominion?”

Ciaran turned to her, his eyes narrowed. “What does my innocent little sister know about Dominion?”

“Plenty. Can I come too?”

“Hell no.”

Between the name Dominion and the horror in his voice at the thought of his sister going there, I suspected it was some sort of sex club.

“Why can’t she come?” Batting my eyelashes at Ciaran, I feigned innocence. “What sort of club is it?”

Ciaran’s lips twitched. He knew exactly what I was up to, trying to embarrass him in front of Emily. “You’ll find out later.”

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

I held his gaze. “I can’t wait.”

Emily cleared her throat. “As glad as I am that you two are on speaking terms again, I’d rather not witness your flirting.” She pushed to her feet and looked at me. “Shall we meet at the front door in ten minutes?”

“Okay.”

After she left, I quickly finished my coffee and got up to leave the room. As I walked past him, Ciaran put a hand on my arm to stop me.

“Later.” That one word held so much promise.

“Later,” I agreed. Perhaps I should be more cautious about getting intimate with Ciaran again, but I needed to explore our attraction, to find out if it could develop into something more.

He released my arm, and I hurried off to get ready for my day out with Emily. I headed upstairs to the room I was already thinking of mine. Brushing my hair, I gathered it up into a ponytail. In case it was chilly out, I put a cardigan on over my short-sleeved dress and made my way back downstairs. By the time I reached the hallway, Emily was already waiting for me.

“Max is on his way over to pick us up. He lives nearby.”

“You don’t sound happy about it,” I surmised.

“The man’s an asshole.”

There was obvious hostility in her voice. I wondered what the story was.

“He drove me back to the hotel the night I met Ciaran. He seemed okay.”

“He used to be fun until he caught me kissing Jamie McKinlay on my nineteenth birthday. He beat the shit out of Jamie and dragged me home. Ever since then, he’s been as bad as my brothers, warning off any man he thinks will corrupt me.”

A startled laugh burst out of me. “What?”

“In our world, a woman’s supposed to be a virgin on her wedding day.”

“But you’re twenty. Surely it’s up to you....”

“Nope,” Emily interrupted. “I follow the rules or face the consequences.”

“That’s archaic.”

Tell me about it. Those assholes belong in the Middle Ages.”

“What assholes?”

We both swung around, startled, to find Max standing in the doorway. Neither of us had heard him arriving.

“Assholes like you, obviously.” Emily swept past him and got into the back of the SUV sitting outside the front door. Max watched her go with an expression that was equal parts consternation and admiration. I suspected the two of them liked each other more than they’d admit.



“Good morning, Max,” I said pleasantly. “Looking forward to a girls’ day out?”

“I’d rather have a red-hot poker shoved up my ass.”

“Charming.”

I followed him out to the car and got into the back with Emily. Max closed the door, then hopped in the front, next to the driver. As we drove off, Emily leaned closer to me so she could speak without being overheard.

“Have you decided to give Ciaran another chance?”

“I want to, but how do I know he won’t end up breaking my heart?”

“How do you know a man you meet at a bar, or go on a blind date with, won’t break your heart?”

She had a point. There was always a risk. “Are you trying to persuade me to forgive Ciaran, or put me off all other men?”

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

Emily laughed. “Both. I want you to stick around. You’d make a great sister-in-law.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“You’re right. Let’s just enjoy our day and spend a shitload of my brother’s money.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I was going to find myself an incredible dress, go to Dominion with Ciaran, and see where the night took us.

### ChapterFourteen

#### Ciaran

Just twenty-four hours ago, I thought I’d lost Annie forever. Her refusal to speak to me had cut to the core, but I did what was right and backed away to give her some space. I was aware my siblings were going to bat for me, telling her about my redeeming qualities. I was grateful to them for that, but I knew nobody would talk her into giving me a second chance. It had to be her decision to move forward.

Now that she was sitting across from me, enjoying dinner in the restaurant at Dominion, I couldn’t fuck it up again. I brought her to the club so I could show her the possibilities for our relationship. From the way she responded when I spanked her, I knew she enjoyed being disciplined. Her responses to my commands showed me she craved dominance. There was so much pleasure I could offer her, and I wanted to give her a taste. If she was willing, of course. I had no intention of pushing her into anything she wasn’t comfortable with. If it came to it, I would surrender my membership of the club before I ever gave up this woman.

Annie looked different tonight. Her hair was slicked back into a high ponytail. Her makeup was a touch heavier than usual, smokier around the eye and redder on her lips. The slinky black dress she wore hugged her hips and ass in a way none of her other clothes did. The low V of the neckline revealed the swell of her gorgeous breasts. I got the feeling she'd chosen this sexy new style to match what she imagined other women at the club would wear.

In reality, all types of people frequented my brother's club. Although Sean enforced a dress code prohibiting casual clothing, there would be a range of styles on display. We were just as likely to encounter feminine florals and delicate silks as hardcore leather. Annie's outfit fell somewhere in the middle, but the woman herself would fit in because it wasn't about how she looked, it was about who she was beneath the façade she presented to society.

"Are you sure you don't want something else to eat?" I hated that she was picking at a salad while I enjoyed the most incredible Wagyu ribeye.

"No, I don't want to eat anything too heavy." Her voice betrayed her nervousness, and I understood. She was afraid she might get sick.

I set down my fork and reached across the table to grab her hand. "Hey, we don't need to do this if you're not up for it."

"Oh, I'm up for it." The wicked gleam in her eye revealed the truth of that statement. "It's just that the forms made it all a bit daunting. I mean, I had to say no to almost everything."

Although he was the one who gave her the consent forms to complete, I couldn't blame my brother for her discomfort. Having her read the regulations and list her limits was a necessity. The safety of the members was paramount, and everything needed to be laid out in black and white in case disputes arose. Thanks to the robust

security Sean had in place, there were rarely issues but occasionally someone screwed up.

“You didn’t say no to everything, sweetheart. We can still have plenty of fun.”

“But wouldn’t you better off with someone who’s open to....” She pulled her hand away from mine and waved it around as she searched for an example of what I might enjoy. “Piss play?”

I almost choked on the piece of steak I’d just popped into my mouth. “Not my thing, sweetheart. For the record, I don’t enjoy anything that involves blood, either.”

“But don’t you want someone more adventurous?”

“You’ll probably get more adventurous with time.” I grabbed her hand once more and squeezed it reassuringly. “And even if you only ever wanted missionary position with the lights turned off, you’d be the only one for me.”

“Hmm, I think we can be a bit more interesting than that.”

I let go of her hand, and we finished our meal. “Would you like dessert?” I asked, hoping she would say no because I was ready to show her around the club.

“Don’t we need to go upstairs for that?” Annie said shyly, peering coyly at me from beneath her eyelashes while making it clear we were on the same wavelength.

“Yes, we do.”

Rising from my seat, I dropped a hundred dollars as a tip. I’d get a bill for all the food and drink we consumed later. Sean and I might be brothers, but he still sent me an account to settle at the end of each month and I always paid it. With our legitimate

businesses, we did everything above board. No favors for friends or family.

I took Annie's hand and led her to the elevator. Dominion was split over three levels. On the first floor was the restaurant where anyone who could afford the premium prices could eat. The second floor housed the communal area of the club with a stage where some of the more experienced Doms gave demonstrations and people mingled, getting to know each other. There were some more intimate spaces off the main area, but the third floor was where the private rooms were situated.

We headed for the second floor. I wanted Annie to get a feel for the club before we went to the room I'd asked Sean to book for me. We stepped out of the elevator into the reception area, where Kitty was perched on a stool behind the desk. A longtime member of staff who'd earned Sean's trust, she ensured that everyone entering the club handed over their electronic devices.

"Mr. Reilly." She smiled as she greeted us. "Please hand over your cellphones and any other recording devices you have."

