



# Sins and Salvation

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

**Description:** Sin and Salvation

(Second Chance Romance Secret Child Redemption Arc Opposites Attract Single Mom Dark Past)

He abandoned me. Now he's the only one who can save us.

Declan Donovan disappeared, leaving me pregnant and broken.

Now, he's back—dark, dangerous, and haunted by sins he swore he'd never repeat.

I should push him away, but he's my son's father, and our lives depend on his ruthless protection. Every touch, every kiss threatens to reignite old flames I thought long dead.

When our enemies close in, Declan proves he'll spill blood for the family he once abandoned.

Forgiveness is deadly, but loving him again might just destroy me.

**Total Pages (Source):** 84

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## PROLOGUE

The timeline of Sin & Salvation takes place before Bloody Knuckles. This series is intentionally told out of order, and readers will know why once the twists are revealed ...

## CHAPTER 1

### DECLAN

Blood sprays across the concrete floor as my fist connects with my opponent's jaw. The underground fight club roars around us, but I hear nothing except the pounding of my heart and the crack of bone against bone.

"Finish him, Donovan!" a voice shouts from the crowd.

I circle my opponent—a burly Russian with tattoos crawling up his neck and hatred in his eyes. He lunges at me, sloppy and desperate. I sidestep, driving my elbow into his temple. He crumples to the floor, and the referee counts him out.

Victory tastes hollow tonight. I wipe blood from my knuckles as the announcer declares me the winner. The Bangkok crowd cheers, but I turn away, heading toward the makeshift locker room—a grimy storage closet with peeling paint and the stench of sweat and cigarettes.

"You need to tape those hands better," my manager Sato says, tossing me a towel. "That's the third fight this month. Your body will break down at this pace."

I grunt in response, unwrapping the bloodied tape from my hands. The mirror on the wall reflects a man I barely recognize—shaggy dark hair falling into haunted eyes, a jagged scar running along my cheekbone, tattoos marking every significant mistake and memory.

"There's a call for you," Sato adds, holding out a phone. "From Ireland."

My stomach tightens. No one from Dublin calls me anymore. I left that life behind six years ago.

"Who is it?" I ask, taking the phone.

"Your brother."

Cormac. The name alone brings back memories I've spent years trying to forget—the Donovan family business, our father's iron rule, the blood on our hands.

"Declan," Cormac's voice comes through. "Da is dead."

The words hit me like another punch to the gut. Patrick Donovan—the man I fled from, the man who wanted to turn me into a monster just like him—gone.

"How?" I ask, my voice rougher than I intend.

"Heart attack. Three days ago." A pause. "The funeral is Friday."

I close my eyes, picturing the family home in Dublin, the empire built on violence and fear. "I'm not coming back."

"You need to," Cormac insists. "Things are... complicated. The Russians are moving in. The Italians too. Everyone thinks we're vulnerable now."

"That's not my problem anymore."

"You're still a Donovan. This is still your family."

I laugh, a bitter sound that echoes in the small room. "I stopped being family when Da put a gun in my hand and told me to kill for him."

"That was years ago. Things are different now."

Are they? I wonder, but don't ask. Instead, I say, "I need to go."

"Wait—" Cormac says quickly. "There's something else you should know. It's about Maeve Brennan."

The name punches through my defenses. Maeve—with her ocean-blue eyes and soft blonde curls, the only pure thing in my dark world. The woman I left behind without explanation.

"What about her?" I ask, my voice tight.

"Just come home, Declan. Some things need to be said in person."

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The call ends, and I stare at the phone, memories flooding back. Maeve's smile. Her laughter. Her tears when I told her I was leaving Dublin. The look of betrayal in her eyes.

I press my forehead against the cool concrete wall, trying to push away the ghosts. But they cling to me, whispering of unfinished business and hidden regrets.

"Bad news?" Sato asks, watching me.

"My father died."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." I toss the phone back to him. "The world is better without Patrick Donovan in it."

"Will you go back?"

The question hangs in the air. Will I return to the city I fled? Face the family I abandoned? See Maeve again after all these years?

"Book me a flight to Dublin," I say before I can change my mind.

Sato nods, not asking questions. He knows better than to dig into my past. "When?"

"Tonight."

I throw my gear into a duffel bag, muscles aching from the fight. Every instinct tells me to stay away from Dublin, from the Donovan name, from all the darkness I left behind. But Cormac mentioned Maeve. After six years, why bring her up now?

In my apartment above the gym, I pack what little I own—some clothes, my passport, a worn photograph I never look at but can't throw away. A picture of Maeve and me, taken the summer before I left. Before I broke both our hearts.

The taxi arrives at midnight. As Bangkok's neon lights blur past the window, I try to prepare myself for what waits in Dublin. My father's funeral. My family's empire. The ghosts I've been running from.

And Maeve Brennan—the biggest ghost of all.

## CHAPTER 2

### MAEVE

My fingers tremble as I count the euros in my wallet again. The numbers refuse to change. Twenty-three euros to last until payday, three days from now. I close my eyes and take a breath.

"Mam, can I get these?" Conor holds up a pack of football cards, his green eyes wide with hope. I know all the lads at school have them, they trade, and he is feeling left out.

Those same green eyes that haunt me every day. The eyes of his father.

"Not today, love," I say. "We need to get milk and bread."

His small shoulders slump, but he puts the cards back without complaint. At six years

old, he understands sacrifice better than most adults. I wish I could give him the nice things, but for now I give him what I can.

I ruffle his dark hair, so like his, and we make our way to the register with our meager groceries. The cashier rings up our items looking bored and tired.

"That'll be twenty-one euros."

I hand over the money, my stomach clenching at how close to the bone we're cutting it. Again.

Conor carries the lighter bag as we leave the shop. The Dublin sky hangs gray and heavy above us, threatening rain. The walk to our flat isn't long, but today each step feels like a mile.

A black car crawls past us on the street, moving too slow to be part of the traffic. The tinted windows hide the occupants, but I feel eyes on me. The car continues down the road, but my nerves prickle.

"Race you to the corner?" Conor asks, already poised to sprint. I shake my head, too tired to even try run a few paces toady.

"Hold my hand when we crossroads, remember?" I tell him, reaching for his small fingers.

Our flat is in a tired building on the edge of a neighborhood that was once respectable. Now it clings to that reputation by its fingernails. The stairwell smells of damp and someone's cooking. Mrs. Flanagan from number six nods to us as we pass her door.

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Inside our flat, I lock the door, slide the chain across, and check the window latches. A ritual I perform every time we come home.

"Homework first, then you can watch telly for a bit," I tell Conor as he dumps his backpack on the kitchen table.

While he works on his spelling, I prepare a quick dinner. Pasta with sauce from a jar, but I add extra vegetables. Growing boys need their vitamins, even when money runs short.

The clinic job pays, but never enough. Nursing was my dream once. Now it's just what keeps us afloat—barely.

My phone buzzes with a text from Beth, my friend from work.

Need someone to cover night shift tomorrow. Double pay. Interested?

I type back immediately.

Yes.

Double pay means new shoes for Conor, whose toes are about to burst out of his current pair. It means a buffer for emergencies. It means one night with less sleep in a life already short on rest.

"Can you read this, Mam?" Conor pushes his homework toward me, smudges on the page where he's erased and rewritten.



"Perfect," I say, though I spot two mistakes. He beams at the praise. I'll help him fix the errors later, gently.

After dinner, bath time, story time, and tucking in, I finally sink onto the sofa with a cup of tea. The flat feels smaller at night, the walls closing in. Photos on the shelf catch my eye—Conor as a baby, Conor with my parents, me with Conor at the beach last summer.

No photos of him. I purged those years ago.

But I kept one, hidden in a book on my nightstand. Declan Donovan with his arm around me, both of us laughing, before I knew what he was, before he left without a goodbye. Before I discovered I was going to have his baby.

The memory hurts, so I focus on bills instead. I organize them by due date, calculate what I can pay now and what must wait. The mental arithmetic makes my head ache.

A noise outside gets my attention. I go to the window, careful to stand to the side as I peer out. The same black car from earlier idles across the street.

My heart pounds against my ribs. I step back from the window and check the door lock again.

This isn't the first time I've noticed watchers. They appear periodically, like a reminder. The Donovan name is a curse in Dublin. Even though Declan abandoned his family's criminal business, the shadow still follows us.

I never told his brothers about Conor, his father made it clear a bastard baby would be dealt with his way. I have never reached out to the Donovans for help, no matter how desperate things got. Their money comes stained with blood. I want nothing from them.

Still, fear crawls under my skin. What if they know? What if they decide a Donovan grandson belongs with them, not with a struggling nurse in a shabby flat?

The car eventually drives away, but my nerves won't settle. I check on Conor, his face peaceful, one arm flung above his head just like his father used to sleep.

My phone buzzes again. Beth with the shift details. I confirm I'll be there, then wash my face and change for bed.

Tomorrow is another early morning. School drop-off, then the clinic from eight to four, home to make dinner, then back to the hospital for the night shift. My mother will come and stay with Conor. She'll fuss about me working too much, but she'll still come.

In bed, I stare at the ceiling, counting pennies in my head. The side of the bed where no one sleeps is empty and cold. I don't miss Declan. Not anymore. I miss what we could have been.

A father for Conor. A partner for me.

Instead, I got abandonment issues, and years of looking over my shoulder, wondering if his family's enemies might one day see my son as a target. Or worse, if his family might see him as an heir.

Sleep comes in fits and starts. In my dreams, Declan returns, but his face changes between the boy I loved and something harder, colder. A fighter's face, marked by violence. A monster in the darkness.

I wake before dawn, heart racing, with the sick feeling of being watched. The feeling never goes away these days.

The morning light brings reality into focus again. Make breakfast. Pack lunch. Get Conor ready for school.

As we step outside, I scan the street. No black car today, but I keep Conor close all the same.

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"Can we get ice cream after school?" he asks.

"We'll see," I say, which means no, but I can't bear to disappoint him twice in two days.

At the school gate, I kneel to straighten his collar. "Be good. Learn lots."

"I will." He hugs me tight, then runs to join his friends.

I watch until he disappears inside, then turn toward the clinic. Every step takes me farther from my son and closer to the grind that keeps us clothed and fed.

But I feel eyes on my back as I walk, and I know the shadows of the past never stay buried for long.

### CHAPTER3

#### DECLAN

The Dublin air hits me like a punch to the gut as I step off the plane. Home. A word that tastes bitter on my tongue.

I never planned to come back. Not after what my father tried to make me become. But death has a way of dragging us to places we don't belong.

My phone buzzes in my pocket—Cormac, for the third time today. I ignore it. My older brother can wait. The last thing I need is his judgment before I even get my feet

on the ground.

The taxi driver eyes me in the rearview mirror. "Where to?"

"Trinity Street." I give him the address of the hotel I booked. Not the family home. I can't face that shitshow yet. I need at least three drinks and a Xanax to prepare for that.

Dublin passes by the window, familiar and foreign at the same time. Seven years changes a city. Changes a man, too.

The bruise on my rib's throbs, a souvenir from my last fight. The underground circuit pays well when you win, and I win more often than not. Pain is an old friend now.

My phone buzzes again. This time it's a text from Finn, my younger brother.

Will you at least come to the wake tonight?

I don't respond. I don't know yet.

The hotel is small and anonymous, probably only two stars at best, but it's exactly what I want. The room key card in hand, I drop my duffel on the bed and stare at the reflection in the mirror. Dark circles under green eyes. A scar above my right eyebrow. Hair that needs a cut.

I look like him now. The man I swore I'd never become.

The shower helps wash away the travel grime but not the memories. I change into clean clothes and stand at the window, watching Dublin go about its business. People with normal lives. People who don't wake up fighting.

My father, Patrick Donovan, was feared across Dublin. The kind of man who made problems disappear. The kind of man who expected his sons to follow in his footsteps.

I chose exile instead.

The bottle of whiskey from the minibar burns going down. Liquid courage for what comes next.

\* \* \*

The wake is at the family home, a place I swore never to enter again. The taxi drops me at the end of the street. I walk the rest of the way, giving myself time to prepare.

The house is lit up, cars parked along the drive. Voices spill out—mourners paying respects to the Donovan patriarch. Or making sure he's really dead.

I pause at the gate, the weight of the past heavy on my shoulders. A figure steps out of the shadows—Cormac.

"You came." His voice is neutral, but I catch the surprise.

"He was our father." The words feel hollow.

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Cormac looks older, lines around his eyes that weren't there before. He runs the family business now. The business I wanted to burn down.

"Come in. People will want to see you."

"I doubt that."

His mouth tightens. "You're still a Donovan."

That's what I'm afraid of.

Cormac sent me away to save me from either killing my father, or being killed by him.

I take a deep breath and follow my brother through the front door, crossing a threshold I swore I'd never step over again. Our family is dysfunctional at best, homicidal at worst.

Inside, conversations hush as soon as people see me. Eyes turn, they stare, and whisper. I recognize old family associates, distant relatives, men who work for Cormac now. My brothers, the ones that are still alive are all here, my crazy sister is probably hiding—if she showed up at all. Daddy's little doll.

Finn finds me, pulling me into a hug that hurts my bruised ribs. I hide the wince.

"You look like shit," he says.

"Good to see you too."

A glass of whiskey is shoved into my hand. I drink it like its juice not booze.

The coffin is in the formal living room, surrounded by flowers. I approach it alone, needing this moment without an audience.

Patrick Donovan looks peaceful in death. A lie. The man never knew peace in life. His hands, folded on his chest, once strangled the innocence out of his sons.

"You didn't win," I tell him quietly. "I never became what you wanted."

But looking at my reflection in the coffin's polished wood, I wonder if that's true.

More whiskey. More handshakes. More eyes that judge the prodigal son's return.

I escape to the back garden for air. The night is cool, stars hidden behind clouds. Dublin's lights create a glow on the horizon.

"Declan Donovan. The ghost returns."

I turn to find Ryan Byrne, one of my father's oldest associates.

"Ryan."

"Fighting these days, I hear. Bare knuckle. Barcelona, Paris, London." He examines me with calculating eyes. "Your father kept tabs. You have a reputation for being ruthless."

All these years, thinking I was free, and the old man was watching. I hope he enjoyed the show before he died, the asshole.



"What do you want, Ryan?"

"Just paying my respects." He sips his drink. "Your brother runs things differently than your father did. More... diplomacy, less blood."

"Good for him."

"Is it?" Ryan's eyes narrow. "Some say the Donovan name doesn't command the respect it once did."

I recognize the game. Old guard versus new. Ryan trying to use me against Cormac.

"My brother knows what he's doing."

Ryan shrugs. "We'll see. Word is the Russians are moving in. Testing boundaries." He walks away, leaving his warning hanging in the air.

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I need to leave. The house, the wake, the past—it all chokes me.

I slip out without goodbyes, walking fast down the back alleys and streets. The hotel calls to me—anonymous, safe. Far away from home.

But my feet take me elsewhere. To streets I know by heart. To the neighborhood where I spent the best days of my life, before everything fell apart.

Before I knew what a monster my father really was. Before Cormac sent me away, to keep me and everyone I loved safe.

Maeve.

I tell myself I just want to see the old building. Her parents' place, where we spent those stolen afternoons. I don't expect her to still be there. She would have moved on. Married, perhaps. Built a life with a picket fence and a rich, handsome husband. I always hoped she ended up happy.

The building looks smaller than I remember. Lights shine in windows, lives carrying on inside.

And then I see her.

Maeve Brennan steps out of a corner shop, grocery bags in hand. Still beautiful, her blonde curls shorter now. She looks tired, older, but it's her.

My heart beats too fast.

Then a small figure runs up beside her. A boy. Dark hair, skinny build.

He turns, laughing at something Maeve says, and I see his face clearly under the streetlight.

My face. My eyes. My smile.

The world stops.

The boy—my son—takes Maeve's hand as they cross the street. They disappear around a corner, unaware of how they've shattered my reality.

I have a son.

The truth hits me like a wrecking ball, knocking me down harder than any hit I have taken in any fight. All these years, while I fought strangers in cages across Europe, I had a son. A child I never knew existed.

A child Maeve never told me about.

My legs move before my mind catches up. I follow their path, staying back, hiding in the shadows, watching as they enter an apartment building.

I stand in the shadows, staring up at the windows, trying to process what I am seeing. Trying to understand what it means. What I must do now?

A black car pulls up across the street. Two men inside, watching the same building.

My hackles go up. I know watchers when I see them. Someone has eyes on Maeve and my son. Who?

The car eventually leaves, but the threat lingers in the air. Real or imagined, it doesn't matter.

Everything has changed now.

I walk back to my hotel in a daze, the city a blur around me. Tomorrow, I'll confront Maeve. Tomorrow, I'll meet my son.

Tonight, I stare at the ceiling, haunted by green eyes that mirror my own.

## CHAPTER4

### MAEVE

I'm pulling the food out the oven when there's a knock at the door. I freeze, checking the clock—7:30 PM, too late for the mail carrier and too early for Mrs. O'Malley from downstairs who tends to bring up her baking at odd hours. I am not expecting a delivery either.

"Mom? Who is it?" Conor calls from the living room where he's doing his homework.

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"Stay there," I tell him, putting down the hot dish and wiping my hands on a kitchen towel.

A second knock, harder this time.

I am tempted to ignore it, but the locks in this building aren't great, and I've noticed strange cars parked across the street for the past week. My mom-senses are screaming that something is not quite right about a visit at this hour.

When I look through the peephole, it's black. Someone is covering it. My heart races as I back away.

"Maeve." The voice hits me like a tidal wave.

A voice I haven't heard in seven years.

A voice I've tried to forget.

"Maeve, I know you're in there."

Conor appears at the edge of the kitchen. "Mom?"

I motion for him to stay back and take a deep breath, summoning every ounce of courage I have.

"Go to your room," I tell Conor.

"But—"

"Now, Conor."

He hears the edge in my voice and listens, though I see the confusion in his eyes—eyes so like his father's that it hurts to look at them sometimes.

When the bedroom door clicks shut, I unlock the front door but leave the security chain on. I open it just enough to confirm what I already know.

Declan Donovan is standing in my hallway, his frame filling the narrow space. Older, harder, with scars I don't recognize, but still Declan. He is still the man who broke my heart and left me to pick up the pieces. Still a monster in the dark.

"What are you doing here?" I keep my voice low, aware that Conor is just down the hall.

"Let me in, Maeve."

"No."

His green eyes, the same ones that haunt me every single time my son gets mad, darken. "Please. We need to talk."

"We have nothing to talk about."

He leans closer to the gap in the door. "I saw him, Maeve."

My blood turns to ice. Of course he did. Conor is his mirror image.

"Go away, Declan."

"He's my son, isn't he?"

The question knocks the air from my lungs. All these years of secrecy, of protecting Conor from the Donovan legacy, shattered in an instant.

"Lower your voice." I glance behind me, making sure Conor hasn't snuck out.

"Let me in." There's an edge to his voice now. "There are men watching your building. Did you know that?"

The mysterious car. The feeling of being watched. Fear slides down my spine.

I close the door, unhook the chain, and open it again. Declan steps inside before I can change my mind.

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He fills my tiny apartment with his presence, too large, too wild, too... everything. I take a step back, needing space.

"Why are you in Dublin?" I ask.

"My father died."

"I heard."

His eyes narrow. "You keep up with Donovan news?"

"Hard not to in this city."

Declan looks around my apartment, taking in the modest furniture, the photos on the wall, most of Conor. His gaze lingers on a shelf of books.

"You still read those romance novels."

"Why are you here, Declan? At my apartment?"

He turns back to me. "I think you know."

"If you're asking me if Conor is yours, yes. He is."

He runs a hand through his hair—still too long, still falling into his eyes the way it did when we were young.



"Why didn't you tell me?"

The question ignites a rage I've kept banked for years. "Tell you? How exactly was I supposed to do that when you disappeared without a trace? When your brothers refused to tell me where you'd gone?"

"You could have?—"

"What? Sent a message through the Dublin criminal grapevine? 'If anyone sees Declan Donovan, tell him he's going to be a father? Smoke signals maybe? Fuck off Declan, you made damn sure no one could find you.'"

He flinches at my tone. Good.

"I didn't know I was pregnant when you left." I cross my arms, a barrier between us. "And by the time I found out, you were gone. I thought you were dead, if I am being honest. Your fucking family were so shady about it, Cormac told me to let it go. He really had me convinced he'd killed you for a while."

"Maeve—"

"No. You don't get to show up after seven years and question me. You left us, remember? You chose to run away from Dublin, from your family... from me."

The pain flashes in his eyes. "I had no choice."

"We all have choices, Declan. I chose to raise my son alone rather than have him live with the noose of your name around his neck. You will not come and fuck it all up now."

"Our son," he corrects, and the possessiveness in his voice sets off alarm bells.

"My son," I insist. "The boy you've never met, never supported, never even knew existed because you walked away."

Declan steps closer. I refuse to back away again.

"I want to meet him."

"No."

"Maeve, he's, my son."

"Biologically, yes. In every way that matters? No. I put the guy who mopped the gym floors down as his father on the birth certificate."

His jaw tightens, that familiar stubbornness I once found charming. Now it terrifies me because I know what Declan is capable of when he wants something.

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"I have rights."

"You gave up any rights when you left Dublin without a word. You, Declan are not a dad—you don't get that title donating sperm, you earn it asshole."

We stand there, locked in a standoff, the air between us charged with anger, hurt. Even after all this time, after all the pain, my body reacts to him being so close. Heat coils low in my stomach, a visceral memory of what once was.

"I never stopped thinking about you," he says, his voice lower now. "Not for a single day."

"Don't."

He moves closer. "Maeve."

"I said don't." I seethe.

But he's already there, too close, his scent making me lose my mind—leather and whiskey and a scent that lingers like blood, it's only Declan. He reaches up, fingers brushing my cheek so lightly I can almost pretend it isn't happening.

"I missed you."

He kisses me before I can protest, and for one treacherous moment, I respond. My body remembers what my mind wants to forget—the feel of him, the taste, the way we fit together perfectly.

Then reality crashes back. I push him away, hard.

"No. You don't get to do that."

His eyes are dark with desire, and I hate that I can still read him like a damn romance book. I hate even more that my own body betrays my sanity.

"Get out."

"Maeve—"

"Out, Declan. Now."

The door down the hall clicks open, and we both freeze.

"Mom?" Conor calls from the hallway. "Is everything okay?"

Declan turns toward his voice, and I see hunger, desperation, and fear cross his face. I move quickly, blocking his path.

"Everything's fine, honey. Go back to your room. I'll be there in a minute."

"Who's that man?"

Before I can answer, the front window shatters. Glass explodes inward as a black thing lands on my living room floor.

Declan tackles me to the ground as the black thing begins smoking. His body covers mine as more glass breaks—the other window now.

"Conor!" I scream.

Declan leaps to his feet and rushes toward my son. He grabs Conor, shielding him as he carries him toward me.

"We need to go. Now," Declan tells me, pulling me up with his free hand.

The smoke gets thicker, burning my eyes and throat. Not just smoke bombs—tear gas.

"The fire exit," I choke out.

Declan keeps Conor tucked against his chest, one arm around my waist as he guides us through the kitchen to the service door that leads to the building's back staircase.

We stumble down the stairs, the sound of breaking glass and heavy footsteps above us. They're inside my apartment now.

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"My car is around the corner," Declan says as we burst into the alley behind the building.

Conor clings to him, face buried against Declan's shoulder, terrified. The sight of my son in his father's arms—a picture I never thought I'd see—I melt a little even in the chaos.

