



Sins of the Father

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Dark

Description: Seven years ago, Orla Nolan found her father murdered in his office, blood seeping into the accounting files he kept for the notorious Kavanagh crime family.

Now she's infiltrated their organization with a new identity, working as executive assistant to heir Cillian Kavanagh. Her mission: gather evidence to destroy the family that took her father from her.

The last thing she expects is to fall for her target.

Cillian Kavanagh has spent his life balancing family loyalty with his desire to legitimize their empire. When he hires the mysterious Orla Kelly, he senses there's more to his efficient assistant than she reveals. As their professional relationship crosses into dangerous territory, he can't ignore their explosive chemistry—or his growing suspicions.

When Orla's true identity is exposed, she learns the truth behind her father's murder is more complex than she imagined. With rival families closing in and betrayal lurking within the Kavanagh organization, Orla and Cillian must decide if vengeance matters more than what's growing between them.

In the shadows of Boston's criminal underworld, justice and love have never been more dangerous—or more tempting.

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CHAPTER 1

ORLA

I place white lilies against the cold granite. Seven years gone, yet the pain still cuts as deep as the day he died. The dates carved into stone - June 15, 1957 to March 8, 2015 - beneath my father's name. Thomas Nolan.

The cemetery is empty around me, rows of markers standing as silent witness. A chilly wind pierces through my coat, but I shake it off. March in Boston is bitterly cold, it is only fitting for what I come to do here each year.

"I will get justice," I whisper, touching the stone. "I promise, Dad."

My knees sink to damp earth as I arrange the flowers. Dad loved simple things - white lilies, black coffee, numbers that balanced on a page. His accounting mind was all about order. Never knowing that same numbers, and need for order would get him killed.

The memory washes over me in the silence of the graveyard.

I call out as I enter our house, tossing my backpack by the door. School debate team ran late. My Dad's car is in the driveway, but he doesn't answer. There's an eerie quiet.

"Dad? I'm home."

Nothing.

I walk down the hall to his office, and push open the half-closed door.

"Dad, did you want to order?—"

The words stop coming out. He is at his desk, slumped forward. Papers scattered across the floor. Blood spreading across white spreadsheets, blooming outward from where he?—

Red everywhere.

I am frozen. His eyes stare at nothing, while blood pools beneath his chair.

I scream.

A twig snaps behind me, pulling me back to reality. I don't turn around. Only one other person comes here on this day.

"Detective Doyle," I say.

"You're punctual, Orla. Every year, nine AM sharp." His footsteps crunch on the gravel as he gets closer.

I get up, brushing dirt from my black pants. "Any news?"

Fergus Doyle stands in front of me exactly as he did last March, and the March before that. Salt-and-pepper hair cut short, stubble on his jaw, rumpled suit worn too many times. His hazel eyes tired.

"The official investigation remains closed." He stands me, looking down at the grave.

"Kavanagh's people were very careful."

"And unofficially?" I ask.

"I'll keep digging. But nothing has come up yet." He pauses. "But there's an opportunity, to get a bit closer."

I turn to him now, waiting to know what that means.

"Kavanagh Import & Export is hiring a new executive assistant. For the heir apparent, Cillian Kavanagh." Doyle watches me. "Thought you might want to know."

My heart races. "You did, did you?"

"Just passing on information. What you do with it..." He shrugs, but I know what he is getting at. We've talked about this option before, theoretically. There was never a way in before.

"How many applicants?" I ask.

"Three he has shortlisted. They'll have an interview tomorrow at ten. It's with their HR manager - Patricia Mills. You'd need some serious credentials."

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"Which I have." Two years of planning paid off. "Orla Kelly exists, on paper."

Doyle nods, then gazes back at my father's grave. "Thomas wouldn't want this for you. Let it go, live your life. Safe. Not poking the bear."

"Thomas didn't want to die with his face in accounting files, while swimming in his blood." My voice turns cold. "But here we are."

Doyle sighs but stays quiet. He's voiced his concerns many times, my need for revenge is something no one could understand. He reaches into his pocket and hands me a business card.

"That's the address and contact information. I already had the application submitted under your... alternate name."

I take the card, tucking it into my coat pocket.

"Be careful, Orla. These people—" He trails off.

"I know exactly who these people are." I turn away from the grave. "I'll let you know."

My apartment is almost bare, only what I need. A bed, a desk, a locked metal box under the floorboard with my father's bloodstained business papers. Bare walls, no photos. Nothing to distract me from my purpose, or give away who I am.