I put my cellphone on the desk, and Annie did the same. Kitty took them and placed them in a locked box in a room behind her desk. She made an entry on her laptop.

"Your phones are in box ninety-five. Do you know which wristbands you require?"

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“Black, please.” That signaled that Annie and I were both spoken for tonight.

Kitty handed me two leather wristbands. I put Annie’s on and then my own. They were broad enough that people would see them easily, but they wouldn’t get in the way if we wanted to use shackles of any kind.

“Do you require a costume tonight?”

“No, thank you.” There was an entire department that provided costumes for members who wanted to roleplay, but that was something for Annie and me to consider another time.

“Very good, Mr. Reilly. Room 14 is booked for you tonight. All equipment has been properly cleaned and sterilized as per club protocols.” She turned to Annie. “Do you have questions or concerns?”

“No, I’m fine.” Annie smiled politely. “Thank you.”

“Then go on through and enjoy your evening.”

I entered the club with Annie by my side. Straight ahead of us was the bar. A partition separated it from the main area, which featured a stage and a variety of places to sit and enjoy a demonstration or relax before going to a private room. Like the restaurant, the whole place was decorated in a traditional style with lots of dark mahogany and red velvet. The lighting was subtle. You could see enough to ensure that nobody was being harassed, but it wasn’t so harsh that it ruined the seductive atmosphere.

As we walked into the bar, we saw Max, Jace, and Sean sitting at a table in the corner. With the security here, this was one of the few places they could relax. Like me, they tended to be on high alert when out in public. It was why I liked Dominion. Not only did it cater to my desires, but it was also relatively safe from attack.

“There’s an unholy trinity if ever I saw one,” Annie quipped.

“We should say hello.”

“Can I join you in a minute? I could use a trip to the ladies’ room.”

I sensed that her need was of an emotional nature rather than a physical one. She wanted a moment to gather her courage.

“Sure, it’s through there.” I pointed to a door beside the bar. “It’s the first on the left.”

I watched her go, trusting that she wouldn’t attempt to leave without me. To get to the main exit, she’d have to walk past me, but there was a fire escape at the end of the corridor she was about to head down. If she tried to get out that way, she wouldn’t get far. My men were covering all exits.

“Ciaran!” Jace was the first to spot me as I made my way over to their table.

“Where’s Annie?”

“Ladies’ room.” I pulled out the vacant chair at their table and sat down. “Didn’t think I’d see you here,” I said to Max.

“Needed to blow off steam. It’s been a hell of a day.”

He’d been out with Annie and Emily all day. “How did it go?”

Max rolled his eyes. “Em insisted on going to the damned aquarium again. Fun fact, male seahorses give birth.”

“I thought everyone knew that,” Jace said.

“Oh, I’ve known it for years. It’s one of a hundred facts she feeds me every fucking time we go there.”

My younger sister had a thing for sea life. She must have visited that aquarium a hundred times. She also liked to push Max’s buttons, so I could imagine her bombarding him with useless information just to see if he’d blow up at her. Emily enjoyed provoking him as much as she did my brothers and me.

“What about Annie?” I asked. “How was she?”

Max shrugged. “She seemed to have fun. She didn’t spend much, even with Em egging her on.”

I already knew that. I saw the transactions on my banking app and was surprised by how small a dent she’d made in my balance.

“I booked room 14 for you.” Sean sipped his Scotch and put the glass down on the table. “I don’t need to remind you to take care of her, do I? She is a newbie.”

I suppressed the urge to tell him to go fuck himself. His concern for Annie showed he was ready to welcome her into our family whenever I could persuade her to join.

“I’ll go easy on her.”

“Not too easy,” Max cautioned. “If you want her to submit to you, she needs to understand what that means.”



*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “Yes, I know.”

Thankfully, before Jace could jump in with whatever advice he had to offer, Annie joined us. She looked around for a seat and I patted my lap.

“Sit here, sweetheart.”

Without hesitation, she put an arm around my neck and lowered herself onto my knee. She sat a little stiffly, but I was glad she’d done as I asked.

“Can I get you a drink, Annie?” Sean offered.

“No, thanks. I had a couple of glasses of wine with dinner and I don’t want to break the rules.”

“Good girl,” I murmured. She’d remembered the club had a two-drink maximum for anyone who wanted to play.

“There are staff members posted throughout the club,” Sean said. “If you feel uncomfortable or distressed at any time...”

“Fuck’s sake, Sean!” Jace shook his head. “Don’t you trust your brother?”

“Of course I do, but this is Annie’s first time here. I want her to be safe.”

“I’m safe with Ciaran,” Annie assured him. “And I read the club protocols. If I need help, I know how to ask for it.”

“We should go have that tour of the facilities.” I lifted Annie off my lap and set her down on her feet before standing. “Unless Sean wants to demonstrate what the fire alarm sounds like and point out the exits.”

Sean gave me the middle finger.

“Enjoy your evening,” Annie said as I steered her away from the table. I loved that she seemed to get along well with the people closest to me.

We headed through to the main part of the club. A set of medieval-looking stocks were set up on the stage. Thomas, one of the most experienced Doms at the club, and his raven-haired submissive, Chloe, stood at the back. They were deep in conversation, no doubt discussing the show they were about to put on.

“Do you want to stay and watch?” I asked Annie.

She scanned the area. Obviously realizing the only free seats were just a few feet from the stage, she shook her head. “Can we skip it for now?”

“Of course.” I buried my disappointment. Seeing an experienced couple in action might have allayed some of her anxieties.

I took her to the elevator leading upstairs. It was separate from the one that brought us up from the restaurant and people had to scan their membership cards to access it. Sean had designed the club that way to ensure there was no direct access from the restaurant to the private rooms.

I strolled along the corridor to give Annie a chance to see what was going on in some of the rooms. In the first, a woman dangled in chains attached to a hook on the ceiling. She was pushed up onto her tiptoes and as her partner wielded a cane, her body jerked and she screamed loudly, startling Annie.

“Are you okay?” I touched her shoulder lightly.

“Yes, fine, but should we be watching this?”

“There are screens on all the windows that can be closed. These people want to be watched and heard. The rooms are soundproofed, but you can choose to turn on a speaker.”

“Oh, wow. I would not like that.”

“Noted.” I had no need for the world to see and hear what Annie and I were up to, so I was fine with keeping things completely private.

Annie moved on to the next window and I followed. This silent scene inside was tame compared with some things I’d witnessed in the club. A naked blonde woman rode one man while another fucked her ass.

The next window had the shades drawn, but the one after that revealed a room that seemed to catch Annie’s interest. She leaned in a little closer. I came to stand next to her and grinned. Inside, a woman was strapped to a medical examination table, her legs spread wide. I recognized her as Misty, a regular at the club. Though I hadn’t played with her, Sean and Jace had spent an evening with her. The man dressed in a white coat, with a stethoscope around his neck, was an associate at the law firm we used for our real estate business.

As he opened a sterile packet to retrieve a speculum, Misty began to struggle. Annie gasped.

“It’s okay,” I assured her. “It’s part of their game. If she wanted him to stop, she’d use her safeword.”

“I’m not worried about her.” Annie turned to me, her eyes glistening and her cheeks red.

“You’re aroused by what you see?”

Annie sunk her teeth into her bottom lip and nodded.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of,” I assured her.

“I know. It’s just. Well, this is the first time I’ve spoken so openly about what turns me on.”

“Just know you’re safe with me. You can tell me anything. I won’t judge you.”

Grabbing her hand, I led her along to Room 14. As we stepped inside, Annie gasped. At one side of the room was a four-poster bed with strategically placed D-rings to attach shackles to. There was also a St Andrew’s Cross in the corner and a spanking bench at the center of the room.

Annie walked over to the wall where various spanking implements were displayed. She studied them for a moment and then turned to me.