There is a black SUV parked in the shadows. Declan unlocks it and helps Conor into the back seat.

"Get in," he tells me.

"My purse, my phone?—"

"Are not worth dying for, get in."

A shout from the building's back entrance scares me into listening. Shadows move in the doorway.

I climb in next to Conor, pulling him close as Declan jumps into the driver's seat. The engine roars to life, and we peel away from the curb, tires squealing.

"Mom, what's happening? Who is he?"

I meet Declan's eyes in the rearview mirror. In them, I see a promise of protection, but also a reckoning delayed too long.

"An old friend," I tell my son. "He's going to help us."

Declan's hands tighten on the steering wheel as he navigates through back streets, putting distance between us and whoever broke into my home.

"I'm taking you somewhere safe," he says.

I want to argue, to demand he take us to the police or to my mother's house in the countryside. But the look in his eyes and the set of his jaw tells me it would be pointless.

Just like that, Declan Donovan is back in my life, dragging danger and chaos in his wake.

## CHAPTER 5

### DECLAN

The car engine growls as I drive through Dublin's back streets, taking a route, no one expects. Every few minutes, I check the rearview mirror. No tails yet.

"Where are you taking us?" Maeve asks from the back seat, her arms wrapped around Conor.

"Somewhere the Russians can't find you."

"Russians?"

I glance at her in the mirror. "That's who's after us. Ryan Byrne mentioned them at the wake—they're moving in on Donovan territory. Testing boundaries. Those thugs did not speak English."

My safe house is on the outskirts of the city, tucked away behind high walls and a biometric gate. I use facial recognition to open up and drive through, closing it behind us. The place looks abandoned from the outside—exactly how I want it.

"This is yours?" Maeve asks as I park in the garage.

"Bought it years ago under an alias. No one knows about it."

"Not even your brothers?"

"Not even them." Some secrets are just for me, my family can't always be trusted.

I usher them inside, flipping on lights to reveal sparse furnishings and bare walls. The place isn't pretty, but it has reinforced doors, security cameras, and bulletproof windows.

"There are two bedrooms upstairs," I say. "The kitchen has food. Bathroom has towels."

Conor stares at me, his green eyes—my eyes—wide. He hides behind Maeve, peeking around her hip.



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"Are you a policeman?" he asks.

I look at Maeve, not sure what she's told him about me.

"No," I say. "I'm... an old friend of your mom's."

"Why did those men break our windows? Are they going to get in trouble? I broke a window at school once and dad a detention."

"Conor," Maeve interrupts, "why don't you go upstairs and pick a bedroom?"

"But Mom?—"

"Now, please."

He trudges up the stairs, looking back at us. The kid is smart. He knows we're hiding something. I always knew when the adults in my life were bullshitting me, we think kids are dumb. They are not.

When he's out of earshot, Maeve turns on me, fury in her eyes.

"This is what I was afraid of. The shitshow that is your family dragging death to my front door. I do not want any part of this shit, Declan. What the ever-loving fuck is going on?"

"Our door," I correct. "Our son."

"He doesn't even know who you are. Fuck off with the 'our'."

Her words are like a kick upside the head when you're waiting for a punch in the gut, they knock me sideways.

"You need to tell him."

"I don't need to do anything, and you will keep your yap shut. When he's ready to know what a monumental fuck up his father is I will tell him."

I move to the window, checking the street. "You might not have time to wait for being ready. Those men came for him. They probably knew I had a kid before I did."

"How could they? You've been gone for seven years. They followed you."

"I don't know how they knew. But I am going to find out."

She rubs her arms, fear replacing anger. "What do they want?"

"God knows? My family has beef with everyone, I am back, it's a way to rattle Cormac."

Her eyes fill with tears. "I hate this. I hate that you're back and bringing this chaos with you. I was doing fine without you."

"Were you?"

She looks away. "Just go back, go back wherever the fuck you were and stay there, please."

I step closer, breathing in her scent. Vanilla and flowers. Seven years and she still

smells the same.

"You're not safe anymore. Now it's my job to keep you safe."

"How? By hiding us in this prison? By bringing Russian thugs to my front door?"

I shake my head. "By eliminating the threat."

Her eyes widen. "What does that mean?"

"It means I'm going to find out who targeted you and make sure they never get a chance to try again."

"Of course, Declan will solve the problem with violence. It's in your fucking blood isn't it."

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"It always was."

We stare at each other, the truth sucking the air out of the room. I'm still what my father tried to make me—a weapon. I just aim myself at willing targets now.

"I'm going out," I tell her. "Lock the doors behind me. The alarm code is 5729. Don't open for anyone, not even me. I can, and will let myself back in."

"Where are you going?"

"To see my brother. Cormac needs to know what's happening."

She looks toward the stairs where Conor disappeared. "You can't tell your family about him. Don't you fucking dare, Declan."

"I have to."

"No! The Donovan's will corrupt him, take him from me. I won't let that happen. I will be the one killing people if they try take him."

I move closer, unable to resist touching her. I brush my fingers against her cheek. "He is a Donovan. But I swear to you, I'll protect him. I am not like them, I left so I didn't have to be."

She pulls away from my touch. "Then why come back at all?"

"You know why."

"Your father dying isn't a reason, you hated him. I bet you danced on his grave, or spit on it." She's not wrong, his death was a relief. That stoke was too good of a way for him to go— I wish he'd suffered.

I shrug. "Maybe I felt something else pulling me home."

"Home." She laughs bitterly. "Dublin was never your home. Not really. You couldn't wait to get away."

"That's not true. I didn't want to leave, I left to protect you. Cormac sent me away to protect me, he knew what would happen if I stayed."

"Protect me?" Her voice rises. "You abandoned me!"

"My father was going to kill me if I didn't leave!" The words burst out before I can stop them. "He was going to kill me, and you. So, I planned to kill him, and Cormac stopped me, he sent me away. I was lucky, he's killed siblings for less." Once upon a time there were seven of us, we're down to four.

She steps back, shock on her face. "What?"

I run a hand through my hair. "He found out about us. Said I was disgracing the family by mixing with someone like you—he called you trash, I lost my mind. He said I had to end it, or he would. His way. So, I decided to end him my way?—"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't get a chance, I had to leave."

"So, you just disappeared? Left me to think you were dead, or that you ran off because you didn't want me anymore. You fucking broke my heart Declan, wrecked

my entire life too."

"It was the only way I knew to save you."

Her eyes fill with tears. "And in doing so, you ruined me."

I want to touch her again, to pull her into my arms and erase the years between us. But I know she won't let me.

"I'm sorry," I say. "For everything. But I'm here now, and I'm not leaving again."

She wipes away a tear. "You can't just waltz back into our lives, Declan."

"I couldn't waltz if I tried, but I am in your life. You can't keep him from me."

"We're not yours."

"You've always been mine. And that boy upstairs—he's mine too. Whether you like it or not."

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Her eyes flash with anger, fear and just a glimmer of desire. I can't tell anymore. Seven years has dulled my ability to read her.

"I should check on Conor," she says.

"Maeve." I catch her arm. "Tell him who I am. Tonight. He deserves to know."

She pulls away. "You don't get to decide what he deserves, not yet. When he's ready I will tell him."

"The Russians didn't leave us that luxury. There isn't always time, tell him please."

A noise from upstairs makes us both look up. Conor stands at the top of the stairs.

"Russians?" he asks.

"Go back to your room," Maeve tells him.

"Are they the bad men who broke our windows?"

"Yes, they are. But I'm going to take care of them."

Conor looks at me, his small face so much like mine it hurts. "How? Will they get detention too?"

"That's grown-up business," Maeve interrupts.

"But—"

"Conor, please."

He turns and disappears back down the hall.

"I need to go," I tell Maeve. "Stay here. Stay safe."

"What if you don't come back?"

"I'll come back. We're not done talking."

I grab my jacket and keys, pausing at the door. "There's a gun in the kitchen drawer. Third one down. You know how to use it?"

She nods, face pale. "My boyfriend taught me in high school, remember."

"Good. Don't hesitate if someone gets in."

I leave before I can change my mind, before I can give in to the urge to stay and never let them out of my sight again.

I punch Cormac's number into my phone.

"We need to talk," I say when he answers.

"Where have you been? You disappeared from the wake."

"I've been busy finding out I have a son."

Silence on the line.



"Meet me at Quinn's in twenty minutes," he finally says.

I hang up and start the car. I fled Dublin once to protect Maeve. This time, I am staying right here.

No one threatens my family and lives.

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The underground fighting taught me many things. How to take a punch. How to deliver one with lethal precision. How to put a man down and make sure he stays there.

I'll put those skills to use. For Maeve. For Conor.

### CHAPTER6

#### MAEVE

I pace the safe house living room, checking my watch for the twentieth time in an hour. Declan left five hours ago. No call. No text. Nothing. I don't even think he has my number this all happened so fast.

Through the window, I watch darkness settle over Dublin. The city lights twinkle in the distance, so normal, so peaceful. A stark contrast to the chaos in my head.

"Mom?" Conor stands in the doorway, hair tousled. "Can we go home now?"

My heart breaks at the hope in his voice. "Not yet, honey."

"When?"

"We need to wait for them to fix the windows, it might take a little while." I cross the room and smooth his hair. "Are you hungry?"

He nods, and I take him to the kitchen. The third drawer down catches my eye—the

one with the gun. I steer Conor away from the drawers to the other side of the cabinets.

The refrigerator has basic staples: eggs, milk, bread, cheese. Nothing fancy, but enough to work with, and way more than we have left in ours at home. I make Conor a grilled cheese sandwich, trying to act like this is completely normal.

"Who is that man?" Conor asks through a mouthful of sandwich.

I freeze, spatula in hand. The question I don't want to answer.

"His name is Declan," I answer. "He's... an old friend."

"Is he your boyfriend?"

"No." The denial comes fast. Too fast.

"Then why are we at his house?"

I turn away, busying myself with wiping down the counter. "The windows at home are broken, we can't stay there until it's been fixed, and all the glass tidied up."

"Is he a superhero?"

I laugh. "No, honey. He's just a man."

A dangerous man. A man I once loved with every fiber of my being. A man who left me pregnant and alone. A monster.

"Do you hate him?"

I stop wiping. "Why do you ask that?"

"You look mad when you talk about him."

Out of the mouths of babes. I sit across from Conor, resting my chin on my hand. "It's complicated, sweetie."

"Grown-ups always say that."

"We say it because it's true." I reach across the table and take his hand.

"Complicated, just means you don't want to tell me stuff."

"Declan and I were important to each other, long ago."

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"Before I was born?"

"Yes."

"was he your best friend?" He chews. "His green eyes are like mine."

My breath catches. Even at six, Conor notices the similarities. Of course, he does—he inherited Declan's sharp mind along with his green eyes and stubbornness.

"A lot of people have green eyes," I say lamely.

Conor shrugs, losing interest. "Can I watch TV?"

"For a little while."

He scampers off to the living room. The annoying sounds of Bluey blare and I resist the urge to go press mute, because my thoughts are loud enough without the extra noise. A click at the door has me lunging for a knife on the counter.

Conor is absorbed in cartoons, oblivious to my fear.

The door opens, and Declan walks in. Blood stains his white shirt. A bruise darkens his right cheek. His knuckles are raw.

He locks the door behind him and turns to find me holding the knife.

"Planning to use that?" he asks, voice rough. "It's a fish knife, not very sharp."

I lower the blade. "What happened to you?"

"I found one of the Russians. We had a chat."

The casual way he says it sends a chill through me. I know what kind of "chat" leaves a man looking like that.

"Where's Conor?" he asks.

I nod toward the TV. Declan's eyes soften when he spots our son. His son.

"Did you learn any Russian in your chat?" I ask, pulling him into the kitchen, away from Conor's ears and eyes, he's a fucking mess.

"They're after me, not you." He grabs a bottled water from the fridge, downing half of it in one go. "The Russians think taking me out will scare Cormac into doing them some favors."

"And I'm collateral damage?"

"You and Conor are leverage." He meets my eyes. "They know he's my son."

Fear slices through me. "How?"

"Look at him, how does anyone not know Maeve?"

I grip the counter to steady myself. "We need to leave Dublin. I have a cousin in Cork?—"

"No." Declan steps closer. "Running won't help. They'll find you."

"So, what, we hide here forever? Wait until they get us? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Until I deal with the threat."

I look at the blood on his shirt. "By killing them all?"

"If I have to."

His voice reminds me of what I tried to forget—Declan is a Donovan through and through.

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"I don't want this life for him," I say, nodding toward the living room. "I don't want him growing up surrounded by blood and bullets. Where brothers kill brothers, Declan I won't let that happen."

"Like I grew up?"

"Yes."

Pain flashes in his eyes. "I don't want that either."

I turn away, unable to bear the raw honesty in his gaze. "You should clean up before he sees you like this."

"Maeve." He catches my arm, his touch electric on my skin. "I need to know what you have told him about his father."

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I told him his father lives far away. That's all." I pull my arm free. "I didn't want to lie, but I also didn't want him asking questions I couldn't answer."

Declan nods, accepting this. "I should tell him."

"Not yet."



"When?"

"When we are safe, and I will tell him. Not you."

He runs a hand through his hair, frustrated. "And if we're never safe?"

I have no answer for that.

"First aid kit?" he asks, changing the subject.

"Bathroom, probably. It's your house not mine."

He moves to leave but pauses. "Cormac knows. About Conor."

My stomach drops. "You told him?"

"I had to. I need his help to protect you both."

"And what did the mighty Cormac Donovan say about his newfound nephew?"

Declan's mouth tightens. "He wants to meet him."

"Absolutely fucking not."

"Maeve—"

"No. I won't have Conor anywhere near your family. Over my dead body does Cormac get to play uncle."

"They are his family too." Like fuck they are.

We glare at each other, neither willing to back down. I hate that I still want him. That after everything, my body still remembers his.

"The safe house in Kerry," Declan says. "Cormac offered it. It's more secure than this place."

"I'm not going anywhere with your brother."

"You don't have to. I'll take you."

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I laugh bitterly. "And I'm supposed to trust you? The man who abandoned me without a word? You come home looking like—this. I do not trust you, or your family."

Pain flashes across his face. "I told you why I left."

"Seven years too late."

Declan moves closer, invading my space. "I had no fucking choice, I really didn't want to die either."

"And what happens the next time you decide staying alive is more important than staying?"

"I won't leave you again." His voice drops. "Either of you."

He's too close. The scent of him—sweat, blood, and that violence that is pure Declan—it overwhelms me. My body heats in response, a traitorous reaction I can't control.

"You don't get to make promises," I say, voice tight. "Not to me. Not anymore."

"Maeve." He says my name quietly. "I never stopped loving you."

It is like a punch to the gut. "Don't." I stop him.

But he's already moving, closing the distance between us, touching my face. I should push him away. I should punch him, or shoot him. Stab him with the fucking fish

knife. I should hate him.

Instead, I stand frozen, caught in his orbit, unable to get away from the force that is Declan.

"Tell me you don't feel this," he whispers.

"I don't."

"Liar."

He kisses me, and everything I've fought to suppress for seven years explodes. I grab his shirt, pulling him closer even as I hate myself for the weakness. The kiss is violent, angry, full of the pain we've inflicted on each other.

His hands tangle in my hair, moving my head to deepen the kiss. I bite his lower lip, drawing blood, wanting to hurt him the way he hurt me.

He groans, pressing me against the counter, his body hard against mine. Seven years melt away. We're twenty-two again, desperate for each other, unable to resist the pull.

"I hate you," I whisper against his mouth.

"I know." He lifts me onto the counter, stepping between my legs. "Hate me all you want, just don't stop."

His hands slide under my shirt, igniting fire everywhere he touches. I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him closer, needing the friction.

"Mom?"

We spring apart. Conor stands in the doorway, eyes wide.

"What are you doing?"

Declan backs away, running a hand through his hair. I slide off the counter, straightening my clothes, heart pounding.

"Nothing, sweetie," I say, voice unnaturally high. "Declan was just... helping me reach something."

Conor looks skeptical. "Why is there blood on his shirt?"

"I had an accident," Declan says. "Cut myself. I'm going to clean up now."

He leaves the kitchen, escaping the awkward moment, leaving me to face our son alone.

Conor watches Declan go, then turns his curious gaze on me. "Your face is red."

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"Is it?" I touch my heated cheeks. "I'm just warm."

"Are you two fighting?"

"No." Not in the way he thinks.

"Then why do you look mad?"

I sigh, kneeling to his level. "Grown-up stuff, honey. Nothing for you to worry about."

"Is he going to help us go home?"

The innocent question cuts deep. "I hope so."

"I miss my room."

"I know." I pull him into a hug, breathing in his little-boy scent of berry-shampoo and innocence. "We'll go home soon."

But even as I say the words, I know our life will never be the same. Declan is back, and with him comes a storm I know will destroy everything I've built.

Later, after Conor is asleep, I sit in the darkened living room. Declan is still awake, I can hear the shower running.

I touch my lips, still swollen from his kisses. The taste of him lingers, a reminder of

the madness that overtook us in the kitchen.

It meant nothing, I tell myself. A moment of weakness, it is just fear and adrenaline. Nothing more.

The shower stops. Footsteps move across the floor above. I wait, part of me hoping he'll come downstairs, another part praying he stays away.

The footsteps fade. A door closes.

Relief and disappointment war within me.

I curl up on the couch, pulling a blanket over me. Sleep eludes me as I stare into the darkness, my mind racing with impossible choices.

Trust Declan? The man who left me broken. Tell Conor the truth? Shatter his innocent world.

Run? Stay? Fight?

## CHAPTER 7

### DECLAN

I stare at the ceiling of the safe house bedroom, sleep a distant dream. The taste of Maeve still lingers on my lips. The ghost of her touch haunts my skin. Seven years apart and her effect on me has not changed—electric, all-consuming.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand. Cormac.

"Any problems out there?" he asks when I answer.

"Nothing. The house is secure." I keep my voice low, aware of how sound travels in this place.

"Good. My men tracked the Russians operation to a warehouse in the docks. We're going to pay them an unexpected visit tomorrow."

"I want to be there."

"You need to protect your boy."

My boy. A son I never knew. And the woman I never stopped loving.

"Keep me in the loop," I tell him, ending the call.



\* \* \*

I pull on a t-shirt and step into the hallway. The door to Conor's room is ajar. I pause, peering inside at the small figure in the bed. My son. The reality of it punches me in the gut every time I think about it. It's like waking up from a concussion, the truth is new each time I see him.

I go into the room quietly, careful not to wake him. When he sleeps, he looks even more like me. The same jawline, the same nose. Even his hair falls across his forehead the same way mine did at his age.

What have I missed? First steps. First words. First day of school. Birthdays. Christmas mornings. All the moments that make a child's life, gone forever because I wasn't there.

I am overwhelmed with regret so powerful it steals my breath.

"He hates sleeping in strange places."

I turn to find Maeve in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest. The moonlight from the window casts her in silver and shadow.

"Does he have bad dreams?" I ask.

She nods. "About monsters. Ironical, considering who his father is."

The barb hits its mark. "I'm not a monster, Maeve."

"No? Your bruised bloody knuckles say otherwise."

I look down at my hands, still raw from the "chat" I had with the Russian. "I do what needs to be done."

"That's what scares me." She adjusts the blanket over Conor. "You think violence is the only way to fix things."

"It is in my world."

"That's not the world I want for my son. I do not want him learning that's the way to get what you want."

"Our son," I correct, unable to stop myself.

She turns those ocean-blue eyes on me, hard as ice now. "Prove it."

"What?"

"Prove you deserve to be his father. Prove you're not just another Donovan thug who solves problems with his fists."

I clench my jaw, fighting back the anger her words ignite. "I left Dublin to escape that life."

"And now you're back, looking like you stepped out of a horror movie, talking about 'chats' with Russians. You might have left, but look at you. You left and spent seven years fighting in a cage."

We stand on opposite sides of Conor's bed, the sleeping child between us the line that both divides us and tethers us together.

"Come downstairs," I say. "I don't want to wake him."

She hesitates, then nods, following me to the kitchen. I grab two beers from the fridge, offering her one. Our fingers brush in the exchange, sending a jolt through my body.

"Tell me about him," I say, leaning against the counter.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

A smile touches her lips, so brief I almost miss it. "He's smart. Too smart sometimes. Asks questions I can't answer."

"Like about his father?"

She nods, taking a sip of beer. "He started asking when he was four. Why he didn't have a dad when all his friends did."

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Knowing that he wondered about me, asked about me, that hurts like a motherfucker.

"What did you tell him?"

"That his father lives far away. That it was complicated."

"The grown-up answer for everything."

"What was I supposed to say? 'Your dad ran away because his father threatened to kill us both'? I didn't even know that, and I did not need him having abandonment issues."

I flinch. "You could have told him I didn't know about him."

"Would that have made a difference? You still left." She puts down her beer. "Do you know what it was like? Finding out I was pregnant after you disappeared? Your brothers refusing to tell me where you'd gone? Your father threatening me when I showed up at your house?"

My blood runs cold. "He threatened you?"

"He said if I ever came back claiming my child was a Donovan, he'd make sure neither of us lived."

Rage boils up, red-hot and untamed. Even from the grave, my father finds new ways to make me hate him.

"I didn't know," I say. "I swear to you, Maeve, if I'd known about the baby?—"

"You'd have what? Come back? Risked your life? Made it all worse, for all of us?"

Everything I want to say sounds empty, meaningless and won't change the past.

"What matters is now," I say. "I'm here now."

"For how long? Until the next threat? Until your father calls from his grave?"

"He's dead. He can't hurt us anymore."

She laughs, a brittle sound. "His ghost is what brought you back to Dublin. His ghost is why Russians broke into my apartment. His ghost is why my son is sleeping in a strange bed tonight. Your siblings are not exactly saints Declan, Cormac, Finn, your sister wherever the heck she crawled off to. You lot have been at each other throats since you could walk, nothing has changed."

I move closer, drawn to her like a moth to flame. "I came back for the funeral. I stayed for you."

"You didn't even know I was still here."

"I hoped." I reach out, touching her cheek. "Every day for seven years, I hoped."

She doesn't pull away this time. "You broke my heart."

"I know."

"I hated you."

"I know that too."

"I tried to forget you."

I step closer, our bodies almost touching. "Did you?"

She looks up at me, conflict in her eyes. "No."

Her admission changes something in the air between us.

I lean down, my lips inches from hers. "I never forgot you either. Not for a single day."

She puts her hands on my chest, neither pushing me away nor pulling me closer.

"Declan..."

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"Tell me to stop."

She doesn't.

I kiss her, gentler than before. No anger now, just longing. Seven years of wanting her all poured into this one kiss.

She slides her hands up to my shoulders, then around my neck. She presses against me, her body fitting perfectly as if we were never apart.

I guide her backward until she hits the edge of the table. She pulls me closer, threading her fingers through my hair and tugging just enough to make me groan against her mouth.

"I've missed you," I murmur against her neck, breathing in her scent. "Every part of you."

She arches into me as my hands slide under her shirt, tracing the soft skin of her waist. "Don't think this means I forgive you," she says, but her body contradicts her words.

"I don't need forgiveness, I need you, right fucking now." I capture her mouth again, deepening the kiss until she moans against my lips.

I want to take my time, to relearn every inch of her, but need overrides patience. She grips my shirt, pulling me tighter against her, the heat between us building even through our clothes.

"Not here," she whispers, eyes darting toward the stairs.