I spread documents across the small table. Birth certificate, driver's license, diploma, employment records - all for Orla Kelly, fabricated with care. Next to them, a resume designed to catch Cillian Kavanagh's attention. Business administration degree from Boston College. Four years administrative experience at firms the Kavanaghs won't investigate too deeply.

I rehearse my backstory in the mirror. Born in South Boston to working-class Irish parents. My 'father' a construction worker, my 'mother' a nurse. Both dead – to Covid during the pandemic. A good Catholic school education. No siblings. I lived with an estranged aunt during college and have no other living relatives.

I practice aloud, my voice steady, but different. A hint more South Boston in my vowels. A warmer tone. Orla Kelly must appear perfect, but forgettable, and seem like she is no threat at all.

In my bathroom mirror looking back at me is a woman with auburn hair pulled back tight, green eyes that glisten with the hunger for revenge. I'll style it softer tomorrow. Wear less makeup. Look normal, unremarkable.

My phone buzzes.

A text from Doyle.

Background check initiated by Kavanagh security. Basic level only. Your story will hold up.

Good. I have been waiting too long for this to get flagged by a simple background check.

I open my laptop, reviewing the Kavanagh Import & Export corporate structure. Legitimate business on paper - shipping, customs brokerage, international trade.

Behind that façade—weapons, drugs, money laundering. And somewhere in their records, is the reason my father died.

He found something in their accounts. Something worth killing for.

I change into running clothes and put my papers back into their hidden box. Physical preparation matters just as much as mental. Five miles to clear my head and wreck my body before I sleep.

Tomorrow, I finally become Orla Kelly.

I touch the small photo of my father tucked inside my wallet - the only personal item I keep with me always.

"Watch me," I whisper. "I'll make them pay. Every last fucking Kavanagh."

CHAPTER 2

CILLIAN

I scan the security monitors, watching as the camera feeds cycle across my desk. The lineup of applicants bores me. None of them really understand what working for the Kavanagh empire truly means.

A woman walks through the lobby, catching my eye.

Auburn hair pulled back neatly, navy suit, modest jewelry. At first glance, she is nothing special—until I notice how she looks at each camera, even the guards disguised as reception staff. Not obvious—a quick glance here, a pause there. Most idiots would miss these details. She is not most people.

Her resume is on my desk. Orla Kelly. She has five years administrative experience. A business degree from Boston College. A six-month gap attributed to family responsibility leave. Her references check out perfectly. Too perfectly. My gut says she's too good to be true, and twenty-nine years as a Kavanagh taught me to trust my gut.

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I grab my phone. "Patricia, hold the Kelly interview. I'll join you."

"Mr. Kavanagh, I've already?—"

"Ten minutes." I hang up.

The next screen shows Patricia greeting Orla, escorting her toward the conference room. I take the private elevator to the third floor, arriving as they start talking.

Their voices drift through the closed door.

"—gap in your employment history?" Patricia asks.

"My aunt fell ill last year. She had no one else to care for her. After my parents died she cared for me, it was only right for me to do the same."

Her voice is confident, warm, with a hint of a South Boston accent. I push open the door.

Patricia startles, her annoyance disappearing as she spots me. "Mr. Kavanagh, I didn't expect?—"

"I'll take over from here," I say. "Thank you, Patricia."

She pauses, then nods. "Of course. Ms. Kelly, it was nice meeting you." She collects her papers and leaves, she knows better than to hang about.

Orla is motionless throughout the exchange. No fidgeting, no false smiles. Just those alert green eyes missing nothing. She stands up, extending her hand to me.

"Cillian Kavanagh. A pleasure, Ms. Kelly."

Her handshake is firm. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Kavanagh. I was expecting HR, not the boos."

I sit across from her rather than at the head of the table. Position matters. Across from her disarms her, giving me full view of her reactions.

"So, you want the executive assistant position."

"Yes. Your company has an excellent reputation in international trade. I think I have what it takes to work with the best."

Rehearsed. I smile coldly. "Tell me about the six months caring for your aunt."

She meets my eyes. "My aunt Margaret caught pneumonia last winter, then suffered a stroke. With no other family available, I took leave from my position."

"And where is Aunt Margaret now?"

A brief pause. "She passed away three months ago."

I nod once. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

"Your resume lists experience with finances and administration. Explain."