“Did you bring me here tonight because you thought I’d get all horny and forget you acted like a complete asshole?” There was no bite in her tone.

“Perhaps.” I had to admit the thought occurred to me. “Did it work?”

“The getting me horny bit definitely did.” She came closer until she was standing right in front of me. “I won’t forget the being an asshole part, but I have forgiven you for it.”

My heart skipped a beat. I grabbed her hands and gripped them tightly. “Thank you, Annie. I appreciate the chance to put things right.”

Neither of us said anything for almost a minute. Then Annie cleared her throat.

“So, this BDSM thing is just for inside the club, right?”

“Yeah. I come to the club when I want to indulge my desires, but I’m not looking for a full-time submissive.”

“But you like to be in control in the bedroom as well?”

“I do. When we’re in a sexual situation, I want you to submit to me. At other times, I want you to accept my guidance, like if your safety is in question, but I don’t expect blind obedience twenty-four-seven.”

“Thank goodness for that.” Annie pretended to wipe sweat from her brow. “I’m happy to explore my submissive side with you, but I’m not willing to become a mindless doll for you.”

I understood. Annie was an independent woman, used to taking care of herself. She didn’t need me to dictate what she ate, what she wore and how she behaved. I wouldn’t have wanted her if she did.

“So.” I dropped her hands and gestured to the room behind her. “Where would you like to start? What are you comfortable with?”

She looked over her shoulder. “I really want to try the spanking bench.”

“Good call.” It’s where I wanted her. “And would you like to try a paddle, a flogger, a riding crop?”

“Uh...” She bit her lip again. “A flogger?”

“Why?”

“It looks soft.”

“Wielded right, some of them deliver quite a sting,” I warned her. “And I know how to use one.”

“Uh, maybe a paddle then.”

She still didn’t look certain.

“How about I start with my hand and if I decide you can take it, I move on to a paddle?”

Annie nodded. “That sounds good.”

“You remember your safeword?”

“Beetroot.”

I’d have to ask her later why on earth she came up with that.

“Do you want to know my hard limits?” she asked.

“You listed them in the forms you filled out earlier, remember?”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

Her nervousness was clearly on display. I reached out and stroked her cheek in that way I’d learned she liked.

“Remember, sweetheart, you have the power to put a stop to this whenever you want. I will push you, but never past what you can endure. Okay?”

“Okay.” She nodded.

“In that case, I want you to remove your clothes and lay yourself across the bench.”

### ChapterFifteen

Annie

As I wriggled out of the tight black dress I’d bought with seduction in mind, apprehension crept in. It wasn’t because I thought Ciaran was going to do something awful to me. I trusted him not to push me too far from my comfort zone and even if I



didn't, I had faith in the club's protocols. Even in the private rooms, activity was monitored to ensure nobody was being forced into situations they were uncomfortable with. My nervousness came from a place of insecurity that always hit me in unfamiliar situations. What if I made a fool of myself? What if I needed to use my safeword after a single stroke of the paddle? Would I leave Ciaran dissatisfied and rethinking his attraction to me?

Standing there all night wouldn't make my anxieties go away. I dropped my dress onto the bed and stripped off my bra and panties. Eyeing the spanking bench as if it was a challenge to be conquered, I walked to it. There was nothing complicated about the apparatus. Two metal A-frames were joined by a long, padded rectangle. Leather cuffs with chains were already in place on each of the four legs of the frame. As I lowered my upper body into position, I was surprised by how soft the red leather was. Unsure where to put my arms, I let them fall by my sides as I laid my cheek on the bench.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you look laid out like that?" Ciaran asked, as he walked up beside me. "But I think we can make you prettier still."

Crouching next to me, he took my left hand and pressed a kiss on the palm. Then he drew my arm forward and wrapped a leather cuff around my wrist.

"How does that feel, Annie?"

My arm was stretched, but not to where it hurt. The cuff was tight, but I liked it. "It feels good."

"It's not too tight?"

I wriggled my fingers. "No, it's fine, Ciaran, uh, Master?" I couldn't help grimacing.

Ciaran chuckled at my obvious discomfort with that word. I knew it was common for submissives to use it, but I hadn't reconciled myself with that role yet. Calling him Master felt like a step too far.

"Sir would be fine."

"Thank you, Sir," I said awkwardly.

"Try not to overthink it." Ciaran fastened the other cuffs, binding my wrists and ankles to the bench, spreading my legs in an obscenely wide stance. "This is a journey we're taking together. We have to learn each other's likes and dislikes. Everything is negotiable. Remember that."

Relief drained some of the tension from my muscles and I sagged against the bench. I didn't have to know it all on day one. There was no right and wrong to this. This was just me and Ciaran. However we chose to build our relationship was up to us, not some rule book.

I tracked Ciaran's movements as he crossed the room to a small wooden cabinet. He opened a drawer and retrieved a piece of black fabric. It wasn't until he approached me I realized it was a blindfold.

"I'd like to put this on you."

"Yes, Sir." I replied without hesitation. Being blindfolded wasn't an issue for me. I knew being deprived of my sight would create a sense of anticipation and heighten my other senses.

"Good girl."

I raised my head as Ciaran placed the padded black silk over my eyes and tied it

securely. Being plunged into total darkness gave me something I hadn't expected. Why was it that being bound and blindfolded like this made me feel free?

Ciaran's footsteps told me he was moving across the room. Drawers opened and closed and then I heard something being wheeled toward me.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“It’s just a small table,” Ciaran said in response to me raising my head in alarm. “I need to place a couple of things on it.”

“Oh.” I didn’t ask him what things. “Okay.”

He tapped my back with his finger. “Okay.....?”

I couldn’t prevent a little smile from forming on my lips. “Okay, Sir.”

Though I heard him taking up his position behind me, the first slap of his hand on my bottom surprised me. I gasped loudly. It had been a couple of days since he first spanked me, but I was sure his palm hadn’t stung as much then. The next blow also made me yelp.

As Ciaran fell into a rhythm, peppering my ass with sharp smacks, I found myself being lulled into a strange calm. My breathing steadied and my body hummed with a quiet pleasure. It was almost like being hypnotized. When Ciaran stopped, I felt bereft.

“Now you’re nicely warmed up, we’ll move on to the paddle.”

Unsure what to expect, I tensed. How much was this going to hurt?

“Unclench.” Ciaran’s one-word command had me immediately loosening the muscles in my backside.

A rush of cold air preceded the crack of the paddle off my ass. My mouth fell open.

Fuck! That hurt. Behind the blindfold, my eyes watered. When the second blow landed, I clenched my fists. The next few strokes lit a fire across my ass. I panted as I tried to absorb the pain. Being spanked with his hand had not prepared me for this.

When he swatted me again, I lifted my hips as far as they would go and tugged at the restraints binding my wrists. My cheeks were drenched with tears, but I had to acknowledge the throbbing between my legs. A part of me relished the pain.

“Do you need to use your safeword?” Ciaran asked.

“No,” I blurted out.

His warm hand wrapped around my shoulder. “Take a second to think about it.”

I considered the situation more carefully. Was I reaching the limit of what I could cope with?

“No, Sir, I’m fine.”

“Okay, sweetheart. Three more. I want you to count them.”

He swung the paddle, and it struck the back of my thighs.

“One!” I screeched as I pushed up onto my toes.

The paddle landed in the same spot again. I wailed as the sting rippled out across my aching flesh. Somehow, I forced myself to yell, “Two!”

“Good girl.” Ciaran splayed a hand across the small of my back.

Since the restraints prevented me from moving more than an inch or two, I suspected

he wasn't holding me in place but offering a measure of comfort. I didn't have time to analyze why I might need it before the long, rectangular paddle thudded across my ass again. It fell across the entire width of my bottom, the impact knocking the breath from my lungs.