I take her hand and lead her to my bedroom. I kick the door shut behind us and pull her to the bed, covering her body with mine.

"Are you sure?" I ask, needing to hear her say it.

Her answer is to pull my shirt over my head. She explores the new scars on my torso with her fingertips. "What happened here?" she asks, tracing a jagged line across my ribs.

"Knife fight. Barcelona."

Her fingers move to another scar on my shoulder. "And here?"

"Bullet. Grazed me in Paris."

She looks up at me, sadness in her eyes. "You lived a whole life I know nothing about."

"A half-life," I correct. "There was always something missing."

I kiss her again before she can respond, before she can put her walls back up and shut me out. I grab the hem of her shirt and pull it up over her head.

The sight of her bare skin in the moonlight steals my breath. "You're fucking gorgeous," I tell her.

A blush colors her cheeks. "I've had a baby, Declan. I'm not the same perfect ten you left behind."



I trace the faint stretch marks on her stomach, marks earned bringing my son into the world. "You're more gorgeous now."

She pulls me down for another kiss, tugging at the drawstring of my sweatpants. I help her, shedding the rest of my clothes before removing hers.

When we're both naked, I pause, taking in the sight of her. "I want to see all of you, every inch I have missed," I say.

"Stop talking." She pulls me down, wrapping herself around me.

I slide my cock into her, watching her face as I do. Her eyes widen, lips parting on a gasp. I stay still, buried deep inside her, nothing has ever felt more like home.

"Declan," she whispers.

I move inside her, hard and deep. She arches off the bed, her nails dig into my back, drawing blood like I am in a fight, only this is one I don't want to win. I want to drag it out all night.

"You're mine," I tell her. "You've always been mine."

"Prove it," she challenges.

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I move faster, driving into her with a force that makes the headboard hit the wall. She cries out, the sound muffled against my shoulder.

"Mine," I repeat. "All mine, this pussy, this body. It's mine."

Her pussy tightens, squeezing me as she shudders. She says my name on a breath as she comes. I come inside her, nothing holding me back, burying my face in her neck to muffle my groan.

We collapse on the bed, our bodies pressed together, both of us breathing hard. Her skin is hot against mine, sweat making us stick to each other. Her fingers trace patterns on my chest, gentle in a way that undoes me.

"I still hate how much I want you," she whispers, her voice raw with emotion. "Seven years and my body still betrays me for you."

I turn to face her, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Your body knows what you won't admit. You're still mine, Maeve. You always fucking were."

She's quiet for a long moment. "I can't trust you."

"You can."

"How do I know you won't leave again?"

I take her hand, placing it over my heart. "Because this time, I have something to stay for, to fight for."

"You had me before, that didn't make you stay."

"Now I have both of you. And I know what it's like to live without you." I kiss her forehead. "I won't fuck up again."

She rests her head on my chest, her breath warm against my skin. "Conor needs to know who you are."

"I want to tell him."

She shakes her head. "I should do it. Tomorrow."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. He might hate you as much as I did."

"Did?"

A small smile touches her lips. "Past tense. For now."

I pull her closer, her body fitting against mine like she never left. Like we didn't lose seven years.

"Get some sleep," I tell her. "Tomorrow will be a long day."

She nods, eyes already closing. I watch her drift off, watching the rise and fall of her chest, the flutter of her eyelashes against her cheeks.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand. Another text from Cormac.

Russians on the move. Be ready.

I glance at Maeve, peaceful in sleep, then at the door that leads to the hallway, to the room where my son dreams.

## CHAPTER8

### MAEVE

I wake to an empty bed, the sheets beside me cold. For a moment, I forget where I am, then it all crashes back—the attack, the safe house, Declan.

Declan, who I slept with last night. Who I let back into my body if not my heart.

I stare at the ceiling, trying to sort through the tangle of emotions. Anger still burns beneath the surface, but a deep relief fills me alongside it. A relief I refuse to name.

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The house is deathly quiet as I get dressed. Too quiet. I check Conor's room first—empty. I panic until I hear voices from downstairs—Declan and Conor whispering.

I pause on the stairs to watch them.

Declan butchers' pancakes in the pan, while Conor sits on the counter chatting about his favorite Nintendo game.

The sight makes my chest ache.

"Mom!" Conor spots me and grins. "Declan makes pancakes with chocolate chips!" They look more like scrambled eggs.

"I see that." I enter the kitchen, avoiding Declan's gaze. "Did you sleep okay?"

"This house makes weird noises."

"Old houses do that," Declan says. "It's just settling."

"Are we going home today?" Conor asks.

I glance at Declan, who shakes his head.

"Not yet," I tell Conor. "The windows need more time to get fixed."

"But I need my stuff for school tomorrow."

I pull out a chair and sit at the counter. "You might miss a few days of school."

His face falls. "But we have the science fair this week."

"I know, honey. I'm sorry."

Declan places a plate of very badly made pancakes in front of each of us.

I know that I need to tell him that Declan is his dad, and I need to do it today—now.

After breakfast, Conor goes to the living room to watch cartoons while Declan and I clean up.

"How do you want to do this?" Declan asks, his voice low.

"I don't know." I rinse a plate with more force than necessary. "How do you tell a six-year-old that his father who was very far away and never coming back is here now?"

"We'll find the right thing to say."

"There is no 'we' yet, Declan." I put down the plate and turn to face him. "One night doesn't magically replace the seven years you vanished."

He steps closer, trapping me between his body and the sink. "Last night wasn't just one night."

"No, it was stress, and fear and bad decisions."

"It was us." He puts his hand on my waist. "It's always been us."

I shove him away, needing space to think clearly. "I can't live like this, hidden away

in a safe house. Conor needs to go to school. I need to work. We need our normal life back."

"You think I don't want that?" Declan runs a hand through his hair. "Until my brother deals with the Russians, this is the safest place for you both."

"And then what? You don't have other enemies? Your own family kill one another for sport Declan, there will always be something to hide from. I can't do that."

He has no answer for that. He knows it is the truth.

"I want to go home," I say. "If we can't, then a house in the city, safe but not a prison. Conor needs his routine."

"That's not safe?—"

"I'm not asking." I cross my arms. "Either find us a real house where Conor can have some normalcy, or I'll go home without you, and all this shit."

Declan's jaw tightens, but he nods. "I know a place. My mother's old townhouse in Blackrock. It's under a different name. We can move there today."

A deep relief fills me. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. I'll still be there."

"Fine."

"And you tell Conor today. Before we go."

I nod, feeling sick. "I will."

He reaches for me again, and this time I let him pull me close. His kiss feels soft, nothing like the desperate passion of last night.

"Last night meant something," he says against my lips. "Don't pretend it didn't."

Before I can respond, Conor calls from the living room. "Mom! The WIFI is off!"

"Time to talk to our son," Declan says.



I take a deep breath and follow him into the living room.

Conor sits cross-legged on the floor, flicks the remote trying to get it to connect. He looks up at us. "What?"

I sit on the couch, patting the space beside me. "Come here, honey. We need to talk about something important."

Conor climbs up next to me, eyes darting between Declan and me.

"Remember how you always ask about your dad?" I begin.

He nods.

"I told you he lived far away, and that was true." I take his small hand in mine. "But he didn't know about you. He left before I found out I was pregnant."

Conor's brow furrows. "He didn't want me?"

"No, that's not it," I say quickly. "He didn't know you existed. If he had known, he would have wanted to meet you."

"How do you know?"

I look at Declan, who stands by the door, letting me lead. "Because he's here now, and he does want to know you."

Conor's eyes widen. "Here? Where?"

My throat tightens. "Declan is your dad, Conor."

He stares at Declan.

"You're my dad?" he finally asks.

Declan nods, moving to kneel in front of the couch. "Yes."

"Where were you?"

"I was in different countries. Spain, France, England."

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"Why didn't you come see me?"

Declan's eyes meet mine. This is the hardest question.

"He didn't know about you," I repeat. "We lost touch before I found out I was having a baby."

"But why did you go away?" Conor asks Declan directly.

"I had to leave to keep your mom safe," Declan says. "Bad people wanted to hurt me, and they would have hurt her too."

"The Russians?"

"Yes." Declan tells a white lie. "But I'm back now, and I'm not going anywhere."

Conor sits with this, his face scrunched in concentration. "Do we have to live here with you?"

"No."

"Are you going to live with us? At our house?"

I step in. "We're moving to a new house today. Declan will stay there too, for now, to keep us safe."

"Like a bodyguard?"

Declan smiles. "Something like that."

Conor slides off the couch and stands in front of Declan. "Do I have to call you Dad?"

"You can call me whatever you want."

"Okay." Conor nods, decision made. "I'll call you Declan for now."

"Can I watch another show?" Conor asks, already moving back to his spot on the floor.

"Sure," I say.

Declan and I retreat to the kitchen.

"That went well," he says.

"He's in shock. The questions will come later."

"At least he knows now."

I nod, wrapping my arms around myself. "When can we move to the other house?"

"I'll call Finn to set up security, then we can go this afternoon."

"Thank you."

He touches my cheek. "I meant what I said to him. I'm not going anywhere, Maeve."

I wish I could believe him.

\* \* \*

The townhouse in Blackrock is a far cry from the bare-bones safe house. Three stories of red brick and large windows, at the end of a quiet street near the sea. It's a mansion compared to my council flat.

"Your mother lived here?" I ask as Declan unlocks the front door.

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"After she left my father. Before the cancer took her."

The house is dusty but beautiful, with high ceilings and large rooms. Conor runs through the space, claiming the bedroom with the view of the garden. He thinks it's a castle.

"Security?" I ask quietly.

"Camera's front and back. Reinforced doors and windows. Finn's men are watching the street."

Not exactly normal, but closer than we were.

I spend the afternoon cleaning while Declan makes calls to his brothers. Conor explores every inch of the house, excited by the adventure of it all.

By evening, the place feels almost homey. I make dinner with groceries Finn's men delivered. We eat at the kitchen table like a normal family.

"Can I go to school tomorrow?" Conor asks.

"Not yet," Declan says before I can answer. "A few more days at home."

Conor pouts but doesn't argue.

After dinner, while Declan helps Conor bathe, I venture outside to the small garden. The evening air feels cool against my skin as I sit on a bench, looking up at the

darkening sky.

My phone buzzes with a text from my supervisor at the clinic, asking when I'll be back. I type a vague response about a family emergency.

How long can I keep my life on hold? How long before I lose my job, my apartment, everything I've worked so hard for?

The sound of the door opening interrupts my thoughts. Declan joins me outside, two glasses of wine in hand.

"Conor's asleep," he says, offering me a glass. "Passed out mid-story."

"It's been an overwhelming day for him." I take the wine. "For all of us."

Declan sits beside me, our shoulders nearly touching. "You did well with him today."

"We got lucky. He might wake up tomorrow full of Donovan rage."

"If he does, we'll handle it."

That "we" again. As if we're a team, a unit.

"I need to go back to work soon," I say. "The clinic won't hold my position forever."

"It's not safe yet."

"I can't put my life on permanent hold, Declan. I need to pay my rent, buy food. Conor's school fees."

He looks surprised. "I'll take care of all that."

"I don't want your money."

"It's not just my money. It's for my son too." He takes my hand. "Let me help, Maeve."

I pull away. "I've managed for six years without your help."

"And you did an amazing job. But you don't have to do it alone anymore."

Before I can respond, my phone buzzes again. I pull it out, expecting another text from work.

Instead, it's a picture message from an unknown number. A photo of Conor at school last week, playing in the yard. The text reads.



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Pretty boy. Looks just like his father.

My blood turns to ice.

"What is it?" Declan asks.

I show him the phone. His face hardens and I see the monster.

"When did you get this?"

"Just now."

He takes the phone. "They're watching us."

"They took this picture before the attack on my apartment."

"They've been planning this." He stands, scanning the garden like they are there lurking in the ferns. "We need to go back inside."

"Declan—"

"Now, Maeve."

I follow him into the house, fear crawling up my spine. He locks the door, checks the windows, calls Finn.

I stand in the kitchen, mind racing. The threats are real. These people have been

watching my son, planning God knows what. All before he even came back, they knew about Conor before he did.

Declan hangs up and turns to me. "Finn's sending more men."

"Who are these people? What do they want?"

"They want me to turn on Cormac, and they think they can do that by hurting you to get to me." He pulls me into his arms. "I won't let them."

I don't resist his embrace. "I'm scared, Declan."

"I know." He kisses the top of my head. "But I'll die before I let anything happen to either of you."

That's what I'm afraid of.

Later, in the darkness of the master bedroom, Declan pulls me against his chest. I listen to his heartbeat.

"Try to sleep," he says. "I'll keep watch."

I am too scared to sleep. I lift my head, finding his mouth in the dark.

He kisses me back, pushing aside the thin fabric of my nightgown as he runs his hand down my body. I climb on top of him, taking control.

He cups my face with his hands and kisses me hard until I can't breathe. I need this—need him—to forget everything else. I work at his boxers with my fingers, pushing them down his hips while he traces a hot path down my body with his mouth.

"Let me see you," he whispers, tugging at my nightgown.

I pull it over my head, tossing it on the floor. He stares at me in the darkness like he's starving. I gasp when he takes my breast in his mouth, arching into him. He sucks hard, grazing my nipple with his teeth just enough to make me moan.

I rock against him, feeling how hard he is. He grips my hips, digging his fingers into my skin.

"Tell me you want me," he demands.

"I want you." Fuck it. I do. No point to lying to him here in the dark.

He flips us, pinning me down. Fuck, I've missed his body on mine. I bite my lip to keep from crying out when he slides a finger inside me, then two.

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"Don't hide from me," he says, circling my clit with his thumb. "I want to hear you."

I come against his hand, trembling and desperate for more.

"I need to be inside you," he growls, nudging my thighs wider. "Now."

He thrusts into me hard, and I cry out. "Fuck, Declan!"

"That's it," he mutters against my neck. "Say my name again."

I wrap my legs around his waist, taking him deeper. Our bodies remember each other. I have to bite his shoulder to keep from screaming when he hooks an arm under my knee, changing the angle.

He pulls out, flipping me onto my stomach. He pushes back inside me from behind and I gasp, my mind going blank as he reaches around to touch me with one hand, gripping my hair with the other.

He fucks me hard from behind, each thrust making me gasp. I push back against him, wanting more, needing to forget everything else. Just for now. Just for this moment. He grips my hips, controlling every move as I moan into the pillow.

"Fuck, your pussy feels so good," he groans, gripping my hair tighter. "Tell me you missed this. Tell me you missed my cock."

"Yes," I gasp, unable to lie when he's hitting that spot inside me. "God, Declan, don't stop."

"Declan!" I cry out as I come, my whole body shaking. He thrusts a few more times, groaning as he fills me, then collapses on top of me, both of us breathing hard.

## CHAPTER9

### DECLAN

A death threat sits on the kitchen table—a crude drawing of a child with a bullet hole through his head. The message is clear and vicious. I want to tear it apart, burn it, erase its existence, but it's evidence. Evidence that our enemies are closer than we thought.

"What the fuck is this?" I slam my fist on the table, making the cups rattle. Finn stands across from me, arms crossed.

"We found it taped to the front door this morning. We have no clue how they got past security. They know that only family is allowed in, and no alarms tripped at all."

I pace the kitchen, rage building like a storm. "You said this place was secure."

"It is. No one got inside."

"They got close enough to leave this." I stab my finger at the vile note. "They could have walked right in and killed my son."

Finn's eyes narrow. "I'm doing my best, Declan. We can't have armed guards visible on the street without drawing the wrong kind of attention."

"I don't give a fuck about attention. I care about keeping them alive."

"Keep your voice down," Finn warns. "The kid?—"

Too late. Conor appears in the doorway, rubbing sleep from his eyes. My rage explodes when I see him looking at the drawing. He's looking at a death threat, one meant for him.

"What's that?" he asks.

I snatch it, crumpling it into a ball. "Nothing."

Maeve enters behind him, hair still damp from her shower. She takes one look around and knows that something is wrong.

"Conor, go get dressed," she says.

"But—"

"Now."

He walks out, eyes still fixed on my hand crushing the paper. Fuck. I need to get him out of here.

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"What happened?" Maeve asks once he's gone.

I hand her the threat. Her face pales as she sees the drawing.

"They came to the house?" Her voice trembles.

"Just to the door. They didn't get inside," Finn assures her.

"That's not fucking good enough," I snap.

Maeve presses her fingers to her temples. "He saw it, Declan. My son saw a picture of himself being killed."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'll fix this."

"How? By 'chatting' to more Russians?"

I exchange a look with Finn, who clears his throat. "I should go."

When he's gone, I move to touch Maeve, but she steps back.

"Don't."

"Maeve—"

"I can't do this, Declan. I can't have my son living in a place where death threats arrive with the morning paper."

I run a hand through my hair. "What do you want me to do?"

"Leave."

The word hits me like a bullet. "What?"

"Go away. Go back to your fighting or whatever you were doing. You're the reason we're in danger, Declan. You."

"If I leave, they'll still come for you. They know about Conor now."

"Then we'll disappear. Change our names, move to another country."

"And live in fear forever?"

"We're living in fear now!"

I grab her arms, not rough but firm. "Look, we can't run from this. I need to find who's behind it and end them. That's the only way out."

"So, you just become the murderer your dad wanted you to be all along? Great, fucking perfect."

I flinch.

"I see it in your eyes, Declan. That darkness. The violence you know you can't escape. It is in you, no matter where you go or what you do."

"If that's all you see, then maybe it's true."

She pulls away. "I don't want your protection, the price is too high for you and your



son to pay."

"You don't get a choice." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret them.

Her eyes flash. "Fuck you. I always have a choice."

"Maeve—"

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"Mom?" Conor stands in the doorway again, dressed now. "Are the bad guys coming back?"

Maeve and I both turn to him. I hate the fear in his eyes, hate that I brought this into his life.

"No one's getting past me," I tell him.

"Can you teach me to fight? So, I can also keep mom safe?"

Pride and heartbreak mix into one shattering realization, he is six and ready to fight for his mom, he is my son it is in his DNA to fight.

"Maybe some basic moves," I say. "But your job is to listen to your mom and stay safe."

"I want to be able to help."

"The best help you can give is doing what mom says."

He frowns, unsatisfied with this answer.

Maeve touches his shoulder. "Go eat your breakfast, honey."

When he's gone, she turns back to me. "I need air. I'm going for a walk."

"Not alone."

"I'll take one of Finn's goons with me."

"Maeve..." I reach for her hand. "I'm sorry about what I said. You always have a choice."

She meets my eyes. "Do I?"

She walks away before I can answer.

I go to the kitchen and call Cormac. "We need to end this. Now."

"Working on it," he replies.

"Work faster. They left a wax crayon death threat on my door this morning."

Silence for a beat. "Meet me at Quinn's in an hour. I have things to tell you, in person."

I hang up and stare out the window. Maeve walks in the small garden, one of Finn's men hovering nearby. Her shoulders sag.

I'm losing her. Again.

\* \* \*

Quinn's is nearly empty at this hour. Cormac is waiting at our table, a glass of whiskey already in front of him. Another waits for me.

"That bad?" I ask, sliding in across from him.

"Worse." He pushes a folder toward me. "The Russians are just hired muscle. This is

coming from inside."

I open the folder to find surveillance photos of a woman with dark hair. The main shot was taken at our father's funeral, which we all believed she didn't attend. She was hanging back in the distance, watching. It takes me a moment to recognize her.

"Siobhan? Our fucking nut-bag, lunatic sister is behind this? Come on, she hasn't got the balls."

Cormac nods grimly. "She's been working with the Bratva for months. Promised them access to our distribution networks if they helped her take over."

"Why target me? I've been gone. I don't even have a stick in this fire."

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"You're the wild card. The brother who rejected the family, who walked away clean. She needs to prove you're no threat—either by turning you against me or eliminating you."

"And Maeve? Conor?"

"Leverage. Pressure points." Cormac takes a drink. "Siobhan never forgave me for sending you away instead of her. She wanted out too, but I wouldn't allow it."

"Jesus." I rub my face. "So, all this time... God, she really is mad in the head, we didn't just imagine her craziness."

"She's been planning her move. Dad's death gave her a perfect shot. I don't think she expected you to come home, I believe her plan was to eventually use Conor to force you to come back." That is sick, but it makes sense.

I down the whiskey in one gulp, welcoming the burn. "I need to stop this, Cormac."

"We will."

"No. I mean right now. This is my family in danger."

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm going to draw her out. Make her come to me."

"That's suicide."

"She's insane, it's not suicide if I know who I am dealing with. Our sister has always been easy to manipulate. She needs her ego stroked."

"You should not provoke her, she's had seven years to stew, and she is bitter as hell. If you push her buttons she'll flip to full on mental mode."

"I can handle my little sister."

"You're willing to risk Maeve and Conor in the process?"

I shake my head. "Not a fucking chance. I want them out of Dublin. Tonight. Your house in Kerry."

"That's smart." He signals for another round. "But Siobhan won't show unless she thinks she can get what she wants."

"Then I'll make her believe she can."

We spend the next hour talking. By the time I leave Quinn's, I know what I need to do—and what it might cost me.

The townhouse is quiet when I get home. Maeve is in the living room, a book open on her lap but she's not reading it.

"Where's Conor?" I ask.

"Upstairs with Finn. They're playing Nintendo. Your brother plays Mario, I find that rather ridiculous." She closes the book. "Did you sort out your violence for the day?"

I ignore the jab and sit across from her. "We're leaving, tonight."

She straightens. "Leaving? To go where?"

"You and Conor are going to Kerry. Cormac's house on the coast."

"Without you?"

"I need to stay and deal with a family problem."

Her eyes narrow. "What aren't you telling me?"

"It's not the Russians behind this. It's my sister, Siobhan."

Maeve's hand flies to her mouth. "Your own sister? She always was a bit loopy, but death threats?"

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"Family's complicated." I try for a smile, but it falls flat. "She wants control of the Donovan business. If I am on her side, it's two against Cormac."

"You have other siblings, why don't they side with the mental patient?"

"It's the safest option."

Maeve stands, pacing the room. "Nothing about this is safe, Declan. Nothing."

"I need you to trust me."

"Trust you?" She whirls on me. "You vanish for seven years, show up with violence following you like a shadow, and now you want me to hide away and hope for the best while you face your insane sister alone?" She saw glimpses of how unstable Siobhan was back then, I can only imagine her delusions of grandeur have gotten worse with time.

"I'm trying to protect you!"

"By getting yourself killed?"

"I'm not planning to die, Maeve."

"No one ever plans to." She wraps her arms around herself. "But Donovan's have a way of ending up dead anyway."

I pull her into my arms, relieved when she doesn't resist. "I survived seven years in



fighting cages across Europe. I can handle my baby sister."

"And then what? Say you win, you kill her, end the threat. What comes next?" I don't plan to kill my sister, I will not stoop to the lowest point this family knows.

I rest my forehead against hers. "Us. If you'll have me."

She pulls back to look at me. "Us? You mean the happy family? You, me, and Conor playing house while you what—go back to cage fighting? Join Cormac in the family business? Have you lost your fucking mind?"

"I don't know yet. But I want to be with you. Both of you."

"What if I don't want you, this, all the violence and death, and fucking crazy sisters? What if I want you - but none of that?"

"I know I will never escape my family." I sigh.

"Pack our bags. We'll go to Kerry." She agrees.

Relief washes through me. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. This isn't forgiveness, Declan. It's survival."