She details systems she has managed, and how her experience overlaps. Everything sounds reasonable, but her answers feel too practiced. Maybe she's just nervous—or well prepared.

"Why Kavanagh Imports specifically?"

"Your company connects international markets I find fascinating. The role demands discretion and organization—my strengths. And the salary matches my needs."

Fair enough. I change direction.

"Your previous employer said you left abruptly."

A test—I spoke to no one. Her face stays neutral.

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"I gave two weeks' notice despite my aunt's condition. I'm surprised at that reference, but I knew they were angry I left."

Clever.

"What would you do if you found financial irregularities in documents you processed?"

She answers without hesitation. "I'd document the issue, verify my findings, then report directly to my supervisor without causing alarm."

"Even if your supervisor might be involved?"

Her gaze meets mine. "If I suspected that, I'd follow the company ethics policy for proper reporting channels and go over their heads."

Smart answer. Safe answer. My phone vibrates. I check it and stand.

"Excuse me. This needs my attention."

I move to the window, turning away as I answer. "Kavanagh."

"We've got trouble at Pier 14. The Belfast shipment—customs flagged three containers. O'Malley isn't here to smooth it over."

I feel my mask slipping. My voice drops low.

"Who changed the manifest?"

"Donovan, but?—"

"Find him. Keep him there. Tell customs we'll send corrected documentation. I'll handle this myself."

"If Donovan tries to leave?"

"He won't." It needs no elaboration. "Not if he values his health insurance."

I end the call and turn to find Orla watching me. She is composed, but more alert now. She saw the change—businessman to something darker. Most people show some badly hidden fear. She doesn't.

I sit down again. "Where were we? Right. Ethics policies."

"Is everything okay?" she asks.

"A minor shipping issue. Common in this business." I watch her. "International trade brings many... regulatory challenges. We will issue the corrected documents, and it'll be fixed."

"I imagine it has many challenges."

This woman has secrets—dangerous in my world. But keeping potential threats close works better than leaving them where I can't see them. Someone has sent her here—I will find out who.

"This position demands complete discretion, Ms. Kelly. We handle sensitive matters for important clients. You'll see and hear things that stay within these walls."

"I understand confidentiality, Mr. Kavanagh. I am happy to sign an NDA."

"I doubt that." My smile shows teeth. "But you'll learn. The pay exceeds industry standard by twenty percent. In exchange, I expect availability beyond office hours and absolute loyalty."

"That sounds fair."

I stand to end our meeting. "Patricia will arrange your paperwork. You can start on Monday."

"Thank you for the opportunity."

"Don't thank me yet, Ms. Kelly." I extend my hand. "This is not a job for the weak."

Her hand touches mine, surprisingly warm. "I am not weak, Mr. Kavanagh."

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Our eyes lock, a current passes between us. I release her hand and step back.

"Monday, eight o'clock. Don't be late."

As she leaves, I plan a deeper background check before Monday. Orla Kelly fits the role too perfectly, and perfect makes me suspicious. I want to know what game she's playing—and why she chose the Kavanagh's.

If she threatens my family, she'll learn why our name strikes fear through Boston.

CHAPTER 3

ORLA

I arrive at Kavanagh Import & Export at seven forty-five. The security guard checks my newly issued ID badge before waving me through.

"The executive floor is restricted access," he says, handing me a temporary keycard. "This will get you to the twelfth floor until Mr. Kavanagh's assistant programs your permanent credentials."

I accept the card with a polite smile. "Thanks. That would be me. I'm his new assistant."

He looks at me again. "Right. Good luck, Ms. Kelly."

The elevator requires both the keycard and a numeric code. I memorize the four digits

as the guard punches them in. Every tiny piece of information is important.

Cillian Kavanagh's office occupies the corner section of the twelfth floor. Floor-to-ceiling windows that showcase Boston Harbor on one side, downtown skyline on the other. It's impressive, if obnoxious wealth is your thing.

"Ms. Kelly." Cillian appears in his doorway. Today's suit is navy, his tie crisp. "Come in. We'll get started."

Mahogany desk. Leather chairs. Abstract art that costs more than my apartment. It reeks of money, and the blood spilled to get it.

"My schedule for today," he says, handing me a tablet. "Your desk is outside. Computer access is set up with basic permissions. Julie from IT will expand those as needed."

I scan over the schedule. "I see you have an eight-thirty meeting with Shipping Operations. Would you like coffee before they arrive?"