"Three." The number came out as a whimper.

As my body sunk into the cool leather beneath me, silent sobs shook my shoulders. I wasn't sure why I was crying so hard. Yes, my bottom was throbbing, and it probably glowed red enough to be seen from space, but the pain wasn't excruciating. In fact, the way my pussy clenched suggested I'd enjoyed it more than my mind would allow.

Heaving in gulps of air, I struggled to get myself under control. I stiffened as Ciaran laid his hand on my ass, then relaxed as he caressed it gently until I eventually stopped crying.

"You did good, sweetheart. You didn't complain and you're dripping wet. I think that deserves a reward."

Unable to see, I had no idea what Ciaran was about to do until he pushed something long and smooth inside me. It wasn't as thick as his cock, but still stretched me. When I felt something press against my clit, I realized it was one of those vibrators with the rabbit ears.

"Woah!" I breathed out sharply as the gadget buzzed to life.

Vibrations from the shaft ripped through my insides as a rapid pulse tormented my clit. I clenched my fists as my pussy throbbed with need. As the sensations threatened to overwhelm me, I tried to get away, but Ciaran shoved the toy deeper. My mouth twisted as the first waves of pleasure lapped over my flesh. As I came closer to orgasm, my breath came out in frantic gasps.

Suddenly, Ciaran pulled the vibrator out of me. As it clattered to the floor, he impaled me on his shaft. I welcomed the warmth of his body, the intimacy no toy could provide.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“You’ll come on my cock, or not at all,” he growled.

I loved the feeling of him inside of me. It was where he belonged. As he thrust in deep, I squirmed on the bench, my nipples drawing up into impossibly hard peaks.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” Ciaran gritted out. Reaching forward, he ripped the blindfold from my eyes. “Want to see you as I make you come.”

Grabbing my hair, he pulled my head up from the bench. My arms stretched painfully, but I barely noticed as he fucked me so hard and fast, I couldn’t hold back.

“Ciaran!” I screamed.

My body shook as I was catapulted into a maelstrom of pain and bliss. He let go of my hair and I dropped my head back down to the bench.

Ciaran pulled out of me and gathered the fluids from between my leg to smear over my asshole. As he pushed a finger into my virgin channel, I shuddered. When he added another, I thought I’d pass out from lightheadedness.

“Breathe, sweetheart,” Ciaran urged me.

I drew in a breath and released it slowly. Ciaran scissored his fingers, gently opening me up to him. It felt strange, forbidden, but not as unpleasant as I feared. He withdrew his fingers, and the head of his cock nudged my entrance.

“I can’t wait to fuck this tight little ass.”



Something about Ciaran's declaration helped to uncoil the tension knotted inside me. I relaxed enough for him to push in an inch or two before I panicked again.

"It's too much. It hurts."

"You're okay, sweetheart." Ciaran's tone was soothing. "It'll get better. Trust me."

As he held himself still, waiting for me to adjust or safeword out of this, I realized I did trust him. He was being so careful not to harm me.

"I trust you, Sir."

Ciaran groaned as he slowly pressed forward. I moaned and tried to twist my hips as my asshole burned. When Ciaran's cock was all the way in, he began to move. I whimpered at the strange fullness. This was so far beyond anything I'd done before. It felt dirty but in the best possible way.

As Ciaran's hips bumped against my well-punished buttocks, I rocked back, as much as I was able, to meet his thrusts.

"This ass was made for me to fuck," Ciaran gritted out. "It's mine. You're mine. I'll kill any other man who touches you."

That declaration was so hot, my pussy clenched. Ciaran thrust into me with long, smooth strokes. Pain and pleasure danced around each other until I couldn't untangle what I felt.

"Need you to come for me." Ciaran's cock swelled inside me as he reached between my legs to ruthlessly drive two fingers into me. He found my g-spot and set off an explosion that ricocheted through every part of me. Blood whooshed through my ears. My body quivered. My eyes flickered and the world went dark.

When I came to, I was lying on the bed. Ciaran stood over me, a look of concern on his face.

“Thought I’d lost you for a minute there,” he said.

“Maybe you did.” I felt odd, like I was both boneless and heavy at the same time. “I might be in heaven.”

“You’d be the first person I sent there,” Ciaran said.

I didn’t get the chance to ask how many people he’d sent to Hell because someone knocked at the door. Ciaran went to answer it. He exchanged a couple of words with the person on the other side. With the door ajar, he turned to me.

“Tell Sean you’re okay,” he said.

“I’m fine, Sean,” I called up. “Just emerging from a sex coma.”

I didn’t catch what Sean muttered, but I heard Ciaran telling him to fuck off. Closing the door on his brother, Ciaran returned to the bed with a glass of orange juice and a bundle of clothing.

“Drink this.” Ciaran handed me the glass. “It’ll help.”

“Unbubbly orange.” I grinned as I took a sip.

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

Ciaran laughed and handed me the clothes, a pair of black sweatpants, and a t-shirt. I looked up at him in question. Had something happened to my clothes?

“I didn’t think you’d want to squeeze back into your dress,” he explained.

His thoughtfulness pleased me. “Yeah, it was a nightmare to get into. I had to hold my breath while Emily zipped me up.”

Ciaran shook his head disapprovingly. “As much as I loved you in that dress, you don’t have to torture yourself.”

“I should leave that to you, right?” I added a cheeky wink, so he’d know I wasn’t accusing him of torturing me.

“And only me.” His possessive tone thrilled me. “Now, do you want to shower here or at home?”

“At home.” Damn, I liked the sound of that a bit too much.

“Okay, then.” He picked up the t-shirt and pulled it over my head.

“But we’ll come back sometime?” Now I’d dipped my toe in the water, I wanted to learn more.

“As often as you like.” Ciaran tried and failed to stifle a yawn. I guess I wasn’t the only one who’d tired themselves out tonight. “Now, let’s get your pants on and we’ll get out of here.”

## ChapterSixteen

Annie

“What time do you call this?” Emily teased as I walked into the kitchen.

Embarrassment swept over me. I hadn’t meant to sleep through the entire day, but every time I woke, I told myself I needed another five minutes and drifted off again. By the time I finally struggled out of bed and into the shower, it was already evening.

My exhaustion was entirely Ciaran’s fault. When we got home from the club, he fucked me senseless in the shower. He took me twice more during the night, once with me on all fours on the bed and then at a more languid pace with me staring into his gorgeous brown eyes. He’d reached for me this morning, but obviously he took my threat to cut his dick off seriously because he immediately backed off. There was only so much of a good thing I could take before I needed a break, but Ciaran seemed to be insatiable.

“Blame your over-sexed brother.”

“Ugh!”

Smiling at Emily’s disgust, I headed for the coffee machine and made myself an espresso. One sip was all it took to make me feel more human again. I leaned back against the countertop and watched Emily as she stirred something in a pot on the stove. A delicious, meaty aroma from the oven filled the air.

“Can I help with anything?”

“Well, this sauce is proving trickier than I expected, so perhaps you could take care of dessert for me. I’ve made meringues and whipped some cream, so if you could cut

some strawberries and mix it all together, that would be great.”

“You’re making Eton mess?” I drained my espresso cup and put it in the dishwasher by the sink.

“Yes. I thought I’d try another good old British dish in your honor.”

Since my arrival at the lake house, Emily had been going out of her way to make me feel at home by preparing British foods. Her bangers and mash had been a triumph, and I hated to admit it, but her sticky toffee pudding was even better than my grandmother’s.

I fetched the strawberries and a bowl of mixed cream from the refrigerator and found the meringues on a cooling rack on the kitchen island. They were cold to the touch, so I crushed them, one after the other, into the cream and mixed them together. Then I grabbed a chopping board and a knife and got to work on the strawberries.

“Thought I’d find you here.”