As I turn to go upstairs, she catches my arm. "If you die doing this, I'll never forgive you."

I kiss her hard. "Then I better not die."

\* \* \*

I standin the doorway of Conor's room, watching him sleep. In a few hours, he'll wake in another strange bed, in another safe house, without me there.

Will he understand? Will he hate me for disappearing from his life a second time? Will I get the chance to explain?

Maeve appears beside me. "He's out cold. All that Nintendo with Finn exhausted him."

"He's amazing, Maeve. You did that. You raised him right."

"I did what I had to do. Don't you fuck it all up now." She leans against the doorframe. "He's starting to like you, you know."

"Yeah?"

"He asked if you were going to live with us forever."

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"What did you tell him?"

"That I didn't know. That it was complicated."

"The grown-up answer for everything." I smile.

She glances at me. "What would you have said?"

"That I want to. That there's nothing I want more."

She turns away. "We should finish packing. Cormac's men will be here soon."

I grab her hand. "Maeve. When this is over?—"

"Don't make promises you can't keep."

"I'm coming back to you."

She touches my face, her fingers tracing the scar above my eye. "You better."

Two hours later, I watch the car drive away, taking my heart with it. Maeve didn't look back, but Conor waved from the back window until they turned the corner.

## CHAPTER10

### MAEVE

The Kerry house perches on a cliff edge, nothing but wild Atlantic waves crashing below. It's beautiful in a stark, isolated way—a fortress disguised as a luxury home. Floor-to-ceiling windows face the ocean, but I know they're bulletproof. The front door looks like oak but feels like steel when I push it open.

"Is this our new house now?" Conor asks, dragging his backpack across the gleaming floor.

"Just for a little while." I drop our bags in the hallway, too exhausted to carry them further.

Cormac's man—I think his name is Jack—brings in the last of our things. "Mr. Donovan says to make yourself at home. Fridge is stocked. Security system's already armed."

"How long are we staying?" I ask.

Jack shrugs. "Till it's safe."

"And when will that be?"

"When Mr. Donovan says so." He hands me a phone. "This is secure. Only call the numbers programmed in. Mr. Donovan—Declan, not Cormac—will contact you on this."

I take it, my stomach turning. I'm trapped in Donovan business now, exactly what I spent six years trying to avoid.

"I'll be outside if you need anything," Jack says, then leaves us alone in the massive house.

Conor wanders to the windows, pressing his grubby little boy hands against the clean glass. "Look, Mom! Dolphins!"

I join him, squinting at the gray shapes in the distant waves. For a moment, I forget why we're here, caught up in my son's excitement. Then reality crashes back - we're hiding from killers who want to use my son as a bargaining chip to win some ridiculous family feud.

"Let's find our rooms," I say.

The master bedroom takes up half the second floor, with its own balcony overlooking the ocean. Conor claims a room with bunk beds—meant for Donovan nephews who never visit, I guess. He bounces on the bottom bunk, testing it.

"Where's Declan?" he asks. "Is he coming later?"

"He had to stay in Dublin for a while."

"Is he fighting the bad guys?"

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I sit beside him. "Something like that."

"Will he be okay?"

"Yes," I lie, because what else can I tell my six-year-old? That his newfound father might be killed by his psychotic aunt? I am not ready for the family tree talk yet.

"I hope he comes soon," Conor says. "He promised to teach me boxing."

I frown. "Did he now?" Typical Declan, promising my son boxing lessons without even asking me first. The man's back for five minutes and he's already trying to turn my kid into a fighter. Like father like son isn't happening on my watch.

\* \* \*

Conor's finally asleep, and I can't stand another minute in this empty bedroom. The house is fucking huge—Cormac and his money. I pace from room to room, the ocean crashing outside. Who has windows that big in a safe house?

I find Cormac's study and head straight for the bar. Rich bastard has the good stuff, too. I pour three fingers of whiskey and knock back half in one go.

The phone sits on the counter. Nothing. Not a fucking word from Declan. Is he facing down his psycho sister right now? Bleeding in some alley? Already dead?

I drain the glass and pour another.

I check job listings on my laptop, searching for nursing positions in remote locations. New Zealand. Canada. Places a Donovan might not think to look, maybe I should look at Alaska.

Running away is the smart choice. Declan's plan to confront his sister might buy us time, but his family's legacy of violence will never end.

My laptop chimes with an email notification. My boss at the clinic—a final warning to return to work or lose my job. Another part of my life ruined by Declan and his homecoming.

I close the computer and drain my glass.

\* \* \*

Daythree of this fucking nightmare and still nothing from Declan. Not a call, not a text. Meanwhile, I'm here playing make-believe with Conor.

"No, sweetie, we can't go home yet. Yes, this is like a holiday. No, I don't know where Declan is."

Every time the floorboards creak, I grab the nearest weapon. Last night I almost stabbed Jack with a kitchen knife when he checked the back door.

I take Conor to the tiny village, a twenty-minute walk along the coast. We buy ice cream and play skipping stones. He laughs as he throws them into the waves, while I'm watching every stranger, eyeing each car like it might explode.

"Can we get a dog?" he asks as we walk back to the house.

"A dog?"

"Declan said he had a dog when he was little. A big one that protected him."

"Did he tell you that before we left?"

Conor nods. "He said maybe I could have one too."

"We'll see." I make a mental note to have a word with Declan about making promises to my son.

Our son. It still feels strange to think that.

Back at the house, Jack meets us at the door. "Mrs. Brennan, you have a call."

My heart leaps. "Declan?"

He shakes his head. "Mr. Cormac Donovan."

My stomach drops as I take the secure phone. "Cormac?"



*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

"Maeve." His voice sounds tight. "Is the boy with you?"

"Conor's right here."

"Send him to another room."

Fear spikes through me. "Conor, go wash up for dinner."

When he's gone, I put the phone back to my ear. "What's happened?"

"There was an incident." Cormac's tone makes it worse. "Declan's hurt, but stable."

"How hurt?"

"Gunshot wound to the shoulder. He lost blood, but he'll recover."

I grip the edge of the table to steady myself. "And your fucking crazy sister?"

"Missing. The meeting... didn't go as planned."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning she brought more men than expected. Meaning she's more unhinged than we thought."

I close my eyes. "I want to talk to Declan."

"He's sedated right now. The doctor?—"

"Doctor? Not hospital?"

"We can't risk hospitals for this type of thing, Maeve. You know that."

"No, I don't know that. I'm not a fucking Donovan! So, help me God you better not have a vet or a butcher sewing him up!"

Silence on the line. "You're the mother of a Donovan. That makes you family whether you like it or not." The motherfucker.

I want to scream, to throw the phone, to pack our bags and run. Instead, I take a deep breath. "When can I talk to him?"

"Tomorrow, probably. I'll have him call you." A pause. "Stay where you are. It's not safe to leave yet."

"Is it ever going to be safe?"

Another pause. "I don't know."

After he hangs up, I sit at the kitchen table for a long time, staring at nothing. Declan's been shot. He could have died—might still die if this "doctor" of Cormac's isn't competent.

And for what?

I make dinner on autopilot. Conor chatters about the dolphins he saw again, about the stones he collected, about everything a six-year-old notices when his world isn't falling apart.

I tuck him in early, exhausted by the effort of pretending everything's normal.

In my room, I pull out my laptop again. There's a nursing job in Vancouver. A good salary, benefits, a fresh start. We could disappear there, change our names, build a new life.

Conor would forget Declan eventually. Children are resilient.

But I wouldn't forget. And Declan wouldn't stop looking.

\* \* \*

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

I wake to a man's voice, low and urgent. For a moment, I think it's Declan, that he's somehow made it to Kerry. Then I recognize Jack's tone as he argues with someone downstairs.

I throw on a robe and creep to the landing, peering down into the foyer.

Jack blocks the door, his hand inside his jacket where I'm sure he keeps a gun. "You can't come in. Mr. Donovan's orders."

"I just need to talk to her," a woman says, her back to me. "Five minutes."

"No visitors. Period."

"Please." The woman's voice breaks. "She needs to know what's happening."

I step onto the stairs. "Who is it, Jack?"

Both heads turn toward me. The woman is blond, pretty, and vaguely familiar.

"Mrs. Brennan, go back to your room," Jack says. "I've got this."

"Maeve." The woman steps forward. "You don't remember me, do you? I'm Fiona. Declan's cousin. We met once, years ago."

The face and the voice, I remember—a birthday party at the Donovan house, before I knew what kind of family they really were. She was drunk, and Declan's dad got pissy about it.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"I need to talk to you. It's about Declan and Siobhan."

Jack moves between us. "Mrs. Brennan, I don't advise?—"

"It's okay," I say. "Let her in."

"Mr. Donovan said?—"

"I don't care what Mr. Donovan said. This is about my son's father."

Jack reluctantly steps aside, but his hand stays near his weapon as Fiona enters.

I lead her to the kitchen, aware of Jack hovering in the doorway. "Talk fast."

"Cormac isn't telling you everything," she says, voice low. "Siobhan didn't just shoot Declan. She took him."

Ice fills my veins. "What?"

"He's not at Cormac's right now. They don't know where he is. Siobhan's men grabbed him after she shot him."

"That's impossible. Cormac called me. He said Declan was sedated, recovering."

Fiona shakes her head. "He lied. They're searching for him, but—" She glances at Jack. "The family's divided. Some think Cormac should pay whatever Siobhan wants. Others want to go in guns blazing."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you deserve to know. And because I might know where they're keeping him. Because I have a son too, and this family is fucking stupid."

Jack steps forward. "That's enough. You need to leave."

"Wait," I say. "Where? Where is he?"

"There's an old fishing cabin north of here. It belonged to our grandfather. No one uses it anymore, but Siobhan and I used to play there as kids. Manky old place, but good for hiding things."

"And you think she took him there? Why not tell Cormac?"

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Fiona glances at Jack again. "Because I'm not sure who to trust anymore. The Donovan's are divided, and they are taking sides. If I'm wrong..." If she's wrong they'd think she was helping the lunatic.

Jack pulls out his phone. "I'm calling Mr. Donovan."

"Do that," Fiona says. "But he'll just tell you I'm lying. He doesn't want Maeve involved."

I study her face, trying to read her intentions. Is this a trap? Or is she really trying to help?

"Show me on a map," I say.

"Mrs. Brennan," Jack warns.

"Show me," I repeat.

Fiona pulls out her phone and brings up a map. "Here. About an hour's drive north."

"I'll go check it out," Jack says. "You stay here."

"No." I shake my head. "If Declan's there, I need to see him. Especially if he is shot, I am a nurse."

"I can't let you leave," Jack says.

"Then come with me. Bring whatever weapons you need. But I'm going."

"What about your son?"

I hesitate. I can't leave Conor alone, but I can't bring him into danger either.

"I'll stay with him," Fiona offers. "I'm good with kids."

"Absolutely not," Jack says.

"Then find someone else," I snap. "But I'm going to that cabin."

Jack runs a hand through his hair, clearly torn between his orders and the situation unfolding. "Let me call for backup."

"No time," Fiona says. "If Siobhan suspects anyone knows where she is, she'll move him. Or worse."

I decide. "Jack, you're coming with me. Fiona stays here with Conor. If anything happens to my son, I'll kill you myself." I turn to Fiona. "That goes double for you."

She nods. "I understand."

"Mrs. Brennan, this is not a good idea," Jack tries again.

"I don't care. We leave in ten minutes."

I go upstairs to dress, my mind racing. I might be walking into a trap. Fiona might be working with Siobhan. But if there's even a chance Declan's being held somewhere, hurt and alone, I need to try.



I check on Conor, still asleep, tangled in his blankets. I kiss his forehead, breathing in his scent.

"I'll be back soon," I whisper.

As I close his door, I notice my laptop on the dresser. The Vancouver job listing still open on the screen.

Choices and consequences.

If I go with Jack to find Declan, I'm choosing this life—the Donovan life, with all its danger and violence.

If I wake Conor now, grab our passports, and slip out the back while Jack and Fiona argue, I could still escape. Still run.

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But I know what I'm going to do. I've known since the moment Fiona said Declan had been taken.

I'm going to find him. And I'm going to bring him home.

### CHAPTER 11

#### DECLAN

Pain radiates from my shoulder down to my fingertips. Blood soaks through the crude bandage, a constant reminder of my sister's betrayal. The bullet tore clean through muscle but missed anything vital—my sister was never a good shot. Thank fucking God for small mercies, and her shaky hands.

I test the zip ties binding my wrists to the chair. They cut into my skin but don't give. The fishing cabin reeks of mold and dead fish, a place our grandfather took us when we were kids. Siobhan picked this location on purpose—a reminder of when we were all something resembling a family.

My phone and gun are gone. No way to warn Maeve. No way to call Cormac. I'm trapped here until my sister decides what to do with me or someone else finds me.

I scan the room for anything I can use. A table with whiskey bottles. A woodstove in the corner. Fishing gear hanging on hooks. Nothing within reach.

The door opens and Siobhan walks in, a cigarette dangling from her lips. She looks thinner than I remember, her face gaunt, eyes wild. The seven years since I left have

carved lines into her face that match our father's.

"Awake already? You always were hard to keep down." She kicks the chair leg, making me wince as the movement jars my wound.

"What's the plan here, Siobhan? You can't keep me forever."

She blows smoke in my face. "I don't need forever. Just long enough to make Cormac give me what I want."

"And what's that?"

"My rightful place. Control of the south side operations. The power our father promised me before you fucked everything up."

I laugh, can't help it. "Dad was never going to give you anything. You know that."

She slaps me, hard. "You think you know everything. You ran away, Declan. You don't get to talk about what Dad wanted."

"I know he pitted us against each other for sport. Made us compete for scraps of his approval." I lean forward, ignoring the pain. "He's dead. Let it go."

"Let it go?" She puts out her cigarette on the table, inches from my bound hand. "While you played fight-club, I was stuck here. Watching Cormac take everything."

"So, this is about jealousy? Christ, Siobhan, grow up."

Her face contorts. "This is about what's mine. And I'll use whatever leverage I need to get it." She smiles, all teeth and malice. "Your little family makes excellent leverage."

"Leave them out of this."

"Too late. The boy looks just like you, doesn't he? Those Donovan green eyes."

I strain against the ties. "If you touch them?—"

"You'll what? You're not in a position to make threats." She circles behind me, her fingers brushing my injured shoulder. I grit my teeth against the pain. "Cormac will give me what I want, or I'll start sending pieces of you back to him. Maybe I'll start with your trigger finger."

"Cormac won't play games with you. You know that."

"Then I'll move on to the boy."

Rage builds inside me, hot and bright. "He's your nephew."

"He's a means to an end." She shrugs. "Nothing personal. I fucking hate kids, little germ factories."

She goes to the table, pours whiskey into a dirty glass. "I expected more from you, Declan. The mighty fighter. The one who got away." She drinks, grimacing at the burn. "But here you are, bleeding in a chair because you cared too much. Dad was right—caring makes you weak."

"Dad was a monster who destroyed everything he touched. Including you."

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She throws the glass against the wall. It shatters, sending shards across the floor. "Don't talk about him like that!" She idolized him, and he made her think she was special.

"Why defend him? He treated you like shit. Treated all of us like we were nothing but pawns."

"He made us strong."

"He made us broken."

Siobhan paces the small cabin, agitated. "You think you're so different? Better than the rest of us? You've got blood on your hands too, brother. I know what you did in Barcelona, in London. The fights that weren't just fights."

"I'm not denying what I am."

"And what's that?"

"A Donovan." I meet her eyes. "But I want more for my son."

She laughs, bitter and sharp. "There is no 'more.' There's just survival. Power. Control." She picks up her phone. "Time to call big brother. See what he'll trade for your life."

I hear her call Cormac, making demands. Territory. Money. Recognition as equal partner in the family business. Her voice rises as she argues, revealing the desperation

beneath her anger.

When she hangs up, her face is flushed. "He says he needs proof of life."

She takes a photo of me, the flash temporary blinding. "And now we wait."

Hours pass. The pain in my shoulder becomes a dull throb as blood dries and stiffens the bandage. Siobhan drinks more, growing more unstable with each glass. She rants about our father, about Cormac, about family loyalty—a twisted view warped by years of manipulation. She truly is mad in the head.

I work at the zip ties while she talks, rubbing them against a rough edge of the chair behind my back. The plastic cuts into my wrists, blood making them slick.

"You could join me," she says suddenly. "We could take Cormac down together. Split everything fifty-fifty."

"I don't want any part of it."

"Liar. It's in your blood."

"I want my son. My girl. That's all."

She snorts. "That nurse? Really, Declan? She's so... ordinary."

"That's why I love her."

Siobhan's face darkens. "Love is a fantasy. Power is real."

"You sound like Dad."

"Good."

Night falls. Siobhan's phone remains silent. No word from Cormac. She grows more agitated, pacing and muttering. I keep working at the ties, feeling them weaken slightly.

She points a gun at my head. "Maybe I should just kill you. Send your body to Cormac in pieces."

"You won't."

"Why not?"

"Because then you have nothing to bargain with."

She lowers the gun. "True." She checks her phone again. "Where are his men? He should have sent someone by now."

"Maybe he doesn't care if I live or die."

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"No. He cares. The hypocrite." She tosses the phone onto the table. "He'll come. Or send someone."

I think of Maeve and Conor, safe in Kerry. At least they're far from this mess. I picture Conor's face, those eyes so like mine. The son I barely know. I can't die here, not when I've just found him.

A noise outside makes Siobhan freeze. She grabs her gun, moving to the window.

"Stay quiet," she hisses.

I hear it too now—footsteps on the gravel path.

"Cormac?" she calls. "Is that you?"

No answer.

She backs away from the window. "Fuck."

"Expecting someone else?"

"Shut up."

More sounds—whispers, the crunch of boots. Siobhan aims her gun at the door.

It crashes open.



Jack, Cormac's man, surges in first, gun raised. Behind him—Maeve.

My heart stops. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Siobhan turns her gun on Maeve. "Well. Isn't this interesting."

Jack keeps his weapon trained on my sister. "Put it down, Siobhan."

"I don't think so." She steps closer to me, pressing the barrel against my temple. "One move and he dies."

Maeve stands frozen in the doorway, eyes locked on mine. She looks terrified but ready to fight.

"Where's Conor?" I ask her.

"Safe. With Fiona."

Siobhan laughs. "Fiona? You trusted Fiona with your kid? That's stupid."

Maeve pales. "What do you mean?"

"Fiona's been helping me for months. She's the one who told me about your son in the first place. Spotted you at some mother-son school outing."

My blood runs cold. "Maeve, call the house. Now."

She fumbles for her phone, but Siobhan clicks her tongue. "Too late for that."

"If anything happens to my son—" Maeve starts.

"You'll what? You're nothing. A nobody who spread her legs for a Donovan, and got knocked up." Siobhan's smile is cruel. "But your kid—he's got potential. Donovan blood."

Something snaps inside me. With a roar, I throw my weight backward, breaking the chair against the floor. The zip ties cut deep but give way as the wood splinters. I lunge for Siobhan, ignoring the explosion of pain in my shoulder.

The gun goes off. I feel the bullet graze my side but don't stop. I tackle her to the ground, wrestling for the weapon. Jack moves in, trying to get a clear shot.

"Back off!" I yell at him. This is between me and my sister.

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Siobhan fights like a wild animal, clawing at my face, my wound. But I'm bigger, stronger, driven by more than her hate. We fight like we're ten years old, wrestling for the TV remote. She screams, and scratches, and calls me names.

I pin her down, knocking the gun from her hand. It skids across the floor.

"It's over," I tell her.

"It's never over," she spits. "Not until I get what I want." Still a brat, even now.

"There's nothing here for you. Not anymore."

I look up at Jack. "Call Cormac. Tell him I have her."

Maeve rushes to my side, hands going to my bleeding shoulder. "You need a hospital."

"I need my son." I grab her arm. "Call the house. Now."

She dials with shaking hands, puts it on speaker. It rings. And rings.

"No answer," she whispers, panic rising.

"Try again."

She does. A voice answers—Fiona.

"Hello?"

"Where's my son?" Maeve demands.

"Right here. Playing video games." A pause. "Is everything okay?"

"Put him on. Now."

I hear shuffling, then Conor's voice. "Mom? Are you coming back soon?"

Relief floods through me. "Hey, buddy," I call out. "We'll be home soon."

"Declan! Did you fight the bad guys?"

Maeve and I exchange a look over Siobhan's bound form. "Yeah, kid. I did."

After we hang up, Jack secures Siobhan to the metal table where the old man used to gut fish. Her eyes burn with hatred, but she's silent now.

Maeve helps me to my feet, supporting me as pain and blood loss make the room spin.

"You came for me," I say, leaning on her.

"I'm an idiot."

"You're brave."

"I'm furious." She inspects my shoulder. "This needs stitches."

"I know a guy."

"A real doctor, not some Donovan vet. No arguments."

I don't have the strength to fight her on this. "Fine."

Jack's phone rings—Cormac. He steps outside to take the call, leaving us alone with Siobhan.

## Page 42

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

"You should have run," I tell Maeve. "Taken Conor and disappeared."

"I thought about it."

"Why didn't you?"

She looks at me, those ocean-blue eyes swimming with emotions. "Because he needs his father. And because... I need you too."

Siobhan makes a disgusted noise. "Fucking pathetic."

Maeve ignores her. "Don't think this means I forgive you. Or that I'm okay with any of this."

"I know."

"And when we get back, we're having a serious conversation about our future. About what happens next."

"Anything you want."

Jack returns. "Cormac's sending men. They'll be here in thirty minutes to collect her." He nods at Siobhan. "He says to get you to a doctor."

I look at my sister, slumped in the chair, defeat and rage warring on her face. "What will he do with her?"

Jack shrugs. "Not my business to know."

But I know. Cormac doesn't forgive betrayal. Especially not family betrayal. We have a few brothers in shallow graves.

"Tell him not to kill her," I say.

Maeve stares at me. "After what she did? She threatened our son! You have lost a lot of blood, do you feel okay?"

"She's still my sister."

"She shot you!"

"I know." I hold Maeve's gaze. "But I'm not becoming my father. And I won't let Cormac become him either."

Siobhan looks up, confusion breaking through her anger. "Why?"

"Because that's what he would want. Us destroying each other. And I'm done playing his game."

I take Maeve's hand, squeezing it tight. "Let's go home."

As we walk to the car, my arm around Maeve's shoulders, I think about what I just did. I could have let Cormac kill Siobhan. Maybe I should have. But I'm tired of Donovan's killing Donovan's. Tired of being what my father wanted me to be.

"Thank you for coming for me."

She kisses me, quick and fierce. "Don't get used to it. I'm not making a habit of

rescuing your ass."

But her eyes tell a different story. One I never expected to read again.

## CHAPTER12

### MAEVE

"Four fucking hours." I check my watch again and kick at the leg of the waiting room chair. "What's taking so long?"

The clock on the wall ticks another minute. My fifth cup of vending machine coffee burns my tongue, but I drink it anyway. Anything to keep moving, keep from thinking about Declan on that operating table.

"Bullet wounds get infected. Who knew rolling around in decades old dead fish wasn't sanitary?" I mutter, pacing the empty waiting room. When I found him, this morning burning with fever, his shoulder red and swollen, I lost my shit. Fuck Donovan back-alley doctors. I dragged his ass to a real hospital.



## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

Finn leans against the wall, arms crossed, watching the entrance like someone's about to storm the place with guns blazing.

"You need to sit down," he says. "You're making me nervous."