"Black, no sugar." He watches me. "You'll find the kitchen down the hall. Badge access. Mugs are in the cabinet above the machine."

I nod and turn to leave when an older woman enters without knocking. Blonde, elegant, wearing designer clothes. Her eyes—the same blue as Cillian's—judging me in one sweep.

Cillian stands immediately. "Mother. I didn't expect you this morning."

Mother. Niamh Kavanagh. I keep a straight face while noting details. Diamond wedding ring. Emerald on right hand. Chanel perfume. A woman who understands power.

"Can't a mother surprise her son?" She smiles with cold eyes. "Aren't you going to introduce us?"

"Orla Kelly, my new assistant," Cillian says. "Orla, my mother, Niamh Kavanagh."

I extend my hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Kavanagh. Hopefully you'll last longer than the last one."

Her handshake is firm. "How long have you worked in executive support, Ms. Kelly?"

"Four years," I reply. "Most recently at Beacon Financial."

"Hmm." She turns to Cillian. "Your father expects you to join us for dinner on Sunday. We're starting early, three o'clock."

"I have plans—" he begins.

"Cancel them." She leaves no room for argument. "Bring Ms. Kelly as well. She should meet the family if she's managing your schedule."

My pulse jumps. The Kavanagh family home. Access I hadn't expected so soon.

"That won't be necessary," Cillian says.

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"I insist." Niamh smiles at me. "Sunday at three, Ms. Kelly. Don't be late."

She leaves as abruptly as she arrived. I stand still, thinking about the possibilities having them all in one room.

Cillian sighs. "My mother enjoys bossing my staff around. You're not obligated to attend."

"I don't mind," I say. "You made it clear that I'd be expected to work outside of office hours."

He nods, attention shifting to his computer. "The coffee, please. Then tackle the filing disaster my previous assistant left."

The filing cabinets in the storage room overflow with disorganized papers. Shipping manifests. Contracts. Personnel files. Financial statements. A treasure trove of potential evidence. But it is complete and utter chaos.

"My predecessor had an unusual organization system," I say when Cillian checks on me an hour later.

"Karen had no system at all." He surveys the papers. "I need these organized by department, then chronologically. Priority on anything from the past eighteen months."

I nod, noting the timeline. "Any specific files you might need immediate access to?"

"South American shipping contracts. We have a situation with a Brazilian partner that?—"

The office door bangs open. A man strides in—younger than Cillian, similar features but harder edges. Same dark hair, same blue eyes, but while Cillian projects control, this man radiates raw energy.

Eamon Kavanagh. The enforcer.

"We have a problem," he announces, ignoring my presence.

Cillian's jaw tightens. "I have a meeting in five minutes."

"Cancel it." Eamon moves around the office. "We caught one of the night crew stealing from the Colombian shipment. The idiot took product from box three."

My hands continue sorting papers while my brain records every word they say. Box three. Colombian shipment. Product.

"How much?" Cillian asks.

"Two kilos. Street value is about fifty grand." Eamon stops, noticing me for the first time. His eyes narrow. "Who's she?"

"My new assistant." Cillian keeps his tone even. "Orla, this is my brother Eamon. Eamon, Orla Kelly."

I nod politely. Eamon stares at me. "You look familiar."

My heart rate increases, but I maintain my calm. "I don't think we've met."

"Where's the thief now?" Cillian asks, pulling Eamon's attention away from me.

"At the warehouse. What do you want me to do with him?"

Cillian glances at me, then at his watch. "I'll handle it after my meeting. Keep him there."

"He saw what was in the boxes, Cillian."

"I said I'll handle it." Cillian's voice drops. "Wait in my office. Orla, please finish the filing."

I retreat to the storage room, my mind racing. Drug shipment? Stolen product. A worker who "saw what was in the boxes." Whatever he saw was worth killing him over.

At six thirty, the executive floor empties. Only the night security guard stays behind, stationed by the elevators. I volunteered to stay late, I said I wanted to finish fixing the filing disaster so I could start fresh tomorrow. Cillian approved, his mind otherwise occupied after a closed-door meeting with Eamon.

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I've spent the day making a mental map of the security cameras. Four in the main office area. Two covering the emergency exits. Only one blind spot near the supply closet. The guard makes his rounds every thirty minutes.

I wait until he leaves for his round. My phone camera makes no sound as I photograph specific documents—shipping manifests from March 2015, the month my father died. Colombian imports. Special handling instructions for "box three" shipments.