I looked up and smiled as Ciaran came into the room. He leaned across the island to place a quick kiss on my lips. Pinching a strawberry from the tub, he settled back on a stool on the other side of the counter.

“Something smells good, Em,” he told his sister.

“It’s venison. I’m making a Cumberland sauce.”

“You get redcurrants here?” I thought they were a British thing.

“I couldn’t find any in the grocery store. Fun fact for you, until recently they were illegal in the States.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, they carried a disease or something that killed other plants. I’m not up on my fruit facts. Anyway, I’m using cranberries instead.”

“That should work.”

“Doubt I’d be able to tell the difference.” Ciaran winked at me.

Trying to ignore the way my spine tingled whenever he looked at me, I carried on cutting the strawberries. They were plump, so I quartered them before dropping them into the cream and meringue mix.

An unsettling feeling came over me as I realized how much at home I was. Thoughts of my real home were fading, and it crossed my mind that I should hand in my resignation at work.

As I realized how deep in I was with Ciaran already, I lost focus and sliced into my finger.

“Shit!” I cursed as I dropped the knife.

I scanned the countertop for a towel or something to stem the bleeding, but Ciaran was by my side before I could find one.

“Get the first-aid kit,” he barked at Emily as he put an arm around my shoulder and pulled me over to the sink.

He turned on the cold water and held my hand under it. I watched as blood trickled down the plughole.

“Ciaran,” I grumbled. “It’s too cold.”

He pulled my hand out of the stream of water and shut off the faucet. Grabbing a clean dishcloth, he wrapped it around my finger. Steering me back across the room, he picked me up and set me down on one of the stools at the island. When Emily returned with the first-aid box, they both hovered over me as Ciaran peeled back the white cloth.

“How bad is it?” Emily asked. “Does it need stitches?”

“It’s just a cut!” I snapped. They were fussing over nothing. “Shouldn’t you be stirring your sauce?”

As Ciaran inspected my finger, I looked over my shoulder at his sister. My tone with her had been harsh. “I’m sorry, Em. Pain makes me grumpy.”

“It’s okay. You should see me when I’m on my period.”

“Can you not?” Ciaran growled.

“Look at that.” Emily grinned wickedly. “The big bad mob boss can’t handle the mention of a perfectly natural bodily function.”

Ciaran’s shoulders stiffened. We’d danced around the subject of his involvement in organized crime, but now Emily had confirmed it. An uncomfortable silence descended on the room as Ciaran stared at me, waiting for a reaction. Though I didn’t like the thought of him being a mobster, I wasn’t going to make a big deal out of it. I was sure I’d get used to it, eventually.

“So, what’s the verdict?” I said lightly. “Will I live?”

“Uh, yes.” Ciaran reached into the first-aid kit and took out a small spray bottle. “It’s not too deep.”

I hissed as he squirted disinfectant on my finger without warning me first. He got a bandage and wrapped it around the cut.

“All better?” he asked, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead.

“Yes, thanks.”

As I jumped off the stool, Seam came into the room. His gaze landed on the first-aid box, open on the counter. “What’s going on?”

“Annie cut herself,” Emily explained.

Sean’s brow furrowed. “You okay?”

“It’s just a scratch.”

“Good.” He turned to Ciaran and tilted his head toward the door. “Need you, brother.”



## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

As Ciaran followed Sean from the room, I put the bottle of disinfectant back in the box and closed the lid. “Where does this go?”

“Just leave it on the counter,” Emily replied. “I’ll put it away later.”

“Okay.”

I returned to the task I’d abandoned. I didn’t think I’d gotten blood on the chopping board, but I wasn’t prepared to take the risk. Thankfully, I’d put a decent number of strawberries into the cream before I cut myself. I finished prepping dessert and put the bowl in the fridge before starting to clean up.

As I wiped down the chopping board, Ciaran came back into the room.

“Sean and I have to go to the city. Don’t hold dinner for us.”

The urgency in his tone told me something bad had happened, but I didn’t feel comfortable asking him what it was.

Emily wasn’t so reticent. “What happened?”

“One of our warehouses is on fire.” Ciaran’s jaw clenched. “Will’s going to stay here in case you need him.”

I felt strangely at a loss as Ciaran turned and left without kissing me goodbye. The situation was clearly serious, but I wasn’t sure how worried I should be. The answer came ten minutes later when Will wandered into the room while Emily and I were

chatting. His grave expression told me there was reason for concern.

“Let’s eat in here tonight,” he suggested, “since it’s just the three of us.”

He glanced over at Emily. Something passed between them I couldn’t decipher. Eating in the kitchen rather than the dining room was clearly significant, but I had no idea why.

“Okay,” Emily agreed. “It’s almost ready, so why don’t you set the table?”

While Emily took the venison out of the oven and quickly sauteed some asparagus, Will set the table. He insisted I sit while he went to get a bottle of wine from the cellar that was apparently accessed via the pantry. When he came back, he poured glasses for me and Emily and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge for himself.

“You’re not having wine?” I asked. He’d indulged in a glass or two when we shared dinner before.

He shook his head. “There’s just me and four guards here tonight. It’s best to keep a clear head in case....”

Almost as if he’d summoned trouble, the lights went out, and an alarm sounded on his phone. Emily turned off the gas burners on the stove as Will ran to look out of the window. Several loud pops came from outside. I’d never heard gunshots in real life before, but I knew that’s what they were. My heart lurched as Will pulled a gun from behind his back.

“Get to the safe room.”

The reason for eating in the kitchen became apparent as Emily ran across the room. Stumbling in the darkness, I followed her into the pantry. She pulled back a shelving

unit to reveal a hidden door and led me down a long flight of stairs. There was light here. Had they come back on?

At the bottom of the stairs was a door. Emily entered a code on a metal keypad, and it swung open. We hurried inside. Footsteps thundered on the stairs and Will skidded into the room. He slammed the door shut and a whirring sound told me he'd engaged the locks.

My jaw dropped as I looked around the room. On one side was a small kitchen with a refrigerator and microwave. On the other, there was a seating area with a large sofa, two armchairs and a coffee table. A bookcase filled with paperbacks provided a means of distraction. Beyond the living space were four bunk beds. It was functional but lacked comfort. A door lay to the right of them. I guessed it led to a restroom.

A bank of security monitors on the wall flickered to life as Will switched them on. He picked up a cellphone from the cradle where it sat on the wall and pressed a button. "Shit. Can't call out."

"What the hell is going on?" I asked.

"We're under attack, but don't worry. It's safe here. Even if they find this room, it's impenetrable and there's a two-week supply of food and water."

"Two weeks?" Panic flared inside me.

"We won't be here that long." Will smiled tightly. "Ciaran, Sean, and Max will get the same alert I did. Help will be here soon."

I hoped he was right. Looking down at my hands, I realized they were shaking.

"Here." Emily put an arm around me. "Let's sit for a while."

How the younger woman could remain so calm was a mystery to me. I found myself unable to look away from the security monitors as several men moved about the house. A couple of them wore bulletproof vests. I knew nothing about guns, but I'd seen enough American cop shows to recognize assault rifles when I saw them.

"The lights are on," I said, confused.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“The backup generator kicked in,” Will explained. “They obviously didn’t know about it.”

Backup generators and safe rooms weren’t a part of any home I’d ever been in before. “You have an impressive setup here. Do things like this happen a lot?”

Emily shook her head. “No, we’ve never been attacked at home before.”

“But you have been attacked?”

“I haven’t.” Emily glanced at Will, who gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head. Clearly, this wasn’t a line of conversation he was going to allow.

As I scanned the security monitors, something caught my eye. I sat forward as the front door opened. Expecting Ciaran, I was surprised to see a young woman with long brown hair coming into the house.

“Who’s that?” I asked, nodding toward the monitor.

“Shit!” Will slapped his hand against the wall. “What the fuck is Erin doing here?”