"I need to do something, or I'll lose my mind." I crush the empty coffee cup and throw it at the trash can. I miss.

My phone buzzes with a text from Jack, who's watching Conor at the Kerry house.

Everything's fine. The kid wants to know when you're coming back.

I type a quick response.

Tomorrow if everything goes well. Let him play video games until bedtime.

"Any word from Cormac about Siobhan?" I ask Finn.

"She's been put away for now." His face gives nothing away.

"What does that mean?"

"It means you don't need to worry about her anymore."

I want to push for details but hold back. The less I know about Donovan family justice, the better. I'm still trying to process the fact that Declan asked Cormac not to kill his sister after what she did.

The doctor appears in the waiting room doorway. "Family of Declan Donovan?"

I rush over. "How is he?"

"The surgery went well. We cleaned out the infection and repaired the damaged tissue. He's in recovery now."

Relief washes through me. "When can I see him?"

"In about thirty minutes. A nurse will come get you." He glances at Finn hovering behind me. "Just one visitor at a time."

"I'll wait here," Finn says. "He won't want to see me first."

I follow the nurse to Declan's room an hour later. The sight of him knocks the wind out of me—pale as the sheets, IV dripping antibiotics, monitors tracking every heartbeat. I've seen hundreds of patients like this at the clinic, but it's different when it's him.

I check his chart at the foot of the bed. His vitals look stable, thank God.

"Hey," I say, taking his hand.

His eyes flutter open, unfocused at first, then finding me. "Maeve." His voice is rough from the anesthesia. "Conor?"

"He's fine. Safe with Jack in Kerry."

"Good." He squeezes my hand weakly. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Making me come to a real hospital."

I laugh, the sound almost hysterical with relief. "You were burning up. What was I supposed to do, dump you in an ice bath?"

"Cormac would have."

"I'm not Cormac."

Declan's eyes drift closed. "No. You're better."

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

He falls asleep, hand still clutching mine. I watch him breathe, the steady rise and fall of his chest. There's a moment when the world narrows to just this—his hand in mine, knowing he's alive.

I stay until the nurse kicks me out, promising to come back in the morning.

Finn drives me to a hotel near the hospital. "Cormac wants you to call him," he says as we pull up to the entrance.

"Too bad."

"He just wants an update on Declan."

"He can call the hospital." I get out of the car. "I'm taking a shower and going to bed. I'll see you at eight tomorrow."

I fall onto the hotel bed fully clothed, too fucking tired to even kick off my shoes. I haven't slept more than two hours at a stretch since this nightmare started.

My phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number. I open it and freeze.

The picture shows Conor asleep in his bed at the Kerry house, taken through the window from outside.

Your son will pay for Siobhan's punishment.

I call Jack immediately.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

"Check on Conor. Right now." My voice shakes.

"He's asleep. I just looked in on him ten minutes ago."

"Check the outside of the house. Someone's there."

I hear rustling as Jack moves. "What's going on?"

"Just do it."

I wait, heart pounding, as Jack checks the house. After what feels like hours, he returns to the phone.

"All clear. No one's here. What did you see?"

I stare at the photo again. "Someone sent me a picture of Conor sleeping. Taken from outside his window."

"That's impossible. I've been watching the monitors all night."

"Check the security footage."

I hear clicking as Jack reviews the cameras. "Nothing. No one's been near the house."

"The picture was just sent to me, Jack. Someone's there."

"I'm telling you, the security system hasn't picked up anything." He pauses. "Send me the photo."

I do. His breath catches when he sees it.

"That's... that has to be from earlier today. I'll wake Conor, move him to a different room."

"Call Finn. Tell him what's happening."

I hang up and pace the hotel room, debating whether to go back to the hospital. If someone's threatening Conor because of what happened to Siobhan, they might target Declan too.

My phone rings—Finn.

## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

"Jack told me about the photo. Stay where you are. I'm posting men at the hospital and sending reinforcements to Kerry."

"I should go back to Declan."

"No. We don't know who sent that or what they want. You're safer at the hotel."

"And Conor? Is he safe?"

"Jack moved him to the panic room. No windows, steel door, separate ventilation system. No one's getting to him."

I sink onto the bed. "What about the photo? How did they get it?"

"It could be old. Or doctored. Let me handle this."

After he hangs up, I stare at the photo again. The timestamp shows it was taken an hour ago. Conor's wearing the pajamas I put out for him yesterday.

This is real. This is happening.

I check the time—nearly midnight. Too late to call Declan's hospital room, and he needs rest anyway. This is my problem to solve.

I wake early and head to the hospital before Finn arrives. Declan looks better, some color returned to his face. He smiles when he sees me.

"The doctor says I can leave tomorrow."

I force a smile. "That's great."

He studies my face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just tired."

"Liar. What happened?"

I consider telling him about the photo but stop myself. He's already been shot, spent days as a hostage, and is recovering from surgery. The last thing he needs is more stress.

"Just worried about you," I say. "The infection was bad."

He takes my hand. "I'm fine."

We're interrupted by Finn arriving with coffee. "How's the patient?"

"Ready to get out of here," Declan says.

I pull Finn into the hallway while Declan talks to his doctor. "Any news?"

"Nothing yet. Jack says Conor's fine, though cranky about being stuck in the panic room."

"I want to go to him."

"Let's wait until Declan's released. We'll all go together."



"And what if whoever sent that photo tries something before then?"

"They won't get past security. I've got six men at the Kerry house now."

I nod, but anxiety still churns in my stomach. "Don't tell Declan about this. Not yet."

"He'll be pissed when he finds out."

"Let me worry about that."

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*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

Back in Declan's room, I find him sitting up, looking at his phone. "Cormac's handling Siobhan," he says. "She'll be out of our lives for good."

"What does that mean? Is she..." I can't finish the question.

"No. I told you, I asked him not to kill her. She's going to a facility. Somewhere she can't hurt anyone."

"A mental hospital?"

"Something like that."

I sit on the edge of his bed. "You really think that will hold her?" I don't think I want to know.

"Cormac will make sure of it." He puts down his phone. "I want us to go back to Dublin when I'm released. To my mother's house. Start over."

The thought of returning to Dublin, to normal life, seems impossible now. "Let's talk about that when you're stronger."

"I'm fine." He cups my face. "I want to be a family, Maeve. You, me, Conor. A real family."

The sincerity in his eyes makes my chest hurt. "Declan..."

"I know it won't be easy. I know I have to earn your trust back. But I want to try. If

you'll let me."

I lean forward and kiss him softly. "Let's get you better first. Then we'll figure out the rest."

He pulls me closer, deepening the kiss. His other hand slides into my hair, holding me to him like he's afraid I'll disappear.

"I love you," he murmurs against my lips. "I never stopped."

Three words I'm not ready to say back, not yet. Not with threats still lurking in the shadows.

"Rest," I tell him. "I'll be back tonight."

I leave the hospital and find a coffee shop across the street. Pulling out my phone, I stare at the photo of Conor again. The threat is clear.

Your son will pay for Siobhan's punishment.

Anger replaces fear. I've spent six years protecting my son from the Donovan family's violence. I won't let it touch him now.

I call a number I never thought I'd use again—Ryan Byrne, Declan's father's old associate.

"Maeve Brennan," he answers. "This is unexpected."

"I need information, Ryan."

"About?"

"Who would want revenge for Siobhan Donovan?"

A pause. "Why ask me instead of your boyfriend?"

"Because Declan's in the hospital, and my son is being threatened."

Another pause. "Come to Quinn's in an hour. And don't bring any Donovan men with you."

I hang up and text Finn that I'm going shopping for clothes for Declan. He offers to drive me, but I insist I need time alone.

Quinn's is empty when I arrive. Ryan sits in a back booth, nursing a whiskey even though it's barely noon. He looks older than I remember, his hair more silver than black now.

"You look good, Maeve," he says as I slide into the booth. "Motherhood suits you."

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*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

"Cut the shit, Ryan. I need to know who's after my son."

He sighs. "Straight to business. You've changed."

"Having a child threatened will do that."

Ryan takes a sip of his drink. "Siobhan has a lover. Andrei Petrov. Russian. Ambitious. Not a man you want to cross." Who on God's earth would want to be with her? She's like a feral cat, you can't keep her.

"And he's after Conor?"

"If Siobhan's been 'contained,' as I hear, then yes. Andrei will want revenge. He is an eye for an eye kind of guy."

"Conor's innocent. He's six years old."

Ryan shrugs. "Petrov doesn't care. To him, hurting your child is hurting Declan. And hurting Declan is hurting Cormac."

"Where do I find him?"

Ryan's eyebrows rise. "What are you going to do? Walk up to a Russian mobster and have a chit-chat? Girl, he will kill you."

"I need to talk to him. Make him understand that Conor isn't part of this."

"You think you can reason with a Russian mob boss?" He laughs. "Girls really are stupid. Conor is a part of this. He is a Donovan, and that man will not listen to you."

"Where is he, Ryan?"

He studies me for a long moment. "He owns a nightclub in Temple Bar. The Red Star. But you'd be insane to go there. You won't get what you want."

"I'm going to try."

"Declan won't let you within a mile of Petrov."

"Declan doesn't know. And he isn't going to."

Ryan's eyes widen. "You're playing a dangerous game, Maeve."

"I'm protecting my son."

He scribbles an address on a napkin. "If you're determined to do this, at least go during the day. Fewer men around. And for God's sake, bring a gun."

I take the napkin. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. If Declan finds out I helped you, he'll kill me." I know he will.

I stand to leave.

"Maeve," Ryan calls after me. "Be careful. These people don't see a mother. They see a means to an end."

I nod and walk out, the address burning a hole in my pocket.

On the drive back to the hospital, another text comes through. A new photo—Conor in the panic room, playing with Legos. How they got this image, I have no idea.

Nowhere is safe.

I slam on the brakes and pull the car over, nearly hitting a lamppost. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!" I punch the steering wheel. The panic room. Jack's fucking impenetrable panic room. They can see right into it. My heart pounds so hard I can't breathe.

I call Jack. "Get Conor out of there. Now."

"What? Why?"

## Page 48

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"They can see him in the panic room." I forward the new photo. "Take him somewhere else. Anywhere. Just go."

"Jesus Christ," Jack breathes when he sees the image. "I'll call Cormac."

"No. Just get my son out. I'll handle the rest."

I hang up and pull back onto the road, my decision made. I won't be telling Declan about this. Not yet. Not until I've made sure our son is safe.

The Red Star nightclub looks like a shithole, I'll bet the owner is a real piece of work too. He must be a special kind of fucked up to love Siobhan—she's certifiable.

### CHAPTER13

#### DECLAN

"What do you mean she's gone?" I rip the IV from my arm, ignoring the nurse's protests. "Where the fuck is she?"

Finn stands by the hospital room door, face tight with concern. "She said she was going shopping for clothes for you. That was five hours ago."

"And you let her go alone?"

"She insisted. I thought?—"



"You didn't think." I grab my clothes from the cabinet, wincing as pain shoots through my shoulder. The stitches pull as I struggle to get my shirt on. "Call Jack. Make sure Conor's safe."

Finn's phone is already at his ear. He turns away, speaking in low tones. The worry on his face when he turns back makes my blood run cold.

"Jack moved Conor from the Kerry house an hour ago. Maeve called him, told him to get out."

"Why?"

Finn shows me his phone. A photo of my son in what looks like a panic room. The message below it makes my stomach drop: Nowhere is safe.

"There was another photo before this," Finn says, swiping to show me Conor asleep in his bed. "Maeve got it last night but didn't tell you."

Rage and fear mix in my gut, a toxic combination that makes me want to tear the world apart. "Where are they now?"

"Jack took Conor to a hotel in Killarney. Cormac's men are with them."

I grab my jacket. "Find Maeve. Check her phone records, credit cards, anything."

"Already on it." Finn holds up his phone again. "GPS shows her car in Temple Bar."

"Temple Bar?" That makes no sense. Why would she go to the busiest tourist trap in Dublin?

"Specifically, parked outside The Red Star."

Ice floods my veins. "Andrei Petrov's club."

"You think she's meeting him?"

"I think she's trying to fix this herself." I push past Finn toward the door. "And she's going to get herself killed."

The doctor tries to block my path. "Mr. Donovan, you can't leave. The infection?—"

"Try to stop me." I stare him down until he steps aside.

In Finn's car, I check my gun—fully loaded. The wound in my shoulder throbs, but adrenaline pushes the pain away. All I can think about is Maeve walking into Petrov's lair alone. What is she thinking?

"Petrov's Siobhan's lover," I tell Finn as he speeds through Dublin. "He'll want revenge for what happened to her."

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"How would Maeve know about him?"

"Someone told her." My jaw clenches. "And when I find out who, they're dead."

We pull up two blocks from The Red Star. The neon sign glows red even in daytime, the front windows blacked out. Two burly men guard the entrance.

"How do you want to play this?" Finn asks.

"Front door. No subtlety."

"You sure? You can barely lift your arm."

"I don't need two arms to kill someone."

I approach the guards, not bothering to hide my weapon. They straighten when they see me coming.

"Club's closed," the taller one says, his Russian accent thick.

"I'm here for Maeve Brennan."

Their faces remain blank. "No women here."

"Wrong answer." I press my gun into the first guard's stomach. "Try again."

The second guard reaches for his weapon. Finn steps forward, his own gun already

drawn. "Bad idea, friend."

A tense moment passes before the first guard nods. "Inside. Boss is expecting you."

The interior of The Red Star is all red velvet and low lighting, even at midday. The place stinks of stale cigarettes and cheap perfume. A few men sit at the bar, watching us with hard eyes.

Petrov waits at a booth in the back, a drink in hand. No sign of Maeve.

"Donovan." He gestures to the seat across from him. "Join me."

"Where is she?"

"Your woman? She left thirty minutes ago."

I keep my gun trained on him. "If you're lying?—"

"Why would I lie? She came, we talked, she left. Simple business."

"What did she want?"

Petrov smiles, revealing a gold tooth. "To make a deal. For her son's safety." He sips his drink. "A mother's love is touching, no?"

I step closer. "What deal?"

"She offered herself as... what is the word? Mediator. Between me and Cormac." His smile widens. "Smart woman. Knows I need new connections now that Siobhan is, how do you say, out of picture."

"And you agreed?"

"I did not agree to anything. I said I would consider her offer."

Something's wrong. This is too neat, too easy. "Where did she go?"

"She did not say. Home, perhaps?" He shrugs. "Or maybe to collect your boy. Insurance, you understand."

I understand now. "You're using her to get to Conor."

## Page 50

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

Petrov's smile vanishes. "Siobhan was mine. Now she rots in some nutty-house. An eye for an eye, as Americans say."

I lunge across the table, grabbing him by the throat. Pain tears through my shoulder but I ignore it, squeezing until his face turns purple.

"Tell me where she went, or I'll tear your fucking throat out."

Finn's voice cuts through my rage. "Declan. We need him alive to talk."

I loosen my grip slightly. Petrov gasps, coughing.

"Talk," I growl.

"She... went to get the boy." He wheezes. "Bring him to me as... good faith."

"You're lying. She'd never do that."

"Not... willingly." He pulls his collar aside to show me a phone. On the screen, a man stands behind Maeve, a gun to her head. "My associate accompanies her."

Fury blinds me. I slam Petrov's head against the table. "Address. Now."

He spits blood. "Kill me, you never find them."

"I won't kill you." I press my gun under his chin. "I'll just make you wish I had."

Ten minutes later, we're back in Finn's car, speeding toward Killarney. I can't stop thinking about Maeve with a gun to her head, forced to lead these fuckers to our son.

"Call Jack," I tell Finn. "Warn him."

Finn tries, cursing when there's no answer. "Straight to voicemail."

"Try Cormac."

Cormac answers on the first ring. "Where the hell are you? The hospital called?—"

"Petrov has Maeve. She's leading them to Conor."

Silence, then, "Where?"

"Hotel in Killarney. Jack took him there. He is not answering."

"I'm sending everyone I've got. Two hours out."

"We'll be there in ninety minutes."

"Declan." Cormac's voice drops. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Too late."

I hang up and call Jack again. Still nothing. "This is my fault," I mutter.

Finn glances at me. "Don't start that shit now."

"I should have let Cormac kill Siobhan. My fucking sister puts a gun to Maeve's head, threatens my kid, and I still tried to save her worthless life."

"You tried to break the cycle. That's not wrong."

"Tell that to Maeve and Conor." I slam my fist against the dashboard. "Family loyalty. What a fucking joke."

"It is if it gets my family killed."



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*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

The wound in my shoulder bleeds through my shirt, the pain a constant reminder of my failure to protect them. I deserved that bullet. They don't deserve any of this.

My phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number. A video message. I open it with shaking hands.

Maeve's face fills the screen, a bruise darkening her cheek. "Declan. I'm sorry. They caught me leaving the club." Her voice trembles. "They want me to take them to Conor. I told them I don't know where Jack took him." The camera shifts to show a man's hand gripping her hair. "They don't believe me."

The video cuts off.

"Drive faster," I tell Finn.

"I'm already doing ninety."

"Then do a hundred."

We make it to Killarney in record time. The hotel Jack mentioned is a small place on the outskirts of town, discreet enough to hide but public enough not to attract attention.

Jack's car is in the parking lot, alongside a black SUV I don't recognize. No sign of a struggle outside.

"Room number?" I ask Finn.

"Jack didn't say."

I scan the building. Three floors, maybe thirty rooms total. "We split up. You take the ground floor, I'll start at the top."

Finn grabs my arm. "You can barely stand, Declan. Let me?—"

"My family. My responsibility." I check my gun. "Just watch my back."

We enter through a side door, avoiding the front desk. The hotel is quiet, most guests out enjoying the day. I take the stairs to the third floor, each step sending pain shooting through my body.

I move down the hallway, listening at each door. Nothing unusual until I reach the end—room 312. Voices inside, one of them a child. Conor.

I text Finn the room number and draw my gun. No time to wait for him. Not with my son in danger.

I kick the door in, gun raised. I freeze the minute I look inside.

Maeve stands by the window, her face bruised but defiant. Conor is on the bed, Jack's body on the floor in front of him, a pool of blood spreading from a head wound. Two men I don't recognize have guns drawn—one aimed at Maeve, one at Conor.

"Daddy!" Conor's cry breaks the silence.

The man pointing his gun at my son turns toward me. I fire twice, hitting him in the chest. He crumples to the floor.

The second man grabs Maeve, using her as a shield. "Drop the gun or she dies."

I keep my weapon trained on him, looking for a clear shot. "Let her go."

"No chance, Donovan." He backs toward the bathroom, dragging Maeve with him.

"I'm walking out of here with her, or she's not walking out at all."

"Declan," Maeve says, her voice surprisingly calm. "Get Conor out."

"Not without you."

"He's what matters." Her eyes hold mine. "Take him and go."

The man tightens his grip on her throat. "Enough talking. Drop the gun."

I lower my weapon slightly, like I'm considering it. "Let her go, and you can walk out of here. You have my word."

He laughs. "Your word of a Donovan? Worth less than nothing."

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

Maeve's eyes flick to the right, then back to me. The bathroom. She's telling me something.

"Fine," I say, kneeling to place my gun on the floor. "Just don't hurt her."

The man relaxes slightly, his grip on Maeve loosening. It's all the opening she needs.

She slams her elbow into his ribs, then drops to the floor. I lunge for my gun, firing as the man raises his weapon. The bullet catches him in the shoulder. He stumbles back but stays on his feet, gun still aimed at Maeve.

Another shot rings out—not mine. The man falls, a bullet hole in his forehead.

Finn stands in the doorway, gun still raised. "Got him."

I rush to Maeve, pulling her into my arms, ignoring the pain in my arm. "Are you hurt?"

She shakes her head, tears streaming down her face. "Conor?—"

I turn to find our son still on the bed, eyes wide with shock. There's blood on his shirt—Jack's blood. I scoop him up with my good arm, holding him tight.

"It's over," I tell them both. "It's over."

Conor clings to me, his small body shaking. "The bad men hurt Jack."

"I know, buddy." I smooth his hair, meeting Maeve's eyes over his head. "But they can't hurt anyone else now."

Sirens wail in the distance. Finn moves to the window. "Police. We need to get our story straight. Or get out fast."

Maeve sits on the bed, pulling Conor into her lap. "Tell them the truth. These men broke in, killed Jack, threatened us. Declan and you saved us."

"And Petrov?" I ask.

"Leave him out of it. For now." She kisses the top of Conor's head. "This is a police matter, not a Donovan vendetta."

I want to argue but know she's right. Bringing the Donovan name into this will only complicate things. And right now, all that matters is getting my family somewhere safe.

"Finn, handle the police. We're taking Conor to the car."

Maeve wraps Conor in a blanket, covering the blood on his clothes. I lead them out through the back exit, away from the approaching sirens.

In the car, Conor falls asleep quickly, exhaustion and trauma taking their toll. I watch him in the rearview mirror, his face peaceful.

"Why didn't you tell me about the threats?" I ask Maeve.

She stares out the window. "You were already injured. I thought I could handle it."

"By offering yourself to Petrov? Were you out of your mind?"

"I was trying to protect our son."

"By getting yourself killed?"

She turns to face me, eyes flashing. "I did what I had to do. Just like you would have."

"That's different."

"How? Because you're a Donovan? Because violence is your birthright?"

I grip the steering wheel tighter. "I know these people, Maeve. I know what they're capable of."

"So do I now." She touches the bruise on her face. "I learned the hard way."

## Page 53

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

My anger deflates, replaced by guilt. "I'm sorry. For all of this."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Yes, it was. I should have let Cormac handle Siobhan his way. I tried to be better than my father, and it almost got you both killed."

She's quiet for a long moment. "You are better than him, Declan. You always were."

I reach for her hand, needing her touch. "I can't lose you. Either of you."

"You won't." She squeezes my hand. "But we can't live like this. Looking over our shoulders, waiting for the next crazy person."

"I know."

"Conor saw Jack die today. He saw you kill a man." Her voice breaks. "No child should see that. We stole his innocence today, Declan."

I glance at our sleeping son in the backseat. Already touched by the violence I swore would never reach him.

"We'll figure it out," I promise her. "Somewhere new. Somewhere safe."

"Is there such a place for a Donovan?"

I have no idea if there is. I drive through the darkness, heading toward Cormac's

compound outside Dublin. It's not a permanent solution, but it's secure enough for tonight.

Tomorrow, I'll deal with Petrov. I'll end this threat once and for all.

And then I'll find a way to give my family the life they deserve—even if it means walking away forever.

## CHAPTER 14

### MAEVE

Two weeks of relative peace. That's all we get after the nightmare in Killarney.

Cormac moves us to a different safe house, a modern fortress on the outskirts of Dublin with bulletproof glass and a security team that works in shifts. Declan never leaves, his shoulder still healing from the gunshot wound. Conor has nightmares about the men who killed Jack, waking up screaming most nights. I hold him until he falls back asleep, watching the shadows under his eyes grow darker.

I try to create some normalcy. We play board games. I teach Conor simple math at the dining room table. Declan shows him how to throw a proper punch in the backyard, over my half-hearted objections. We're going through the motions of family life while living in a prison of someone else's making.

"We need groceries," I announce at breakfast, fourteen days after Killarney. "I can't make another meal with what's left in this kitchen."

"I'll send someone," Declan says, not looking up from his phone.

"No. I need to get out of this house. I need air that doesn't taste like fear."



He looks up then. "It's not safe."