A name catches my eye on a personnel file. James Marias, Dock Supervisor. The same Marais from Eamon's story. The same man who caught the thief today.

I photograph his employment record, then return everything to the folders. Three minutes until the guard is back.

The elevator dings just as I settle back at my desk, the picture of a dedicated assistant working late. The guard nods as he passes me.

In my purse, my phone now holds the first pieces of evidence. It's not enough yet, but it is a start. Seven years after my father's murder, I am inside the enemy's house.

CHAPTER 4

CILLIAN

"Are you still able to attend dinner on Sunday," I say. "There's going to be a business discussion, and I want you to take minutes."

She looks up, her face changing for a split second before returning to neutral.

"What time should I arrive?" she asks.

No anxiety about meeting the Kavanagh clan. Just practical logistics. Her reaction intrigues me.

"I'll pick you up at six," I reply. "Dress formal but understated. Bring your tablet."

On Sunday evening, I arrive at her apartment building at six. She walks out right away, as if she was already waiting. Dark green dress, black heels, hair in a neat bun - appropriate and bland enough to be forgettable. Exactly as instructed. I don't need my brothers lusting after my assistant.

I drive, watching her from the corner of my eye. She looks out the window, taking in the passing streets. She has a small purse and her tablet with her.

"My father will ask about your background," I say as we enter the wealthy neighborhood. "He interrogates everyone new."

"I understand," she says.

The gates open automatically as we arrive. Three acres of grass and landscaped gardens surround the colonial mansion my great-grandfather bought with rum-running money during The Prohibition. Stone walls with security cameras circle the property. Two men trim shrubs near the entrance, looking like gardeners but I know they're carrying weapons under their overalls.

Orla takes in each detail, she's making notes rather than being impressed. Most

visitors gawk at the wealth displayed through the architecture. She is spotting the security measures. Another note in my mental file about my new assistant, she's always looking for the exit.

I park in the circular driveway. "Ready?"

"Yes." She steps out of the car with grace.

The front door opens before we get to the top step. My mother waits in the entryway, wearing a deep blue dress.

"Cillian." She kisses my cheeks, then smiles at Orla. "And Orla."

"Hello mother," I say.

"Thank you for having me, Mrs. Kavanagh," Orla says.

My mother takes her hand. "Please, call me Niamh. Come in."

The foyer is overshadowed by a grand staircase, and walls covered with family portraits and Irish landscapes. Orla follows us to the dining room, where the distinct chaos of family conversation is already loud enough to lift the roof.

My father is at the head of the table, Eamon to his right. They stop talking as we enter the room.

"Ah, Cillian," my father says without standing. His eyes lock onto Orla with the stare that makes men talk. "Who is this?"

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"My new assistant, Orla Kelly," I answer. "Mother invited her, and she'll be taking notes on our business discussions, so you fuckers can't lie and say you didn't say what you said."

My father's eyebrows raise slightly. Bringing an outsider to Sunday dinner breaks our rules.

"An assistant at family dinner?" Eamon says with a smirk. "She must be quite capable."

"She is," I reply. "and mother invited her, would you have said no?" No one says no to mother—especially not my father.

My mother guides Orla to sit beside me, across from Eamon. I can watch her as she faces my brother.

Servers bring the first course. My father has at her right away, I knew he would. He has a thing about hiring pretty ladies—he thinks assistants should be ugly or gay. One too many affairs that nearly had my mother lop his balls off, I'm surprised it is not company policy.

"Where are you from, Ms. Kelly?" he asks.

"South Boston," Orla answers, meeting his gaze.

"And your family?"

"I don't have any family, my parents died during the pandemic."

My father nods without sympathy. "Where did you go to school?"

"Boston College. I studied business administration."

More questions, he is like a dog with a bone. Previous jobs. Where she lives. Connections to other Boston families. Orla answers each one directly. Her story matches everything she told me during her interview.

My mother steps in when my father pushes too hard. "Tiernan, the soup will get cold. Perhaps we can learn about Orla throughout dinner rather than conducting an interrogation on the first course."

He grunts but changes the subject. Orla takes a small breath - the only hint she feels relief.

Eamon is quiet during the questioning, but he watches Orla the whole time. He looks at her as he would a potential threat. I plan to ask him about this later, I can tell he doesn't like her. Any other day a woman that pretty came to dinner he'd be eye-fucking her.

The main course arrives, and talk turns to business.