Emily groaned. “She said she wanted to meet Annie. I didn’t think she’d just show up here without telling anyone.”

“Fuck! Where’s Vincent? He’s not meant to leave her side.”

“She probably gave him the slip. You know how she feels about being shadowed.”

We all watched on screen as Erin got down on the floor and crawled under the hall table. I couldn't see what she was doing, but when she emerged, she had a gun in her hand.

“What's she doing?” I asked.

“She must know there's someone in the house,” Will replied. “She needs to go and hide.”

Unfortunately, that's not what she did. She crept along the corridor, peering through open doors as she went. My heart almost stopped as she reached the kitchen, where one man was searching for us. Erin raised her gun. I held my breath as she fired, and the man went down.

“Now come down here, sweetheart,” Emily murmured. “Come on.”

Erin hurried across the room, but before she could reach the pantry, two men came into the kitchen. Ciaran's youngest sister spun around, her gun raised. When the other three intruders arrived, Erin's shoulders sagged, and she dropped the gun. One man crossed the kitchen, grabbed her, and forced her to her knees.

“I know him.” I recognized the stocky redhead as one of the men who'd brought me to Ciaran's apartment the other day.

“Mike Bannon.” Will spat out the name. “Fucking traitor!”

“I wish we could hear what they were saying.” I hated that their lips were moving but I couldn't make out a word.

“We can.” Will pressed a button at the bottom of the security monitor for the kitchen and sound came on.

“Come on, princess,” an ugly brute with a receding hairline and a large paunch at his waist said. “Tell us where your useless brother and the little whore are hiding.”

“That’s Danny Mulhearn,” Emily whispered.

Why had she lowered her voice? “Can they hear us?”

“No. I’m just....” Emily threw her hands up. “I don’t know.”

“It’ll be okay. She’ll be okay.” Will tried to reassure himself more than us. “Ciaran will be here soon.”

“Can he see what’s happening?”

Will nodded. “Yeah, he can access the cameras on his phone. He’ll have eyes on everything.”

“Where is she?” Mulhearn demanded when Erin stared defiantly at him. Of all the siblings, she looked the most like Ciaran. She had the same long straight nose and bow lips. “Where has William taken her?”

A thought occurred to me. I turned to Emily. “They don’t know you’re here. They think Erin’s you.”

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“How do you figure that?” Will asked.

“He keeps asking where Will’s hiding me, not the women or the girls or whatever else he might call us.”

Will nodded. “You could be right.”

“Can we use that?”

“Maybe.” Will focused his attention on the screen once more.

He roared with fury as the man he’d called Mike drew his hand back and slapped Erin across the face, knocking her to the floor. “Motherfucker!”

Mulhearn tipped his head toward her. One of the other men dragged her back up onto her knees.

“Tell me where they’re hiding, or I’ll let each of my men fuck your ass before I put you on the auction block.”

My stomach churned. I couldn’t believe I’d wanted so desperately to meet this monster. What he was threatening to do to Erin was so disgusting I didn’t have the words to describe it.

“I’m going up there.” Will keyed in the code to open the door. “You wait here.”

“No, Will.” I was too late to stop him. He stepped outside and pushed the door closed



behind him. It locked with a quiet click.

Emily got up and tried to use the cellphone again. She cursed as the call didn't go through. Unable to take my eyes off the screen, I watched as Will emerged from the pantry, firing off bullets that hit two of Mulhearn's men before he was taken down by a shot to the shoulder. It was so surreal, like watching a movie. I couldn't process what I was seeing.

I turned away from the screen as Emily opened a cabinet in the bedroom area and withdrew a rifle like the ones the men upstairs were carrying. The way Emily handled the weapon told me she knew how to use it.

"What are you planning?"

"I'm going to help my family."

As she headed for the door, I stepped in her way.

"Come out, little whore." Danny's voice drifted over the intercom. "You have one minute. Then I'm going to make this one watch while we take turns fucking his sister before slitting his throat."

Emily tried to barge past me, and I shoved her back into the room. "Wait," I urged her. "Let me go up there. They don't know you're here. I can distract them."

"Yeah." Emily nodded. "There's only Mulhearn, Bannon and that other guy left. I can take them."

She didn't sound confident enough for my liking, but there was no alternative. We had no idea if Ciaran had gotten the alert about the intruders, and I couldn't just sit here and watch his family being torn apart.

“Okay.” I took a deep breath and motioned for Emily to unlock the door.

As I walked upstairs, I felt Emily’s presence behind me. I held my hands up as I emerged into the kitchen. Two guns swung toward me, and I yelped.

“Ah, this must be Ciaran’s little slut.” He looked me up and down. “I must say I’m disappointed.”

“I’m disappointed too.” My voice was steady despite the fear coursing through my veins. “When I came here to connect with my cousin, I didn’t expect him to be pond scum.”

“Ah, yes, I heard we’re related.”

“Distantly.”

I glanced at Will, who was slumped in the corner. A lanky skinhead held a gun on him. I turned to Erin, whose assailant was an older man with a thick gray beard. He held her by the hair, a gun pointed at her head.

“Hmm, and yet you spread your legs for a Reilly. Where’s your family loyalty?”

“I didn’t know about any of this when I met Ciaran.” I took a few more steps into the room, moving away from the door so Emily could get a clear shot. “And we’re not really family, are we?”

I edged toward the wooden table at the side of the room, hoping it would give me cover.

“Down!” Emily yelled. I threw myself under the table and covered my head with my arms as all hell broke loose.

### ChapterSeventeen

Ciaran

Fear like I’d never experienced before gripped me as we drove back to the lake house. We’d gotten halfway to the city when an alert pinged on my phone, warning me of a breach in security. I realized immediately that the fire was a diversion to get me and my brothers away from the house. Thank fuck I’d left Will behind, so the women weren’t entirely unprotected.

Not knowing what was happening drove me wild. I should have been able to access the security cameras, but the app wouldn’t work. My tech guys would answer for that. I thought I’d hired the best in the business, but apparently not. I’d tried calling Will and Emily’s cellphones and the satellite phone in the safe room repeatedly but couldn’t get through on any number. Hopefully, my brother had gotten the women in there before anything could happen to them. If either of them were harmed, heads would roll.

As we entered the property, through gates that shouldn’t have been open, Max’s car, which was behind ours, stopped. He got out to check whether any of the men lying in the driveway were still breathing. Sean and I continued to the house. Checking my gun, I jumped out of the car. Three vehicles sat in the driveway, none of which I recognized.

My brother followed as I entered the house as quietly as possible. We scanned our surroundings for signs of an intruder as we slowly made our way toward the kitchen. The safe room was the first place I wanted to check. When we got closer to the kitchen, I heard voices. Sean must have too, as he signaled for me to stop.

“Em?” Sean mouthed.

I nodded. Though I couldn’t make out what she was saying, it was my sister speaking. We moved forward cautiously and stepped into the kitchen. The scene that greeted us stunned me. It was a bloodbath. Five bodies lay on the floor, clearly dead. A sixth, that asshole Danny Mulhearn himself, writhed around, squealing like a pig. Emily stood over him, wielding an AR-15 like a pro.

Annie crouched next to Will by the pantry door, talking to him in soothing tones as she pressed a sterile pad to a bloody wound on his shoulder. As she realized someone had come into the room, Emily raised her weapon. She lowered it the moment she saw it was me and Sean.

“You took your sweet fucking time,” she grumbled.

“Got here as fast as we could.”

“Looks like we missed the fun.” Sean nudged her shoulder as he walked past her to see Will.

He knelt on the floor next to Annie. They exchanged a few hushed words and then she got to her feet, allowing Sean to take over. She wiped her hands on her jeans and stared at me for a moment. Then she ran to me. I caught her as she leapt into my arms.