"Nothing's happened in two weeks. Petrov's gone underground since you raided his club. Cormac's men are watching his contacts." I meet his eyes across the table. "If I don't get out of this house, I will be the one that goes crazy."

"I'll go with you."

"You look like you went ten rounds with a freight train. Your face will attract attention." I touch his hand. "One hour. The grocery store five minutes away. I'll take the guard if it makes you feel better."

Declan hesitates, then nods. "Fine. But only the one on O'Connell Street. Finn goes with you, and you keep your phone on."

"Can I go too?" Conor asks. He hasn't left the house either. "I'm bored."

I exchange a look with Declan. Another argument we've had behind closed doors—how much freedom to give our son versus keeping him safe.

"Sure," I say before Declan can object. "You can help me pick out cereal."

## Page 54

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

Finn drives us in an unmarked car, parking close to the entrance. The grocery store is busy with morning shoppers. For the first time in weeks, I feel almost normal, pushing a cart down aisles filled with ordinary people doing ordinary things.

Conor runs ahead to the fruit section. "Can we get apples? The red ones?"

I don't have to say no anymore, he can have the nice apples, and the fun cereal. But at what cost? "Sure, baby. Pick out some good ones."

I watch Conor's small hands inspect each apple, his face scrunched in concentration. He holds up a particularly shiny one, pride in his eyes.

"This one's perfect, Mom."

The moment shatters.

A man in a black jacket appears from nowhere. His arm shoots out and grabs Conor by the wrist. My son's eyes widen in terror.

"Mom!"

My heart stops. The apple hits the floor with a dull thud.

"Let him go!" I lunge forward, fingers clawing at the man's arm. "Finn! Help!"

Conor kicks and screams. The man lifts him off the ground. Where the fuck is Finn?

"Get your hands off my son!" I punch, claw, kick—anything to make him let go.

Something hard crashes against the back of my skull. Pain explodes through my head. My vision blurs.

Conor's scream cuts through everything. "Mommy!"

I reach for him as my knees buckle. His terrified face is the last thing I see before darkness swallows me whole.

I wake up on the cold tile floor, surrounded by store employees and customers. My head throbs, and panic claws up my throat as I remember.

"Conor!" I try to stand but the world spins. "They took my son!"

A security guard holds me down. "The police are on their way, ma'am."

"I don't need police, I need to find my son!" I push him off and stagger to my feet. My phone rings in my pocket—an unknown number.

"Hello?" My voice shakes.

"Ms. Brennan." The voice is male, heavily accented. Russian. "Your son is safe. For now."

"If you hurt him?—"

"That depends on you. And on Declan Donovan."

I grip the phone tighter. "What do you want?"

"Mr. Petrov wants what belongs to him. The Donovan's took something valuable. Now he has taken something valuable from them."

My son. My baby. Used as a bargaining chip in this insane power struggle.

"Put Conor on the phone. I need to know he's okay."

A pause, then my son's voice. "Mom?" He sounds terrified but alive.

"Baby, are you hurt? Did they hurt you?"

"I want to come home." He starts crying. "I'm scared."

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*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

The Russian takes the phone back. "You have four hours. Bring Declan Donovan to the abandoned shipyard at the north docks. Alone. Or the boy dies."

The line goes dead. I stand frozen in the middle of the grocery store, terror and rage battling inside me.

I need to call Declan. But when I try his number, it goes straight to voicemail. I try again. Nothing.

A store manager approaches. "Ma'am, the police are here."

"I don't have time for police." I push past him and run for the exit. As I reach my car, my phone rings again—Cormac.

"Where are you?" he asks without preamble.

"They took Conor." My voice breaks. "Russians. Petrov's men. They want Declan at the north docks in four hours."

"Where are you now?"

"The grocery store on O'Connell Street. I need to find Declan."

"He's with me." Cormac's voice is tight. "He found Petrov. Things got... complicated."

Cold fear grips me. "Is he hurt?"

"He'll live. I'll send a car for you. Don't talk to anyone else."

Ten minutes later, a black SUV pulls up next to my car. The driver opens the back door without a word. I get in, and we speed away just as police cars pull into the parking lot.

Cormac's compound north of Dublin is a fortress disguised as a country estate. Steel gates, surveillance cameras, armed guards. The driver takes me straight to the main house, where a stone-faced maid leads me to Cormac's study.

Declan is slumped in a leather chair, shirtless, while a man I don't recognize stitches a gash on his arm. His face is bruised, eye swollen, but his expression when he sees me is pure relief.

"Maeve." He tries to stand but the doctor pushes him back down.

"They took Conor." The words come out in a rush. "At the store. They want you at the north docks in four hours or they'll kill him."

Declan goes still, his face draining of color. "Petrov."

"How is that possible? I thought you went to deal with him."

"I did." His eyes meet Cormac's across the room. "He wasn't there."

Cormac steps forward. "We raided his club. Killed six of his men. But Petrov had already cleared out."

"He must have known you were coming," I say.

"Someone warned him," Declan's voice is ice. "The same person who told him about

Conor's shopping trip with you."

My blood runs cold. "Someone inside your organization."

Cormac nods grimly. "It appears so."

The doctor finishes with Declan's arm and packs up his bag. Cormac dismisses him with a nod.

Once we're alone, Declan pulls me into his arms. "I'll get him back. I swear to you."

I push away from him, anger replacing fear. "This is your fault. All of it. Your fucking family and their power games."

"I know." He doesn't try to defend himself.

"They want you. Not Conor. You."

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"And they'll get me." He looks at Cormac. "I'm going to the docks."

"It's a trap," Cormac says. "You know that."

"I don't care."

"You walk in there alone, they'll kill you both."

"Then what do you suggest?" Declan's voice rises. "I let them murder my son?"

"We need a plan," Cormac says. "One that doesn't end with both of you dead."

I pace the room, forcing myself to think past the panic. "You said someone inside your organization tipped off Petrov. How do we know they're not listening to this conversation right now?"

Cormac's eyes narrow. "My office is swept for bugs daily."

"But the mole could be anyone. One of your guards. That doctor. How do we make a plan when we can't trust anyone?"

"We trust each other," Declan says. "Just the three of us."

Cormac walks to a cabinet and pulls out a bottle of whiskey. He pours three glasses, handing one to me. "Drink. Then we strategize."

I accept the glass but don't drink. My head pounds from where they hit me, and I need



to stay clear. "Three hours and forty-five minutes left."

Declan paces the room, his injured arm forgotten. Cormac pulls up blueprints of the shipyard on his laptop. I stare at the clock, counting every fucking minute my son spends with those monsters.

"You'll approach from the east entrance," Cormac points at the screen. "My men will cover the perimeter."

"Too obvious," Declan argues. "They'll expect that."

Their voices blur into background noise as I imagine what Conor must be feeling. Is he crying? Is he hurt? Is he calling for me?

Three hours and thirty minutes left.

"I need a moment alone with Declan," I tell Cormac after we've gone over every detail twice.

He nods and leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

Declan pulls me into his arms again, and this time I let him hold me. "I'll bring him home," he promises.

"I know." I rest my head against his chest, listening to his heartbeat. "But I need you to come home too."

"I will."

I lift my head to look at him. "No matter what happens, I need you to know something."

"What's that?"

"I never stopped loving you either." The words burn my throat. "Not even when I hated you."

He kisses me, fierce and desperate. I cling to him, memorizing the feel of his body against mine, the taste of his lips.

When we break apart, I press my forehead to his. "You'll need a gun."

"Cormac's taking care of that."

"And a vest. Promise me you'll wear a vest."

"I promise."

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*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

I step back, steeling myself for what I need to say next. "If something goes wrong... if you can't get Conor out..."

"Maeve—"

"If you have to choose between saving him or yourself, you choose him." My voice doesn't waver. "No matter what. Promise me."

His eyes darken. "I promise."

Satisfied, I nod and move toward the door. "I need to use the bathroom. Give me a minute."

Instead of heading to the bathroom, I find my way to the kitchen. The house is massive, but I follow the sounds of activity until I reach a large, gleaming space where staff prepare dinner.

"Excuse me," I say to a young woman chopping vegetables. "Where does Mr. Donovan keep his car keys?"

She looks up, startled. "Ma'am?"

"Mr. Cormac asked me to move his car. For the security team." I force a smile. "He said the keys would be in the kitchen."

She hesitates, then points to a row of hooks on the wall. "The spares are there. But I don't know which?—"

"Thank you." I grab a random key fob and walk out before she can question me further.

In the garage, I press the unlock button, following the beep to a sleek black Audi. I slide into the driver's seat and start the engine.

The guard at the gate stops me, but I roll down the window with a confident smile. "Mr. Cormac asked me to pick up some medications for his brother. At the pharmacy in town."

He studies my face, then nods. "Be careful, ma'am. Mr. Donovan wants you back before dark."

The gates open, and I drive through, keeping my speed steady until I'm out of sight. Then I floor it.

I'm not going to the pharmacy. I'm going to the north docks, where my son is. Where Declan will walk into a trap in less than two hours.

I know a side entrance to the shipyard from my teen years—back when it was an abandoned playground for bored Dublin kids looking for trouble. If I can slip in unnoticed, maybe I can find Conor before Petrov's men realize I'm there.

It's suicide. It's madness. But I can't sit and wait while the two people I love most in the world face death alone.

Cormac calls my phone five times before I turn it off. Declan will be furious when he realizes I'm gone. But by then, it will be too late.

I spot the abandoned shipyard up ahead, its rusted cranes sticking up like skeletal giants against the darkening sky. I park the Audi a half-mile away and walk the rest

of the way, staying close to the fence line.

My old entrance—a gap where the chain-link fence has been cut and bent back—is still there, hidden behind overgrown bushes. I squeeze through, ignoring the way the metal catches and tears my shirt.

The shipyard is massive, a maze of containers, warehouses, and equipment left to rot. I move from shadow to shadow, listening for voices, for any sign of Conor or his captors.

A light glows from one of the warehouses near the water. I creep closer, staying low. Through a dirty window, I can see movement inside. Men with guns. And in the center of the room, Conor is in the middle, on a chair, his hands tied.

I need to get inside, but every entrance will be guarded. I circle the building, looking for another way in.

There—high up on the wall, a ventilation shaft. If I can reach it, I might be able to crawl through.

I find a stack of crates nearby and climb them, wincing at every sound. The metal groans beneath my weight, but the men inside the warehouse don't seem to hear. At the top of the crates, I'm level with the vent. I jump across the gap, grabbing the edge of the vent grid. It comes loose in my hands, nearly sending me crashing to the ground.

I hang there for a moment, heart pounding. When no one comes to investigate, I pull myself up and into the shaft.

It's narrow, filthy, and pitch-black inside. I crawl forward slowly, using my phone's flashlight to see. The shaft leads deeper into the warehouse. I follow it until I hear

voices below me.

"The boy is hungry," someone says in heavily accented English.

"He eats when Donovan arrives." Another voice, deeper. "Not before."

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

"And if Donovan doesn't come?"

A chilling laugh. "Then the boy doesn't need to worry about food anymore."

I bite back a sob. They're going to kill my son if Declan doesn't show up. And they'll probably kill him anyway.

I continue forward until I find another grill. Through it, I can see more of the warehouse floor.

A large man paces nearby—his build and the way others defer to him suggest he's in charge. Not Petrov, but someone important. He checks his watch.

"One hour," he announces. "Get ready."

I need to act before Declan arrives, before they have both of them. But how? I have no weapon, no backup.

The ventilation shaft continues past the grill. I follow it, hoping it might lead somewhere useful. It branches left and right. I choose right and find myself above what looks like an office. Inside, a man sits at a desk, talking on a phone. A gun lies on a table behind him.

I stare at the gun, then at the radio on his desk. Fuck it. It's crazy and I'll probably get us both killed, but what choice do I have?

I wait until the man on the phone gets up and leaves the office. Then I remove the

grill and drop down into the room. I grab the gun, checking that it's loaded. Six bullets. Not much, but better than nothing.

I search the desk and find what I'm really looking for—a radio. The same kind the guards are using to communicate. I turn it on, listening to their chatter.

"Perimeter secure. No sign of Donovan yet."

"The boat is ready if we need extraction."

I go to the window of the office, which overlooks the warehouse floor. From here, I can see Conor and his captors clearly. The large man I noticed earlier stands close to my son, his back to me.

I have one shot at this. Literally.

I open the office door a crack, checking the hallway. Empty. I slip out and make my way toward a metal staircase that leads to the main floor. My heart pounds so hard I'm sure they can hear it.

I reach the bottom of the stairs and freeze. Shit. No way to get to Conor without crossing open floor with five guys carrying guns between us. They'll shoot me before I take three steps.

The radio in my hand gives me an idea.

I check my watch. Forty-five minutes until Declan is supposed to arrive. I turn the radio to full volume and set it on the floor at the bottom of the stairs. Then I press the talk button and let it squeal with feedback before running back up the stairs.

Shouts of confusion erupt below. Three men race toward the sound, leaving only two



with Conor—the leader and one guard.

I take aim from the top of the stairs, steadying my hand. The boyfriend who taught me to shoot always said to exhale before pulling the trigger.

I breathe out and fire.

The guard drops, clutching his leg. Before the leader can react, I fire again, missing him but forcing him to dive for cover.

"Conor, get down!" I scream, racing toward him.

My son jerks his head up, his eyes wild with hope when he spots me. He pulls against the zip ties on his wrists as I rush to him, knife already out from my pocket.

I race across the floor, dodging a bullet that strikes the concrete near my feet. I reach Conor and drop to my knees beside him, sawing frantically at the zip ties with my knife.

"Mom," he sobs as the plastic snaps.

"We need to go. Now."

"Run!" I grab his arm and yank him up. Bullets fly past us, smashing into the wall. I push Conor ahead of me toward the stairs, my body blocking him from the gunfire.

The leader roars something in Russian, on his feet again and aiming at us.

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

"I can't lift you," I tell him. "You'll have to climb."

"I can't reach," Conor whispers, tears streaming down his face.

"I'll lift you." I lock my fingers together and he steps into my hands, grabbing the edge of the vent when I push him up. He scrambles inside.

More bullets. I jump for the vent, my arms burning as I pull myself up. My knife clatters to the floor below.

"Crawl fast," I whisper. "Don't stop."

We move through the shaft, the sounds of pursuit growing behind us. When we reach the outer wall, I kick out the grill and help Conor drop to the ground outside.

"Run to those bushes," I tell him, pointing to where I came in. "Stay low."

I drop down beside him, and we run, crouching, toward the fence. Gunfire erupts behind us, bullets pinging off metal.

We reach the fence, and I push Conor through the gap. "Keep going," I urge him. "To that road."

I follow him through, tearing my shirt worse and scraping my side on the metal. We run across open ground toward where I parked the Audi.

The sound of engines roaring to life behind us spurs us faster. They're coming after

us.

We reach the car, and I fumble with the keys, hands shaking. The engine starts, and I push Conor down in the passenger seat. "Stay down!"

I reverse onto the road, then stomp on the gas. The Audi shoots forward just as a black SUV bursts from the shipyard entrance.

"They're following us," Conor says, his voice small.

"I know, baby." I press the gas harder, taking a sharp turn onto a narrow side road. The SUV follows, gaining on us.

I reach for my phone to call Declan, but it's not in my pocket. I must have dropped it in the warehouse.

"Fuck!" I slam my hand against the steering wheel.

"Mom," Conor says. "I'm scared."

"I know. But we're going to be okay." I take another turn, hoping to lose our pursuers. "Just stay down."

The SUV stays with us, getting closer. I see the flash of a gun barrel through their windshield.

I swerve as bullets hit the back of the Audi. The rear window shatters, and Conor screams.

"Are you hit?" I cry out.

"No." He's sobbing now. "Mom, please."

I need to lose them. Think, Maeve, think.

Up ahead, the road passes under a railway bridge. Beyond it, the road splits in three directions. If I can make it to the split before they catch us...

The SUV rams us from behind. The Audi lurches forward, almost spinning out. I grip the wheel, fighting for control.

"Hold on!" I shout as we approach the bridge.

I hit the brakes hard just before we reach the tunnel, then swerve left, scraping along the wall. The SUV, going faster, overshoots and has to brake hard to avoid hitting the far wall.

I floor it again, taking the left branch at the split. The SUV recovers and follows, but we've gained some distance.

Where can we go? Not back to Cormac's. They'll expect that.

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

"Conor, do you remember Aunt Sarah's house? By the ocean?"

He nods, still crying but quieter now.

"That's where we're going."

Sarah isn't really his aunt, but my old roommate from nursing school. She lives in a small house on the coast, thirty miles from Dublin. If we can reach her, maybe we'll be safe for a while.

The SUV is still behind us, but farther back now. I take every turn I can, trying to lose them in the maze of country roads.

Finally, after twenty minutes of white-knuckle driving, they're gone from my rearview mirror. I slow down slightly, my hands cramping from gripping the wheel so tight.

"Are they gone?" Conor asks.

"I think so." I reach over to squeeze his hand. "You were so brave, sweetheart."

"I want Declan," he says, surprising me. "He'll keep us safe from the bad guys."

My heart breaks for him. "We'll find him soon. I promise."

But right now, Declan is probably walking into the trap at the docks, not knowing we've escaped. And I have no way to warn him.

## CHAPTER15

DECLAN

"What do you mean she's gone?" I slam my fist on Cormac's desk, sending papers flying. Pain shoots through my injured shoulder, but I ignore it. "Where the fuck is she?"

Cormac's face is stone-cold, but I see the concern in his eyes. "She took one of my cars. The gate guard thought she was running an errand."

"She's gone to the docks." I check my watch. Thirty minutes until the deadline. "She's going after Conor herself."

"That's suicide."

"You think I don't know that?" I grab my gun and check the clip. "She watched her son get kidnapped. She blames me. Us. The whole fucking Donovan family."

"And she's right."

I stop and look at my brother. For once, he drops his mask, showing the guilt underneath.

"We need to move." I tuck the gun into my waistband. "Now."

Cormac nods. "My men are already in position around the shipyard. But if we storm in?—"

"They'll kill Conor and Maeve on sight." I pace the room, mind racing. "I need to go in first, alone, like they wanted. Create a distraction."

"That's exactly what Petrov wants."

"I don't give a fuck what Petrov wants. This is about my son. My woman."

Cormac looks at me for a long moment. "You love her that much? After all this time?"

"I never stopped."

He picks up his phone. "I'll tell the men to hold position until you're inside. Ten minutes, then we move in."

"Make it five." I check the bulletproof vest under my shirt. "I've got a feeling we're running out of time."

The ride to the docks is silent. Finn drives, his face grim in the rearview mirror. I load extra ammo into my pockets, ignoring the throbbing in my shoulder. The doctor wanted to give me painkillers. I refused. I need a clear head.

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"Declan." Cormac's voice breaks through my thoughts. "If it comes down to a choice?—"

"I know." I cut him off. "Conor comes first. Always."

He nods, satisfied. We understand each other in this, at least. Family above all.

We park a quarter-mile from the shipyard entrance. I check my phone one last time—still no word from Maeve.

"Five minutes," I remind Cormac. "Not a second longer."

"Be careful." He grips my good shoulder. "Bring them home."

I walk toward the entrance, hands visible, gun hidden at my back. Two men step out of the shadows to meet me, weapons drawn.

"Donovan," one of them says with a thick Russian accent. "You came alone. Smart man."

"Where's my son?"

He smiles, revealing a gold tooth. "Inside. Mr. Petrov is waiting."

They pat me down, finding the gun at my back.

"Insurance," I say with a shrug.



The gold-tooth man laughs and takes it. "You won't need this."

They miss the knife in my boot. Amateurs.

The main warehouse is dim, the high windows filthy from years of neglect. I look around for Conor and Maeve. Nothing but an empty chair is in the center under one light.

A tall figure walks out from the darkness. Andrei Petrov. Photos don't do justice to the ice in his eyes.

"Declan Donovan." His English is perfect, no trace of an accent. "At last, we meet properly."

"Where's my son?"

He tilts his head. "Straight to business. Very well." He nods to someone behind me. "Bring the boy."

I wait, muscles tense, for Conor to appear. But the man who steps forward is empty-handed.

"He's gone," the man says in Russian, which Petrov doesn't know I understand. "The woman took him."

Petrov's face darkens. "What woman?"

"The mother. She broke in, shot Yuri, and took the boy."

Relief hits me hard. Maeve got Conor out. They're gone. They're alive.

I hide my reaction and laugh instead.

"Looks like you just lost your leverage," I tell Petrov. "My son's not here. My woman took him back."

"Impossible," Petrov snaps, but I see the uncertainty in his eyes.

"She's a mother protecting her child." I take a step toward him. "You fucked with the wrong family."

Petrov pulls a gun, aiming it at my chest. "You still came. That means I still have something to bargain with."

"I didn't come to bargain." I move closer. "I came to end this."

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Five minutes. That's what I promised Cormac. I need to keep Petrov talking until then.

"Do you know what your sister meant to me?" Petrov asks, his voice dropping. "She was the only person who understood what it means to be cast aside, overlooked."

"Siobhan's insane. She always was."

"She's brilliant. Visionary. She saw what your brother couldn't—that the future belongs to those bold enough to take it."

I scoff. "She's a jealous bitch who couldn't stand that our father chose Cormac to run things instead of her."

Petrov's face hardens. "Your father was a fool. Just like Cormac. Just like you."

"Maybe. But I'm still standing here. And soon, you won't be."

Confusion crosses his face. "What are you?—"

The windows explode inward. Smoke grenades hit the floor, hissing as they release thick clouds. Cormac's men, right on time.

I dive for cover as gunfire erupts. Petrov fires wildly, the bullet hitting the concrete where I stood a second ago. His men scatter, yelling in Russian and firing blindly through the smoke.

I pull the knife from my boot and move through the smoke. I spot one of Petrov's guards just ahead of me. I drive the knife into his neck before he even knows I'm there. He drops without a sound.

Around me, Cormac's men fight Petrov's, precise and deadly. I stay low, looking for Petrov in the chaos.

I spot him heading for a side door, two guards covering him. I follow, ducking behind shipping containers and old equipment.

Outside, the night air is crisp, the sounds of gunfire muffled behind us. Petrov moves toward a waiting car, his guards checking the perimeter.

I strike the first guard from behind, using my knife to slash across his hamstring. He crashes to the ground with a howl. Before the second guard can turn, I'm on him, driving my fist into his throat. He staggers back, choking.

Petrov pulls his gun again, but I'm already moving. I tackle him to the ground, the impact sending a wave of pain through my injured shoulder. We roll across the gravel, fighting for control.

He's strong, but I've spent years in fighting rings. I pin him down, my knife at his throat.

"Wait," he gasps. "We can make a deal."

"I don't make deals with men who threaten my family."

"Your sister—I can tell you where she is. Cormac lied to you."

I press the knife harder, drawing blood. "What are you talking about?"

"She's not in any facility. He's keeping her at the old hunting lodge. Ask yourself why."

My hand stops. Could Cormac have lied? No. This is just Petrov trying to save himself.

"You're lying."

"Am I? Why would I lie when I'm about to die? Think, Donovan. Why would Cormac keep her alive when you asked him not to kill her? What does she know that he wants?"

The doubt creeps in. Cormac's always had his secrets, his own agenda. But he wouldn't lie to me. Not about this.

"You're out of time," I tell Petrov.

Fear flashes in his eyes. "Your brother's empire is built on blood. Your father's, his rivals', even family. You think you're different? You have the same darkness in you. I see it right now."

"I never claimed to be different." I lean closer. "But I protect what's mine."

His eyes widen as I drive the knife home. A quick, clean death. More than he deserves.

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I stand, wiping the blade on my jeans. The gunfire inside has stopped. Either Cormac's men won, or they're all dead.

My phone rings—a number I don't recognize.

"Hello?"

"Declan." Maeve's voice, breathless with relief. "We're safe. Conor's with me."

"Where are you?"

"At a friend's house on the coast. Sarah's place, remember her?" She pauses. "I got him out. Before you arrived."

"I know. You scared the shit out of me."

"I couldn't wait. I couldn't let you walk into that trap alone."

"Where did you get a gun?" I ask, remembering what Petrov's man said.

She laughs, the sound tinged with hysteria. "From one of their offices. I climbed through an air vent like a fucking action movie."

"Jesus Christ, Maeve."

"I did what I had to do." Her voice hardens. "For our son."

Behind me, Cormac walks out of the warehouse. His men haul corpses. None of our guys are dead, thank fuck.

"It's over," I tell her. "Petrov's dead."

"Good."

"Stay where you are. I'll come to you."

"Declan." She hesitates. "Is it really over?"

I think of what Petrov said about Siobhan, about Cormac's lies. But now's not the time for those doubts.

"Yes," I say. "It's over. We can go home."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

I hang up and walk to Cormac, who's directing the cleanup. Bodies disappearing, evidence erased. The Donovan way.

"Maeve has Conor," I tell him. "They're safe."

Relief flashes across his face. "Good. Where?"

"Somewhere safe. I'm going to them now."

He nods. "And Petrov?"

I gesture to the body. "Done."

"Clean." He looks me over. "You're bleeding."

I look down at my shoulder. The stitches have torn, blood soaking through my shirt.

"It's fine."



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"Get it looked at before you see the boy. He doesn't need more trauma."

I nod, though my mind is already racing ahead to Maeve, to Conor. To the questions Petrov planted.

"Cormac." I stop him as he turns to leave. "Siobhan. Where is she really?"

His face gives nothing away. "In a secure facility, like I told you."

"Which one?"

"Does it matter?"

"It might."

He looks at me for a long moment. "Let it go, Declan. She's where she needs to be."

"I want to see her."

"Why? After what she did to your family?"

"Because she's still our sister."

Cormac sighs. "Fine. When this is all cleaned up, I'll take you to her. But you won't like what you find."

I nod, satisfied for now. "I need to go to Maeve."

"Take Finn. And get that shoulder looked at first."

I drive toward the coast, Finn following in another car. Cormac's doctor patched me up and shot me full of painkillers I didn't want. My head feels foggy, but I push through it. I need to stay sharp. For Maeve. For Conor.

The address leads to a small cottage overlooking the sea. Lights glow in the windows, warm and welcoming. I park and sit for a moment, gathering my strength.

What do I say to them? How do I make this right?

The front door opens before I reach it. Maeve stands in the doorway, her face bruised, eyes red from crying. But she's alive. She's whole.

"Declan." My name on her lips is both a prayer and an accusation.

I cross to her and pull her into my arms. She tenses, then relaxes against me.

"I thought I'd lost you," I murmur into her hair. "Both of you."

"We got lucky." She pulls back to look at me. "You're hurt again."

"It's nothing."

She touches my face gently. "You look like hell."

"Feel like it too."

"Dad!"

Conor barrels into me, nearly knocking me over. I lift him with my good arm, holding

him tight against my chest.

"Hey, buddy." My voice breaks. "You okay?"

He nods against my shoulder. "Mom saved me. She shot the bad guy, and we crawled through a tunnel. It was super dark."

I meet Maeve's eyes over his head. "Your mom's a hero."

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"A crazy hero," she says with a tired smile. "Come inside. Sarah's making tea."

The cottage is small but cozy, with mismatched furniture and seashells on every surface. A woman with bright red hair waits in the kitchen, the kettle whistling.

"So, you're the famous Declan," she says, eyeing me up and down. "I thought you'd be taller."

"Sarah," Maeve warns.

"What? After all the drama, I expected something more impressive."

I can't help but laugh. "Sorry to disappoint."

"He's bleeding again," Maeve says, pointing to my shoulder. "Sarah, do you have a first aid kit?"

While Sarah patches me up, Maeve puts Conor to bed in a small room off the kitchen. He's exhausted, emotionally and physically, but refuses to sleep until I promise to stay.

"You won't leave again?" he asks, his small voice making my chest ache.

"Never." I kiss his forehead. "I promise."

Once he's asleep, Maeve leads me to a tiny living room overlooking the sea. The moon casts a silver path across the water. She stands at the window, arms wrapped

around herself.

"Is it really over?" she asks, not turning around.

I move to stand behind her, resting my hands on her shoulders. "Petrov's dead. His men are scattered."

"What about your sister?"

"Cormac has her contained."

She turns to face me. "Contained how?"

"I'm not sure yet." I push her hair back from her face. "But I'm going to find out."

"And then what?"

"Then we start over. Somewhere new. Somewhere safe."

"Safe?" She shakes her head. "Your last name is still Donovan. That follows us everywhere."

"Then I'll change it. Or we'll move so far away nobody's heard of us. Whatever it takes."

She stares at me, looking for something in my face. "I killed a man today. For my son."

"I know."

"I'd do it again."

"I know that too."

She rests her head on my chest. "What does that make me?"

"A mother. A fighter." I tip her face up. "Mine."

"Yours." She sighs. "God help me."

I pull her to me and take her mouth. Hard. She bites my lip, drawing blood as she yanks me closer. I shove her against the wall, my hand finding its way under her shirt. Her skin burns against my palm. She moans into my mouth as I push my thigh between her legs.

"Fuck, I missed you," I mutter against her neck, tasting salt and fear on her skin.

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*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

She pulls my hair, forcing my head back. Her eyes are wild, pupils blown. "Don't leave me again."

We break apart at the sound of footsteps. Sarah stands in the doorway, arms crossed.

"If you two are going to tear each other's clothes off, at least wait until I'm asleep. The walls in this place are thin."

Maeve laughs, the sound surprising both of us. "We'll behave."

"Speak for yourself," I mutter, earning an elbow in the ribs.

Sarah rolls her eyes. "There's a guest room upstairs. Try not to bleed on my sheets."

After she leaves, Maeve leads me upstairs to a tiny room with a sloped ceiling and a bed that's barely big enough for both of us.

"Your friend doesn't like me much," I say as we settle under the covers.

"She doesn't trust Donovan's." Maeve curls against my side, careful of my injured shoulder. "Can't blame her."

"And you? Do you trust me?"

She's quiet for a long moment. "I trust that you love us. That you'll try to protect us. But your world..." She shakes her head. "I don't know if I can live in it."

"Then we'll build a new one."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

She traces patterns on my chest, her touch sending warmth through my veins despite the exhaustion. "When do we start?"

"Tomorrow. After I see Siobhan."

She lifts her head. "Why? After everything she did?"

"I need to know the truth. About her, about Cormac. About what I'm bringing you and Conor into."

"And if you don't like what you find?"

"Then we leave."

She settles back against me. "I want to go with you. To see her."

"Maeve—"

"She tried to take my son. I need to look her in the eye."

I know better than to argue. "Fine. But Conor stays with Sarah."

"Agreed."

We go quiet. Waves crash on the shore, pulling us toward sleep. But I need to tell her



something first.

"Maeve?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you for saving our son."

She presses a kiss to my chest. "We saved him together."

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And in that moment, I believe her. We're a team now. A family. Whatever comes next, we'll face it together.

But as sleep claims me, Petrov's words echo in my mind. Why would Cormac keep Siobhan alive? What truth is he hiding?

### CHAPTER16

#### MAEVE

I wake to sunlight streaming through the cottage window, Declan's arm heavy across my waist. For a moment, I forget everything—the kidnapping, the gunfights, the escape. Then reality crashes back as pain shoots through my bruised body.

Morning after a nightmare, and somehow, we're still alive.

I slip from the bed, careful not to wake Declan. His face looks younger in sleep without the hard lines of worry. The bandage on his shoulder needs changing, but that can wait.

Sarah's already in the kitchen pouring coffee when I drag my ass downstairs.

"Conor's still asleep," she says, passing me a mug. "Poor kid was exhausted."

"Thank you for taking care of him."

She shrugs. "That's what friends do."

I take my coffee to the window, staring out at the gray Irish sky. So much has happened in the past twenty-four hours—Conor kidnapped, Declan shot, me killing a man. I take a burning sip, trying to ground myself in the present.

"You look like shit," Sarah says, joining me.

"Feel like it too."

We hear footsteps from upstairs—Declan moving around. A few minutes later, Conor's voice rings out, loud and urgent.

I rush upstairs to find him in our room, clinging to Declan like he might disappear.

"I thought you left again," he says when he sees me, his face buried in Declan's good shoulder.

"No, baby. I'm right here." I join their hug, stroking Conor's hair. "We're both here."

We head downstairs together. Sarah's in the kitchen mixing pancake batter, the smell of fresh coffee filling the small space.

"Look who's up," she says, eyeing our bruised faces but not commenting.

"Can we have pancakes?" Conor asks, perking up at the sight of the bowl.

"That's the plan," Sarah says, ruffling his hair. "Set the table for me?"

I help Conor with the plates while Declan pours coffee. Sarah flips pancakes at the stove, humming some pop song under her breath.

"Look at us," she says, sliding golden pancakes onto Conor's plate. "Like a fucked-up

family vacation."

I shoot her a warning look—Conor doesn't need the reminder. Or to learn how to cuss. He drowns his pancakes in syrup, chattering about Disney World while my face throbs from yesterday's bruises. Declan winces every time he lifts his coffee mug.

Twenty-four hours ago, I shot a man. Declan killed a Russian mob boss. Men with guns nearly murdered my son. Now we're eating pancakes like nothing happened.

"Your phone's charged," Sarah says, handing me the borrowed charger. "Your boyfriend's brother called six times."

Declan looks up sharply. "Cormac?"

"He wants us at the compound by noon," I say, checking the messages. "Says it's urgent."

"I bet it is." Declan's jaw tightens. "He's not happy I'm taking you to see Siobhan."

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*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 10:13 am*

Sarah eyes us over her coffee mug. "The psycho sister who kidnapped Conor? You're visiting her?"

"We need answers," Declan says.

"Closure," I add, though that's not quite right. I need to look this woman in the eye. I need to know why she targeted my son, and if the threat is truly gone.

Sarah sighs. "You Donovan's and your drama. I'll watch the little man while you go confront the crazy lady."

"I'm not a Donovan," I object automatically.

Sarah and Declan exchange a look that makes my cheeks burn.

After breakfast, I take Conor outside to the small garden overlooking the sea. We need to go soon, and I have no fucking clue how to explain it to him. Not when I don't even know where we're headed next.

"Are we going home now?" he asks, kicking at stones in the garden path.

"Not yet." I kneel to his level. "Dad and I need to talk to someone first. You'll stay with Sarah for a little while."

His face falls. "I don't want to stay. I want to go with you."

"I know, but this is a grown-up thing." I brush his hair from his eyes—he needs a

haircut. "We won't be long, I promise."

"Is it about the bad men?"

I hesitate. "Yes."

"Are they coming back?"

"No, baby." I pull him close. "They can't hurt us anymore."

Declan joins us in the garden. "Ready?" he asks me.

I nod, though I'm not ready at all. I hug Conor one more time, feeling his small arms squeeze my neck.

"Be good for Sarah," I tell him. "We'll be back soon."

Declan lifts Conor up with his good arm. "Hey buddy, while we're gone, think about where you want to go for vacation. Any place in the world."

Conor's eyes light up. "Disney World?"

"If that's what you want." Declan sets him down. "We can go anywhere."

I kiss Conor's forehead one more time. "Be good. We'll be back soon."

Sarah hands me my phone and jacket. "Try not to get shot this time."

"No promises."

I grab Cormac's car keys and head for the Audi. Time to visit the woman who tried to

destroy my family.

\* \* \*

Cormac waits for us in his office, a glass of whiskey already in his hand I think he drinks twenty-four-seven. He looks tired, dark circles under his eyes. For a moment, I feel sorry for him—for the weight he carries as head of the Donovan family.

"You're taking her to see Siobhan," he says to Declan, not bothering with pleasantries. "Are you sure that's smart?"

"Not your decision," Declan replies.

Cormac sighs. "The woman who tried to kidnap your son?—"

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"The woman who succeeded in kidnapping my son," I interrupt. "I need to see her."

"She's not well, Maeve."

"I don't care."

Cormac nods. "I'll have a car brought around."

"I want to drive," Declan says.

Another sigh. "Fine. The hunting lodge is an hour away. My men are outside."

He writes directions on a slip of paper and hands it to Declan. Their fingers brush, a silent communication passing between brothers. For all their differences, their bond runs deep.

"Be careful," Cormac tells us. "She might look contained, but her fucked up mind is dangerous."

I suppress a shiver.

The drive north is quiet. I watch the Dublin suburbs give way to rolling countryside, green after recent rain.

"What do you want to ask her?" I say, breaking the silence.

Declan keeps his eyes on the road. "Why she targeted us specifically. What she



knows about Cormac that I don't."

"You think he's hiding something?"

"He's always hiding something. The question is whether it matters to us."

I turn to look at him. "And then what? After we talk to her?"

"Then we decide our future."

"Just like that?"

He takes my hand across the center console. "Just like that."

The hunting lodge is nestled among tall pines. It's smaller than I expected, more cabin than lodge. Two men stand guard outside, nodding to Declan as we approach.

"Mr. Donovan," one of them says. "She's inside."

"Is she restrained?" Declan asks.

The guard shakes his head. "Mr. Cormac's orders. She's not dangerous physically."

I'm not so sure about that, but I follow Declan inside without comment.

The interior of the lodge is rustic but comfortable. A fire burns in the stone hearth, casting long shadows across the wooden floors. And there, in an armchair by the window, is Siobhan Donovan.

"My little brother returns," she says, her voice stronger than her appearance suggests.

"And you brought the nurse. How cute."

Declan steps forward, positioning himself slightly in front of me. "Siobhan."

"Come to gloat? To see the mighty Siobhan fallen?" She gestures around the lodge.

"My prison is comfortable, at least. Cormac always did have style."

"We came for answers," I say, stepping out from behind Declan.

Siobhan's gaze shifts to me, a cold smile playing on her lips. "The mother lion. I heard you shot one of Petrov's men to save your cub. Impressive."

"You targeted my son."

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"Business," she says with a shrug. "Nothing personal."

Rage burns through me. "He's six years old."

"And a Donovan." Her eyes narrow. "That's all that matters."

Declan moves closer to her chair. "Why, Siobhan? Why Conor? Why not come after me directly?"

She laughs, the sound hollow and bitter. "Oh, I did. The bullet in your shoulder, remember? But you're harder to break than most men." Her gaze returns to me. "Your weak spot is obvious."

"You're a monster," I tell her.

"I'm a Donovan." She tilts her head. "We're all monsters. Just like your son will be."

Declan grabs the arm of her chair, leaning into her space. "Enough games. Petrov said you know something about Cormac. Something he doesn't want me to know."

Interest flickers in Siobhan's eyes. "Andrei talked before you killed him. Fucking weakling."

"What is Cormac hiding?"

"Why do you care? You abandoned this family years ago."

"I left to protect the woman I love. From our father. From the life he wanted for me."

"Such nobility." She scoffs. "And yet here you are, back in the fold, blood on your hands again."

"Not by choice."

"We always have choices, brother dear." She leans forward. "I chose to take what was rightfully mine. Cormac chose to stop me. You chose to come back to Dublin. And now, you'll choose what to do with what I tell you."

Declan straightens. "So, talk."

Siobhan's eyes dart to the window, where one of Cormac's men stands guard outside. "Not here. Not with his dogs listening."

I step forward. "This is bullshit. She's fucking with us."

Siobhan ignores me, focusing on Declan. "The basement. No windows, no ears."

Declan hesitates, then nods. "Show me."

"Declan—" I start to object.

"It's okay," he says. "Wait here."

"Like hell I will."

Siobhan smiles, amused by our exchange. "The nurse can come too. She should hear this."

She leads us to a door off the kitchen, opening to a narrow staircase. The basement is small but finished, with a card table and chairs in the center. A single bulb hangs overhead, casting harsh light.

Siobhan sits at the table, gesturing for us to join her. "Fucking cozy, right?"

"Talk," Declan says, taking a seat across from her. I remain standing, too wired to sit.

"Our father's death wasn't natural," Siobhan says without preamble. "Cormac helped him along."

Declan's face betrays nothing. "You're saying Cormac killed him."

"Not with his own hands, no. That's not our brother's style. But the heart medication Dad took? Cormac had it replaced with something else. Made it look like a stroke."

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"Why would he do that?"

"Dad was planning to step down, to divide the business between us. Cormac would get the legitimate operations, I'd get the street trade. Dad thought it would keep the peace." She leans forward. "Cormac wanted it all."

I watch Declan's face, trying to read his reaction. "You have proof of this?" he asks.

"I found the altered medication. Confronted Cormac. He admitted it." She smiles thinly. "That's when he decided I was too dangerous to keep around."

"So, you allied with Petrov to take him down."

"I allied with Andrei because he understood my ambition. Knew what it means to be denied your birthright." Her eyes harden. "Cormac took what should have been shared. He deserves to lose it all."

"And my son? What did he deserve?" I ask, unable to hold back.

Siobhan glances at me. "Collateral damage. The price of war."

I move before I can think, my palm striking her cheek hard enough to snap her head to the side. "You fucking bitch."

She touches her reddening cheek, laughing softly. "There it is. The fire that attracted my brother. I see it now."

"Enough." Declan stands. "If what you're saying about Cormac is true?—"

"It is."

"Then why keep you alive? Why not kill you too?"

Siobhan's smile fades. "Because I have insurance. Information that would destroy him if it got out. Names, dates, accounts—everything needed to bring down the Donovan empire." She taps her temple. "All up here. Kill me, and it all goes public."

"You expect me to believe you orchestrated all this just to get back at Cormac for not sharing his toys?"

"Not just that." Her voice drops. "There's more, about you. About why Cormac really sent you away seven years ago."

I move closer to Declan, sensing his tension. "What about me?"

"Dad didn't threaten to kill Maeve because she was trash," Siobhan says. "He threatened her because Cormac told him you were planning to leave the family business. That she had turned you soft."

Declan shakes his head. "That's not true. I never?—"

"No? You never talked about getting out? About starting fresh somewhere else?" Her eyes gleam. "Cormac couldn't lose you. You were his enforcer, his weapon. So, he told Dad about your plans, knowing how he'd react."

"You're lying."

"Am I? Think about it, Declan. Who suggested you leave Dublin 'for Maeve's safety'?"

Who arranged your exile? Who kept you in those fighting cages, ensuring you stayed violent enough to be useful when he needed you back?"

Declan's fists clench on the table. "Cormac was protecting me."

"Cormac was using you. Still is." She leans back. "Why do you think he's keeping me alive? Not just because of my insurance. But because he knows you'd never forgive him if he killed me. Not after you specifically asked for mercy."

We all go quiet. I see the doubt cross Declan's face as Siobhan's poison works into him.

"Even if all this is true," he finally says, "why tell me now?"

"Because I want you to choose brother. Choose me, and we take Cormac down together. Choose him, and you're choosing the lies he's built around you." She smiles. "Or choose neither, take your little family, and run. But know that neither Cormac nor I will ever truly let you go."

I've heard enough. "We're done here."

Siobhan's eyes lock on mine. "The nurse speaks for you now, Declan? Whipped much?"

"She speaks with me," Declan says, standing. "And she's right. We're done."



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We climb the stairs in silence, Siobhan following behind. At the top, she catches Declan's arm.

"Think about what I've said. The offer stands."

He pulls away without answering, taking my hand as we walk out of the lodge into the gray afternoon. The guards watch us go.

In the car, Declan sits without starting the engine, staring through the windshield at nothing.

"Do you believe her?" I ask quietly.

He rubs his face with both hands. "I don't know. Siobhan's always been manipulative, but..."

"But?"

"Some of it fits. The timing of Dad's death. Cormac's reaction when I came back to Dublin. He wasn't expecting me, to actually come."

I turn in my seat to face him. "Does it matter? If Cormac killed your father, if he manipulated you—does it change what we do now?"

"It changes everything if I can't trust my own brother."

"You never fully trusted him anyway."

A small smile touches his lips. "True."

"So, what now?"

He starts the engine. "Now we get our son and get the hell out of here."

No revenge plot. No choosing sides in this twisted family feud. Just us, our son, a clean break.

"Where will we go?" I ask.

"Anywhere. Everywhere. As far from Dublin as we can get." He takes my hand. "I meant what I said to Conor about Disney World. Or anywhere else he wants."

"What about your brothers? Your life here?"

"My life is with you and Conor now." His grip tightens on mine. "I won't make the same mistake twice."

I want to believe him. God, I want to believe that we can drive away from this nightmare and never look back. But experience teaches hard lessons.

"The Donovan's won't just let you disappear."

"Let me worry about that."

"No." I pull my hand away. "That's not how this works. We're in this together now. Whatever comes, whatever you decide, we do it together."

He looks at me like he can't believe what he's hearing. "After everything I've put you through, you're still willing to stand with me?"

"Not with you. For us. For Conor." I touch his face. "For our family."

He kisses me hard, his hand in my hair. The kiss is raw, full of everything we can't say.

"I love you," he says against my lips. "I never stopped loving you."

"I know." I rest my forehead against his. "I never stopped either. Not really."

We drive back toward the coast, toward Sarah's cottage, toward Conor. Our future is uncertain but at least we have one.

Whatever Siobhan and Cormac do next, whatever secrets lie buried in the Donovan past, one thing is clear, my future belongs with Declan and our son. And I'll fight anyone who tries to take that from us—even the demons that haunt Declan's heart.

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The road takes us away from Dublin, from the violence, from all the shit that's defined our lives. For the first time in my life, I let myself hope.

### CHAPTER17

#### DECLAN

Sarah's cottage appears as we drive over the hill. I park the Audi in the gravel driveway and cut the engine. My mind races through what we need next - cash, new papers, a way out that no one can trace back to us.

"I can tell you're plotting something," Maeve says, touching my arm.

"I need to line up money, papers, transportation. Nothing that leads back to us."

"How long?" she asks.

"A day. Two at most." I take her hand. "We'll be gone before Cormac or Siobhan realize what we're planning."

The front door opens before we reach it. Finn steps out, face tight.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I ask, moving in front of Maeve.

"Cormac sent me to watch the kid." He glances at the road behind us. "And to give you this."

He passes me a thick envelope. Inside: a burner phone, cash, and a note from Cormac.

They're moving. Watch your back.

"What's this about?" Maeve reads over my shoulder.

"Russians hit two Donovan businesses an hour ago. Three men dead."

"Petrov's crew?" I ask.

"New boss took over after you killed Petrov." Finn lowers his voice. "Cormac thinks they want payback."

"Where's Conor?" Maeve pushes past us, no patience for this shit.

"With Sarah inside. He's fine."

We walk in. Conor sits at the kitchen table with crayons, drawing while Sarah chops vegetables for dinner. He looks up grinning.

"Dad! Mom! Look what I drew!" He holds up a paper covered in colors.

"That's cool." I touch his hair, then look at Sarah. "We need to talk."

She jerks her head toward the door. "Garden."

Outside, Sarah folds her arms against the wind. "Your thug showed up an hour ago. I nearly shit myself."