“Thank fuck you’re okay,” I murmured as I hugged her tightly.

A noise in the corridor behind us caught my attention. I swung around and blew out a breath as my youngest sister walked toward me, an icepack pressed to her red, swollen cheek.

“Might have known you’d be among the chaos.” I let go of Annie and pulled Erin in for a hug.

“What are we doing with this asshole?” Emily demanded, giving Mulhearn a vicious kick.

“Oh, Mr. Mulhearn can look forward to a slow and painful death.”

“Fuck you and your little whore!” he spat.

“On second thought. . .” I raised my gun and put a bullet between his eyes.

Annie gasped. She shook her head and ran from the room. I turned to go after her, but Sean called out. “Give her a minute.”

Nodding, I made my way through the chaos to where Sean was tending to Will. As I passed the back door, it opened, and Max came in.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed as Emily pointed her gun at him.

“Sorry. Thought you might be another lowlife prick who needed to be put out of his misery.”

“Cute,” Max growled. He turned to me. “Three dead, one critical. Doc’s bringing a team.” He looked down at Will. “What happened here?”

“Took two of the assholes out then got hit.” Will’s voice was shaky. His skin had

taken on a grayish hue. The medics needed to get here fast.

“And the others?” I asked, impatiently.

“Erin got one. Emily took care of the rest.”

Max, Sean and I exchanged looks of shock. My little sisters had killed men tonight.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“When did you even get here?” I asked Erin.

She shrugged. “Fifteen, twenty minutes ago. I saw the guys lying dead in the driveway and knew something was up.”

“You saw bodies in the driveway and came into the house anyway?” Sean demanded.

“Of course I did. I had to make sure my family was okay.”

“Fuck, Erin!” I shoved my fingers through my hair. When had my sisters gotten so reckless? “I want a full account of what happened here.”

“And you’ll get one later,” Emily said firmly. “Now go make sure Annie’s all right.”

“Go,” Max urged me. “Sean and I can handle things here.”

Knowing I could trust my brother and my closest friend completely, I nodded and got to my feet. I handed Sean my gun, figuring Annie wouldn’t be comfortable seeing me with it. There were others stashed around the house in case any other assholes attempted to launch an attack on us tonight. I doubted they would.

I made my way upstairs, dreading what I might find. Annie was an innocent. I hated the thought she might look at me differently now she’d seen the darker side of my world.

When I got to my bedroom, she wasn’t there, but I could hear her moving about my bathroom. I was glad she’d chosen to come here. She could have gone back to the

room she'd occupied before we reconciled. My joy was short-lived. As I pushed open the door to the bathroom, I realized she was crying.

"Sweetheart," I said carefully as I came to stand behind her at the sink. In the mirror I could see her eyes were red and swollen. "Are you okay?"

It was a stupid question after all that had happened, and I deserved the glare she threw at me.

"No, I'm not fucking okay!" The venom in her voice startled me. "I'm a terrible person."

"You are?" I almost laughed. I'd expected her to throw the accusation at me after I killed Mulhearn. "Why are you a terrible person?"

"Because I wanted them all to die," she spat out. "Because I wanted Danny Mulhearn to die. I wanted the man I came here to find to suffer an agonizing death. When you shot him, I was disappointed it was over so fast."

"Oh, sweetheart." Putting my hands on her shoulders, I turned her to face me. I brushed her hair back from her tear-streaked cheeks. "That doesn't make you a terrible person."

"So what does it make me?" she challenged.

"It makes you human. You were scared tonight. Men broke in here who wouldn't have hesitated to kill you. They could have killed people you care about."

"You should have heard what he threatened to do to Erin."

I clenched my fists. "I can imagine."



Annie drew in a shuddering breath. She inched closer to me. “I need you, Ciaran.”

Not wanting to move too fast and spook her, I trailed my hands slowly down her body, over the curve of her hips. I cupped her bottom and pulled her close as I bent to kiss her. My lips caressed hers as I tried to be gentle. Annie threaded her fingers through my hair as she pressed herself against me. Breathing in her sweet scent, I struggled to hold on to my control.

“Tell me you want this.” I searched her pretty blue eyes for confirmation.

“I do.”

Scooping her up into my arms, I carried her through to the bedroom and set her down beside the bed. I pulled her t-shirt up over her head, then unbuttoned her jeans. Today was the first time I’d seen her in anything other than a dress. The casual look suited her. Earlier, when she’d been in the kitchen with Emily, she appeared young and carefree. Now there was an air of melancholy around her I hoped I could banish.

As I slid her jeans down to reveal black satin panties, I felt my cock stiffen.

“I like these.” Reaching between her legs, I let my fingers glide over the silky fabric.

“I like them a lot.”

“I wore them for you.”

Smiling coyly, Annie held my gaze as she knocked my hand away. She hooked her thumbs in the waistband of her panties and slid them down her legs. Then she took off her bra. She moved closer and unfastened my pants. Slipping her hand inside, she curled her fingers around my painfully erect cock. She slid her hand up and down my shaft.

As she stepped back, I removed my pants and underwear, then yanked my shirt off, sending buttons flying in all directions. Annie giggled.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

“I want you on the bed, on your back with your legs spread.” Tonight I needed to look into her eyes as I fucked her.

Annie climbed onto the bed and parted her thighs for me.

“Wider,” I commanded. “I want to see that pretty pink pussy.”

“Yes, Sir.” Annie opened her legs wider.

“So beautiful.”

“Thank you, Sir. Now, fuck me hard and fast.”

This girl had a lot to learn about submission, but right now I was in no mood to teach her. If she wanted to be thoroughly fucked, who was I to say no?

I grabbed her ankles and dragged her ass to the edge of the bed. I’d planned to taste her sweet pussy again, to savor her moans, but now all I wanted to do was claim her.

Yanking her onto my cock, I drove inside her. My head fell back with a feral growl as I filled her. Nothing had ever felt more natural to me than this. I pumped my hips establishing a steady rhythm, taking it gently despite her demand to take her ruthlessly.

“More,” Annie urged raising her hips in encouragement.

Unable to deny her, I picked up my pace. My fingers dug into her hips as I plowed

into her welcoming body again and again. Annie whimpered and moaned as she clutched the bedsheets. The twist of her lips told me she was close.

“Please, Ciaran.”

“I love it when you beg, sweetheart.”

I curved a hand around the velvety skin of her breast. It fit perfectly in my palm like her body had been made for me. Her nipples were drawn up into tight, rosy peaks. Later, I would worship them, but right now Annie needed a little pain to help her over the edge. As I twisted her nipple between my fingers, I used my other hand to spank her ass. It was enough.

Her pussy clenched around my cock, squeezing me hard enough to trigger my own release. She arched up off the bed as I emptied myself inside her. Leaning down, I gathered her up into my arms and held her, legs locked around my waist, as her shudders subsided. She was so soft, so pliant like this, I never wanted to let her go.

I turned around and sat on the edge of the bed, stroking her hair as her breathing slowed. Several minutes passed before she climbed off me.

“Stay,” I called out as she walked away.

“I’m just going to the bathroom.”

“No, I mean stay. For good.” I breathed deeply. “Marry me.”

“What?” Annie half-laughed, half-snorted.

I knew it was too soon to ask her, but I couldn’t resist.

“We barely know each other.”

“We know enough. I know I love you.”

“Ciaran...”

I held a hand up to halt her objections. “You’re right, it’s soon, but I knew from the first time I kissed you we were meant to be.”

Annie raised her hand to her mouth and bit her thumb as she considered what I’d said. Then she dropped her arms down by her sides. “Why not? Let’s do it.”

“Really?” Intense joy swept through me. I leapt to my feet and pulled Annie to me. I kissed her passionately, sealing the deal. “You’re mine now.”

“Yes, Ciaran,” she agreed. “I’m yours.”