"Change of plans," I tell her. "We leave tonight."

"Tonight?" Maeve's voice rises. "You said we had days?—"

"That was before Russians started shooting up Donovan places." I can't stand still. "If they hit family businesses, they know I took out Petrov. They'll want blood."

"You're jumping to conclusions," Maeve says.

"And if I'm right?" I look at Finn. "What exactly did Cormac say?"

"That you need to vanish. Fast." Finn glances at the cottage. "He set up a clean exit. Private plane from an airfield west of here. Takes off at midnight."

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I check my watch. "Three hours."

"Where to?" Maeve asks.

"Spain first. Then anywhere." I grab her hands. "I have people there who owe me."

Sarah snorts. "More criminals, right?"

"People who can get us what we need to start fresh."

Maeve yanks her hands away. "Hold up. You want to run off tonight with our six-year-old to another country where more of your shady friends will help us?"

"I want you both alive," I snap.

"And I want my son safe. Your contacts could sell us out the second we land."

"They won't. They know what happens to people who cross me."

Sarah whistles. "Jesus fucking Christ, what a mess."

Finn's phone buzzes. He walks off to answer it while I face Maeve.

"Look, this is shit timing. But we need to go. Now." I try to sound less desperate.  
"Just trust me on this."

She stares at me, torn. "Fine. But we tell Conor what's happening. No more bullshit."

"Done."

Finn walks back, face grim. "Cormac just called, the Russians found our sister."

"What?"

"Someone busted her out. Two guards dead."

"Fuck." I rake my hands through my hair. "She's in with the Russians."

"Looks like it."

Maeve grips my arm. "If she's working with them, she'll tell them about Conor. About us."

"We go now." I look at Sarah. "Pack only what Conor needs. Nothing traceable."

Sarah nods and goes inside. Finn follows, leaving me and Maeve alone in the darkening garden.

"I wanted more time," I tell her.

"For what?"

"To leave clean. Give you and Conor time to adjust." I touch her face. "Didn't want it like this."

Her eyes get wet. "I don't know if I can do this. Run forever."

"Not forever. Just until we're safe." I put my forehead against hers. "I'll make us safe."



"How?"

"Cut all ties. Become someone else. Someone better." I kiss her. "Someone you both deserve."

Inside, Conor hunches over his paper, crayon in hand like nothing's wrong. Sarah jams Conor's clothes into a backpack. Finn prowls past each window, checking sightlines, his hand on his gun.

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I kneel by Conor. "Hey buddy, remember that trip we talked about?"

He nods without looking up.

"We're going tonight. Big adventure time."

That gets him. "Tonight? Now?"

"Yeah. We're taking an airplane to Spain. Sound good?"

His eyes get big. "A real airplane? But flying's scary."

"I'll be right there," I promise. "Mom too. All together."

"Are we coming back?"

Maeve moves to his other side, pushing hair from his eyes.

"We're going to live in a new place for a while," she says. "Somewhere cool."

"What about school? My toys?"

"We'll get new toys," I tell him. "And find a school with kids from everywhere."

His face scrunches up, thinking. "Can I take my drawing book?"

"For sure."

That works for now. He goes back to his drawing while we get ready. Lucky kid - still young enough to think this is an adventure, not running for our lives.

I go outside to call Cormac.

"Are they safe?" he asks right away.

"For now. Heading to the airfield soon."

"Good. I've got everything set up. The pilot knows the destination." He pauses. "You were right about Siobhan."

"How?"

"Russian connection all along. Used Petrov, replaced him after you took him out." His voice goes cold. "She wants us dead. All of us. You, me, even the boy."

"I figured." I look at the dark sea. "Did you make Dad threaten Maeve seven years back?"

Silence on the line. Then Cormac sighs.

"Did what I had to do. For the family. For you."

"By sending me away? Threatening the woman I loved?"

"You were going soft. Talking about leaving. We needed you."

Anger fires up in my chest. "You fucking used me."

"I saved you. From Dad's rage. From what he'd have done to you both." He pauses.

"Not proud of it. But I'd do it again."

"You won't get the chance," I tell him. "This is goodbye."

"I know." His voice drops. "Be safe, little brother. Take care of them."

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I hang up and stare at the phone before dropping it onto the rocks. No more calls. No more Cormac. No more fucking Donovan's.

I walk back in to find Maeve stuffing Conor's books in a backpack. Sarah presses a tin into his hands.

"For the trip," she says, messing up his hair. "Airplane food is shit."

"Sarah!" Maeve glares, but doesn't mean it.

Finn looks at his watch. "It's time to go. We'll take the back roads to the airfield."

I grab our bags. "Two cars. I'll take Maeve and Conor. You follow behind."

Maeve hugs Sarah hard. "Thanks. For everything."

"Shut up." Sarah fights tears. "Just send a postcard from somewhere hot."

Conor hugs her too. "Bye, Aunt Sarah. Your pancakes were good."

"Visit when you're older. I'll make you pancakes every day."

We get in the cars. Conor clutches his backpack in the back seat of Cormac's Audi. Maeve sits next to me.

"Ready?" I ask.

Conor nods from the back. Maeve grabs my hand.

"Drive."

I pull onto the coastal road, Finn right behind us. Dark night, no stars, no moon. Perfect for vanishing.

Ten minutes in, headlights show up behind us. Coming fast. Too fast for this empty road.

"Is that Finn?" Maeve checks the mirror.

"No. Someone else." I floor it. "Hold on."

The car speeds up, pulling alongside. I cut them off.

"Down!" I yell as a gun pokes out their window.

Maeve drags Conor to the floor, covering him with her body. I slam the brakes as bullets crack through our windshield.

Their car flies past, can't stop in time. I crank the wheel, taking us down a dirt track off the main road.

"Anyone hit?" I check the mirror. Finn's still behind us. The other car turns around.

"We're fine," Maeve says, voice tight. "Conor's okay."

The track gets narrow, trees crowding in. This Audi isn't made for this shit, but I push it hard anyway. If we're struggling, they will too.

A sharp turn comes up. I take it too fast. We skid, crash through bushes and hit a tree. Hard, but not hard enough for airbags.

"Out. Now." I grab my gun from the glove box. "Into the trees."

Maeve pulls Conor out. His face is white, but he's not crying. Tough little man.

We run into the woods as headlights hit our wrecked car. Russian voices shout. No sign of Finn.

"This way," I whisper, leading them deeper.

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We move quiet, Conor between us. The forest is black as pitch, but that helps us. I head downhill, remembering a farm lane that runs along the coast.

Gunshots crack behind us. They're firing blind, hoping for a lucky hit.

"Don't stop," I tell Maeve when she slows.

"I'm scared," Conor whispers.

"I know. But we gotta be super quiet now. Like hide and seek."

He grips my hand harder.

We hit the forest edge. Beyond it: open fields, then the coastal road. No cover at all.

"We run now," I tell them. "Don't stop for anything."

Maeve lifts Conor. "I got him. You cover us."

I nod. "Ready? Go!"

We sprint across the field, exposed. Shouts come from the forest. They have spotted us.

Halfway across, headlights hit the farm lane ahead. I aim my gun, then recognize Finn's car.



"It's Finn. Run."

He pulls up and throws the doors open. "In! Now!"

We jump in, Maeve and Conor in back, me up front.

"Russians," Finn mutters as we tear away. "Three of them. Got one in the leg but the other two aren't giving up."

"We still making that flight?" I ask.

He cuts down a dirt path I've never seen. "What do you think? Cormac would kill me if I let you miss it."

Maeve holds Conor, whispering to him. The kid's gone quiet. Shock.

"Who told them where we were?" I ask Finn.

"Siobhan, probably. She heard about the cottage from your calls with Cormac."

I look back at Maeve. "I fucked up again. Put you in danger."

"Save it," she cuts me off. "Just get us to that plane."

The airfield comes into view, just a few lights around the edge. A sleek private jet waits, engines humming.

Finn stops near it. "Go. I'll watch your backs."

"Come with us," I tell him.

He shakes his head. "You know I can't. Cormac called while you were gone. He needs me back there to clean this shit up." He hands me a paper bag. "New IDs, cash, contacts in Spain. Everything to disappear."

I grab his shoulder. "Thanks."

"Take care of them." His face is dead serious. "Don't look back."

We run to the plane, heads down. The pilot, weathered guy in his fifties, waves us on.

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"Gotta go now," he yells over the engine. "Weather's going bad."

I boost Maeve and Conor into the cabin, then jump in. The door locks just as headlights appear at the airfield edge.

"Friends of yours?" the pilot asks, unfazed. "Hold tight."

The plane races down the runway. Through the window, I see Finn's car block the entrance, muzzle flashes in the dark.

We take off as gunfire cracks below. The plane banks hard over the sea.

"Will Finn be okay?" Conor asks, voice tiny against the engine.

I pull him onto my lap. "He's a tough guy. He'll be fine."

Maeve takes his hand. Our little circle. "We're together now. That's all that matters."

The plane climbs higher. Ireland vanishes behind us. Below, just dark sea. Ahead, Spain. A future I never thought I'd have.

I left Dublin once to protect Maeve. Now I'm leaving with her and our son. No more running from who I am. No more Donovan blood curse.

The pilot turns back. "Six hours to a private strip near Barcelona. Get some sleep if you want."

Sleep? Not fucking likely. I stare out the window, half expecting to see Russians on our tail. Nothing but clouds and stars.

"This isn't over," Maeve says low. "Siobhan, the Russians—they'll keep looking."

"Let them." I look at her in the dim light. "We'll be ghosts."

Conor crashes between us, head on Maeve's lap, feet on mine. Asleep, his face looks peaceful. Like he didn't just see men with guns try to kill us.

"We'll give him normal," I promise Maeve. "School, friends, holidays. They won't find us."

She watches our son, love and pure steel in her eyes. "If they try, they die."

I take her hand across Conor's sleeping body. I see it in her - that same kill-or-die protective rage I feel. We've both taken lives for him. We'd do it again in a heartbeat.

"I love you," I tell her. "Both of you. More than anything."

"Enough to become someone else? To leave Declan Donovan behind?"

"He's already dead." I squeeze her hand. "I'm whoever you need now."

She leans over Conor to kiss me. A promise. "Just be ours. That's all I need."

The plane cuts through night sky toward a new life.

## CHAPTER18

### MAEVE

"Emma! Emma Murphy!" The shopkeeper waves from behind his fruit stand, and I force a smile as I respond to a name that isn't mine.

Three months in Barcelona and I still flinch at "Emma." Three months living in a rented villa with windows that face the Mediterranean. Three months of pretending to be American expats—David, Emma, and little Sean Murphy—while our real names collect dust.

I balance groceries on my hip and unlock our front door. Shoes scattered in the entryway. Conor's backpack tossed on a chair. Signs of normal family life that feel like props on a stage.

From the balcony, I spot Conor on the beach below, chasing seagulls at the water's edge. His laugh carries on the breeze—one authentic thing in this fake life we've constructed.

Declan walks up behind me, fresh from the shower. "He's been down there an hour already."

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"The locals think he's a strange American kid," I say, not turning around. "An Irish boy would know better than to waste time chasing birds that shit on everything."

"You're in a mood."

I set my coffee down harder than necessary. "I got stopped by police on my way back from the market. Random ID check, they said."

Declan tenses beside me. "And?"

"And nothing. The forgeries work fine." I glance at him. "But my heart nearly stopped. Again. Like it does every fucking day."

He pulls me against him, chin resting on my shoulder. "We're safe here."

"Are we?" I turn to face him. "I wake up every night panicking that they've found us. I check Conor's room three times before I can sleep."

"The nightmares will fade."

"Will they? Three months and I still dream about Russians with guns." I look away. "I want to go home, Declan."

His expression shifts. "To Dublin?"

"I want to stop pretending to be someone I'm not."

He runs a hand through his damp hair. "It's not safe yet."

"It's not living either."

At least he doesn't argue. His hair's grown longer, sun-streaked from days with Conor. The bruises and cuts have healed, but new scars join the old ones.

He looks different here—lighter. The Mediterranean sun burns away some of the Dublin darkness. Yesterday at the market he grabbed my arm when a man walked too close to us. Last week he spent three hours following a car that drove past our villa twice.

"I saw the papers you've been checking," I say, nodding toward his desk drawer. "No Donovan deaths in three months. No Russian mob wars. Nothing's happened."

He tenses. "That we know of."

"Cormac would have warned you if there was trouble." I grip the balcony rail. "I can't live like this anymore, Declan. Neither can Conor."

"I'm trying to keep you safe."

"I know. But this isn't living." I face him. "I want to go home."

He looks away, jaw tight. "I'll think about it."

I can't blame him. The memory of bullets shattering our windshield still wakes me up at night. But fuck, I miss calling coffee shops by their real names. I miss hearing Irish accents that aren't our own. I miss home.

"Mom!" Conor shouts from the beach. "Dad! Look what I found!"

He holds up a large shell, waving it proudly.

"We should go down," I say.

Declan nods, but his phone rings. He checks the screen, instantly alert.

"I need to take this," he says, stepping inside.

Through the door, I watch him pace, phone to ear. His shoulders tense, hand raking through his hair.

I go inside. "What is it?"

He holds up a finger, still listening. "When?" he asks the caller. "Are you sure?"  
Another pause. "Text me the details."



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He hangs up and looks at me, face grim.

"What happened?"

"Siobhan's dead."

"How?"

"Her car exploded outside her apartment." His voice goes flat. "The Russians got tired of her bullshit."

"Is it over then?"

"Might be." He checks his phone as a text comes in. "Cormac wants to meet."

"Here? In Spain?"

He nods. "Private location. Just me."

I grab his arm. "Don't go. It's a trap."

"It's Cormac."

"Who lied to you for years. Who got your father to threaten me. Who sent you away. Who probably killed your dad."

"Who also made sure we got out alive." He puts his hand over mine. "I need to know

what's happening. If it's really over."

"And if it's not?"

"Then we go deeper. Change identities again. Move to another country." He pulls me close. "Or we go home and deal with whatever's waiting."

I rest my head on his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat.

"When do you meet him?"

"He's flying in tomorrow. His flight lands at noon, and he wants to meet right after."

One day to decide the rest of our lives. "I want to be there."

"No." His voice leaves no room for argument. "Conor needs you here."

"And I need to know you're coming back."

He lifts my chin. "I'll come back. No matter what."

I want to believe him. Three months ago, I wouldn't have. Now I'm not sure if it's trust growing or desperation.

"One condition," I tell him. "If Cormac says it's safe, we go home. To Dublin. No more running."

His eyes search mine. "You want that? After everything?"

"I want my life back. I want Conor to know who he really is."

"Even if that's a Donovan?"

"He's more than that. He's ours." I touch his face. "And I want that life back too."

He kisses me, hard and deep.

"Deal," he says against my lips. "If Cormac says it's clear, we go home."

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The next morning, I help Declan pack a small bag for the day trip.

"I'll be back tonight," he says, zipping the bag closed.

"You better be." I grab his shirt and pull him in for one last kiss. "I mean it."

He grins. "Yes, ma'am."

I watch from our balcony as his taxi pulls away. My stomach twists with dread as he disappears around the corner. I drop Conor with Maria downstairs, then pace our villa, unable to focus on anything. I check my phone every few minutes, though I know he won't call until he's heading home.

I pick up Conor after lunch, trying to distract myself with normal things—making dinner, bath time, reading stories. But my eyes keep drifting to the clock, counting minutes.

"Where's Dad?" Conor asks as I tuck him into bed.

"Meeting an old friend. He'll be back soon."

"Uncle Cormac?"

I stop and stare at him. "How do you know that name?"

He shrugs. "I heard you and Dad talking. Is he really my uncle?"

I kneel to his level. "Yes. But remember, we don't use those names here."

"I know. We're the Murphys now." He kicks at his blanket. "But I miss being Conor. Sean sounds weird."

I hug him tight. "I know. I miss being Maeve too."

Seven o'clock passes. Then eight. I put Conor to bed with promises that Dad will be here when he wakes up.

Nine o'clock. I pace the living room, phone in hand. No calls. No texts.

Ten o'clock. I try Declan's number. Straight to voicemail.

By midnight I'm frantic. I check the gun in our bedroom safe and plant myself by the window, watching the dark road.

At one in the morning, headlights appear. A taxi pulls up. I grip the gun tighter.

The back door opens. Declan steps out, pays the driver, and turns toward our villa.

Relief floods through me. I run outside.

"Where the fuck have you been?" I demand, throwing myself at him.

He holds me tight, burying his face in my neck. "Cormac's flight got delayed, then he wanted to talk for hours. I couldn't get away."

I pull back to look at him. "What happened? What did he say?"

"Let's go inside first."

In the living room, he drops onto the couch, exhaustion etched in his face. I sit beside him, waiting.

"Siobhan really is dead," he says. "The Russians took her out."

"And?"

"The new boss wants peace. There is too much heat from Siobhan's games. Cops, Interpol." He takes my hand. "Cormac made a deal. The Donovan's stay out of Russian business, they stay out of ours."

"You believe him?"

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"I do." He looks at me. "He showed me proof. Photos of the men who chased us that night. All dead."

"So, it's over? For real?"

"Looks that way." He squeezes my hand. "We can go home, Maeve. If that's what you want."

"What about Cormac? After what he did to you—to us?"

Declan stays quiet for a moment. "We talked about that too. He admitted everything. About Dad, about sending me away." He shakes his head. "He thought he was protecting me in his own very fucked up, twisted way."

"Can you forgive him?"

"I don't know. But I understand him now." He says. "He wants to meet Conor. Properly."

The thought makes my stomach twist. "I don't know if I'm ready for that."

"Me neither. But one day, maybe." He pulls me closer. "For now, let's just go home. My Irish skin was not meant for Mediterranean sun." We have bought shares in sunscreen since we moved, basically bathe in it.

"When?"

"Whenever you want. Cormac's arranging original papers. Our real names, no red flags."

I lean my head on his shoulder, relief mixing with a strange sadness. Our Spanish escape is ending, even if I hated it here.

"What about the Donovan business?" I ask. "Will Cormac expect you to join him?"

"No. That part of my life is done." He lifts my chin. "I told him I'm out. For good."

"And he accepted that? Just like that?"

"Not at first. But he gets it now." His thumb traces my cheekbone. "Family comes first. Real family. You and Conor."

"Take me home," I whisper. "Take us home."

\* \* \*

Two weeks later, we land in Dublin. The familiar damp air hits me as we exit the airport. It smells like three weeks of rain, and home.

Conor bounces beside me, pointing at everything. Before, his world was small—our apartment, his school. Now Dublin spreads before him, full of family history he's only beginning to understand.

"Where are we going?" he asks as we load our bags into a taxi.

"A new place," Declan says. "Near the sea. You'll like it."

The house Declan bought is on the outskirts of the city—a two-story brick with a



garden and a view of Dublin Bay. Not his mother's old place, but somewhere untouched by the past.

"It's huge," Conor breathes as we pull into the drive. To a little boy it probably is massive.

It is big compared to our old apartment. Four bedrooms, a garden, rooms filled with light.

"Do I get my own room?" Conor asks, already heading for the stairs.

"Pick any one you want," Declan calls after him.

I walk through the ground floor, running my fingers along new furniture, clean walls. No memories here yet. No ghosts.

"What do you think?" Declan asks.

"It's perfect." I turn and wrap my arms around his neck. "Thank you."

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He kisses me. "Welcome home, Maeve Brennan."

The name sounds strange after months of being Emma Murphy. But good. Right.

"Does Conor have to go back to his old school?" I ask.

"If you want. Or we can find a new one closer to here."

"New one," I decide. "Fresh start for all of us."

He nods. "I talked to the clinic where you worked. They'd take you back if you want."

I stare at him, surprised. "You did that?"

"Figured you'd want your job back. If not there, we'll find something else."

"And you? What will you do?"

He grins. "I'm thinking of opening a gym. Boxing, training, that kind of thing. Legit business."

I laugh. "Declan Donovan, respectable business owner. Who'd have thought?"

"Not my father, that's for sure." His smile fades slightly. "Cormac wants to come by next week. Just to check in."

I tense. "Just him?"

"Just him. No other Donovan's." He touches my face. "We can say no."

Part of me wants to keep Conor as far from the Donovan family as possible. But they're his blood too. And if we're really starting fresh...

"One visit," I say. "We'll see how it goes."

"Thank you."

Conor thunders back down the stairs. "Mom! Dad! I found my room! It has a window seat!"

We follow him up to see his choice—the second largest bedroom with bay windows overlooking the garden. He bounces on the bare mattress, face lit with excitement.

"Can I paint it blue? Like the ocean in Spain?"

"Sure," Declan says, ruffling his hair. "Whatever you want."

Later, after Conor falls asleep in his new room, Declan and I stand in the master bedroom. Moonlight pours through the windows.

"Are you happy?" he asks, pulling me against him.

"I think I will be." I look up. "Are you?"

"More than I deserve."

I hit his arm. "Don't start that shit again."

He laughs and kisses me. "Yes, ma'am."

His mouth covers mine, the kiss turning desperate in seconds. He backs me against the wall, hands rough as they push under my shirt.

"Need you," he says against my neck. "Right now."

I pull at his shirt. "Then take me."

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He yanks my shirt over my head, pulling my bra straps down. His mouth closes around my nipple, teeth grazing hard enough to make me gasp.

"Fuck, I love this," he says. "I love you."

I unbuckle his jeans, sliding my hand inside to grip him. "Show me how much."

He lifts me, carrying me to the bed where he strips off my clothes. I lie naked while he stands over me, eyes dark with hunger as he tears off his own shirt.

"Turn over," he orders.

I roll onto my stomach, and he pulls my hips up. His hand comes down hard on my ass, making me cry out.

"You want this rough?" he asks, landing another slap.

"Yes," I gasp. "Don't hold back."

He pushes his jeans down just enough to free himself, then slides his fingers between my legs.

"So wet already," he says. "You need this as bad as I do."

I push back against his hand. "Stop teasing. I have been waiting all day to christen this room."

He grips my hips and drives into me with one thrust. I bury my face in the mattress to muffle my scream.

"Fuck, you feel perfect," he says. "So tight."

I can't speak as he fucks me harder than he has in months. This isn't gentle homecoming sex. This is claiming, marking, reminding each other we're alive.

He grabs my hair, pulling my head back. "Say my name. My real name."

"Declan," I moan. "Fuck, Declan!"

"That's it. No more hiding. No more pretending." He reaches around to circle my clit. "Come for me. Now."

The orgasm rips through me as I cry out his name. He fucks me through it, not slowing until I'm shaking.

He pulls out, flipping me onto my back. "I want to see your face when I come inside you."

He pushes back in. I wrap my legs around his waist, urging him deeper.

"Fill me up," I tell him, digging my nails into his back. "Make me yours again."

"Always mine," he says. "Always fucking mine."

He comes with my name on his lips, my real name, not the alias we used in Spain. This is us, raw and real, no hiding.

After, we lie on sweat-soaked sheets, my head on his chest.

"I never thought we'd have this," he admits. "A real home. A family."

"Never?"

"Not after I left Dublin. I figured that was it—lost my shot at happiness."

I look at him. "And now?"

His eyes meet mine. "Now I protect what's mine. With everything I have."

"We protect each other," I say.

"That too."

I rest my head back on his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

This is just the beginning. We'll have challenges—Conor adjusting to school, rebuilding my career, Declan finding his place outside the Donovan empire. Cormac will visit, reminding us of the past we can't fully escape.

But we're home. Together. The three of us against whatever comes.