With that declaration, I pulled her toward the bed to prove to her just how true that was.

ChapterEighteen

Annie

As I made my way downstairs for breakfast the next morning, my stomach fluttered with nervousness. Ciaran had gone ahead of me, presumably to ensure all evidence of last night's horrors had been erased. While I wouldn't forget what happened anytime soon, I refused to dwell on it. Letting it color my worldview would be handing victory to the men who'd attacked us.

After we'd made love several times, Ciaran and I talked long into the night about his life and how he would ensure I was kept away from the less pleasant aspects of it as much as possible. He'd eased a lot of my fears about uprooting my life and moving to a new country to marry a man I'd met less than a week ago. His promise to have a long engagement had helped to put my mind at rest.

When I woke, Ciaran had been gazing down at me with such reverence I'd known I made the right choice when I decided to give him a chance. He'd asked me to affirm my acceptance of his proposal, as if he was afraid I'd come to my senses during the night. I assured him I hadn't changed my mind. People might think I was crazy, but I knew I belonged here, not just with Ciaran, but with his entire family.

My anxieties about breaking the news of our engagement to the rest of his family slowed my pace as I headed along the corridor. Would they think it was a terrible idea? What if they didn't accept me?

When I reached the breakfast room it was empty. Assuming everyone must be in the kitchen, I made my way there, but before I reached it, I heard chatter coming from the dining room. I paused outside the door to take a steadying breath then entered.

Straight away, I saw why the smaller breakfast room hadn't been suitable this morning. All the Reilly siblings were there, along with Max and Jace. Ciaran sat at the head of the table, the vacant space to his left presumably for me. Sean sat to his immediate right, and then came Will, who looked like death warmed over. Jace and Max took the remaining seats on that side of the table while Emily and Erin sat opposite.

Deep in conversation, they didn't notice me until I approached my seat. Then they all stopped talking.

"Sweetheart!" Ciaran got up and rushed over to me. He kissed my cheek then guided me into my seat.

"Good morning," I greeted as I sat down.

The chorus of good mornings that came back to me reminded me of my class back in Scotland. I felt a brief pang of regret that I'd have to leave my job, but I banished it as Ciaran laid a croissant down in front of me and Emily poured some coffee into my mug. I could get used to being looked after like this.

"How's the shoulder?" I asked Will.

"Not too bad. The bullet went straight through and didn't hit anything vital."

"If they were trying to blow his brains out, they'd have aimed lower," Sean said wryly.

"Leave him alone," Erin said. "He was a hero for all of thirty seconds before Emily saved the day."

Will threw a piece of bread across the table at her, and she laughed. I guessed their

banter meant that all was well this morning.

“Will there be any consequences for last night?” I asked.

Ciaran shook his head. “Not legal ones. The police know better than to get involved, but Sean had to smooth things over with Jimmy Cleary last night.”

I had no idea who that was. “Jimmy Cleary?”

“Mulhearn’s boss.”

“Oh, right, and did things get smoothed over?”

“Sean was about to tell us when you walked in,” Max said.

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense.” I slathered some butter on my croissant and took a bite.

“He’s only got a couple of months to live so he doesn’t want a fight. He suggested I marry his daughter, merge our families before he dies.”

“Woah!” Erin leaned forward. “What did you say?”

“I said I’d think about it. The girl sounds like a pain in the ass. She’s in Edinburgh, refusing to come home.”

“Even though her dad’s dying?” Emily’s disapproval was evident.

Sean shrugged. “The man’s a bastard. Can’t imagine he’s daddy material.”

“Would make good business sense to marry her,” Max said.



“Then you do it.” Sean jabbed a finger at him.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

I felt Emily tense beside me and Max shot her an inquiring look. There was definitely something going on there, even if neither of them would admit it.

Sean's phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen. "Vincent's here."

"Shit," Erin cursed. "He's going to be pissed."

Erin looked up as a tall, dark and incredibly handsome man walked in, his face a mask of fury. She plastered on the fakest smile I'd ever seen. "Vincent. How nice to see you."

"Do you know how long it took me to get out of that fucking room?" he demanded.

Erin glanced at her watch. "Allowing two hours for the flight, I'm going to guess eight hours."

As Vincent marched toward her, Sean flew out of his seat to intercept him. Though they were evenly matched in size and build, Sean easily shoved the other man up against the wall. I gasped, but none of the others even batted an eyelash.

"Erin's bodyguard," Ciaran explained, though I already knew that.

"Where the fuck were you last night?" Sean demanded.

"Locked in a fucking closet." Vincent tilted his head toward Erin. "That little brat drugged me."

“It was just a couple of sleeping pills,” Erin muttered.

“She could have died last night,” Sean spat. “You’re fucking useless. I should shoot you now.”

“No,” Erin protested, suddenly contrite. “I was the one who was stupid enough to walk in here, even though I knew we were under attack. It wasn’t his fault. It’s like he said. I drugged him.”

“Yes, it is his fucking fault,” Sean barked. “He should know better than to let you get one over on him. If he can’t protect you, what use is he? What’s the number one rule? Protect our weak spots.”

“Weak spot?” Vincent scoffed. “Erin? She’s a fucking viper.”

“She’s a kid!” Sean thundered.

As he pulled back his fist to punch the other man, I surged to my feet.

“Stop it!” I had no idea where I found the nerve to yell at Sean like that. “Your sister, both your sisters, were nothing short of heroic last night. They didn’t need you or Vincent or any other man to protect them. Erin held her own, and Emily finished the job.”

“I helped too,” Will interjected.

“Yes, you did.” I smiled at him. “And I’ll bet none of these alpha assholes told you they were proud of you.”

“I’m proud of him.” Jace winked at me, and I sighed.

“Cut that out,” I scolded, using my best schoolteacher tone.

Sean snickered, and I turned back to him. “And you, sit down and shut up.”

He burst out laughing. “Knew I liked you for a reason.”

He released Vincent, who brushed down the front of his shirt in a gesture designed to show he was unruffled by what had just happened.

“Sit down, please, Vincent.” I pointed to the free seat next to Erin which I suspected was the last place he wanted to be right now. “You’re here now so you might as well join us.” I sank back onto my seat.

Ciaran took my hand and whispered. “Do you know how turned on I am right now?”

My cheeks heated.

“Who is she, anyway?” Vincent asked Erin as he sat next to her.

“My future bride,” Ciaran announced. “Annie has done me the honor of agreeing to be my wife.”

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:58 am*

A knot formed at the pit of my stomach as silence fell. For several long seconds, nobody spoke, and finally a chorus of congratulations erupted all around us.

“This calls for champagne,” Emily said, getting to her feet.

“It’s 9 am,” Max pointed out.

“Oh, lighten up for once in your life.” Emily shook her head despairingly. She ducked down to kiss my cheek and then disappeared in search of champagne.

“Maybe you can have a double wedding with Sean and... What is Cleary’s daughter called?”

“Aoife.” Sean snorted. “And no, we will not have a double wedding.”

“Poor Annie,” Jace said. “She came looking for her family and got stuck with you lot.”

“I like this lot,” I muttered defensively.

As wedding chatter broke out around the table, Ciaran pulled me up from my seat and settled me on his lap. The dark gleam in his eye made me shiver with delight.

“You know, there is still the matter of punishment for last night.”

“What?”

“Emily told me everything. You should have stayed in the safe room, but instead you put yourself in danger.”

“So did the others.”

“But I can’t very well spank them, can I?”

“I mean, you could, but I doubt Will would respond well.”

Ciaran laughed. “I am going to fuck you senseless when we get rid of this lot.”

As Emily returned with two bottles of champagne, I got the feeling that wouldn’t be anytime soon.

“Bring it on, my love,” I murmured as I snuggled closer to him. A wave of contentment washed over me. This felt right. “Bring it on.”

The End