"The shipment from Dublin arrives Tuesday," my father says, cutting his steak. "Traditional handling."

I put down my fork. "We should consider alternatives. The harbor master mentioned increased inspections, it is a risky one."

My father waves this away. "We've used the same plan for twenty years."

"Which makes it predictable," I counter. "I've been looking at northern routes with better margins and fewer eyes."

Eamon snorts. "Ever the Harvard man, trying to reinvent the wheel. It's not broke, don't try fix it."

Orla takes notes on her tablet, recording our discussion. She writes without looking down, paying full attention to everyone at the table.

"Progress requires change," I say. "Our competitors are using technology and crypto while we rely on methods from the last century."

My father's knife hits his plate. "Those methods built this house, paid for your education, and kept us out of prison. Respect what works. I want no part of that funny-money stuff."

My mother joins in. "Cillian makes valid points about change, Tiernan. Perhaps it is time for a compromise? Keep traditional channels open while testing Cillian's alternatives with some smaller shipments?" Orla looks surprised that my mother is the smartest man at the table.

The same argument continues through dessert - tradition versus innovation, old ways versus new ways. Orla watches and takes notes, she never says a word.

After dinner ends, my father gets up. "Cillian, join me in my study. Eamon, check with Connor about the warehouse situation."

My mother turns to Orla. "Would you like to see the garden? The jasmine smells wonderful this time of evening."

"Thank you," Orla says. "May I use the restroom first?"

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My mother points her down the hall while we go our separate ways. I walk toward my father's study but stop when I hear Eamon talking in the corridor by the bathroom.

"Have we met before?" His voice is harsh. "You look so fucking familiar."

I see Eamon blocking Orla's path back to the dining room. She stays calm, but changes her stance.

"I worked at Flanagan's Pub during college," she says. "You and your friends came in often."

Eamon narrows his eyes. "Which friends?"

"I didn't know their names. The group that came in on Thursday nights. You always paid their tab with cash."

Her specific answer makes him pause. I step forward.

"Father's waiting, Eamon."

He looks at me, then back at Orla. "Right. Flanagan's." He walks away, still suspicious.

Orla turns to me. "Should I find your mother?"

"In a moment," I say. "How was your first Kavanagh interrogation?"

A small smile appears. "Not so bad."

"You handled it well," I admit. "Most people panic under my father's questioning."

"I have no reason to panic," she replies.

I watch her, adding another note to my mental file about Orla Kelly. She meets my eyes without backing down. I get the sense she's measuring me as much as I'm measuring her.

"I really should join your mother," she says.

I nod and watch her walk away, wondering what I've brought into our inner circle.

CHAPTER 5

ORLA

It is just after four thirty when crisis strikes, interrupting my plans to snoop in the shipping files after hours.

"Westridge wants to pull their account," Cillian says, walking from his office. "They're saying they have an exit clause. I need a solution now."

I set aside my real plans and put on my best assistant persona. Each problem creates a chance to gain his trust, giving me more access, and information.

"What happened?" I ask while pulling up their files.

"FDA flagged three shipments." He drops a folder on my desk. "They don't think we can shield them from investigation, they want to pull the plug. Bunch of ninnies,

afraid of a little heat."

I review the contract, and shipping manifests as Cillian moves around behind me. Westridge Pharmaceuticals makes up fifteen percent of our legitimate revenue—a major client whose departure would draw unwanted attention.

"I need twenty minutes with these," I say.

"You get ten," Cillian snaps.

Nine minutes pass before I knock on his door.

"Come in."

I enter with my printed response and place it on his desk. "The FDA flags target their Southeast Asian manufacturing. By routing shipments through our Singapore office instead of Boston, we can create a regulatory buffer."

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Cillian reviews my work, going through each page. "This changes their classification."

"Yes. And creates documentation that meets FDA requirements without triggering a deeper investigation."

He looks at me with new interest. "How did you learn about these loopholes?"

"My previous firm managed pharmaceutical shipping. On a much smaller scale, but with similar challenges."

"Contact Singapore. I want confirmation they can handle this change."

This means working late—perfect. "On it."

By seven, we are finished restructuring Westridge, drafting new contracts, and keeping a firm grip on their business. I talk with their VP while Cillian speaks to their CEO. This crisis serves us both—for very different reasons.

"They signed a three-year deal" Cillian says, ending his call.

"Better than the one-year we had." I save every file onto my drive.

"You did well today." He pulls his tie loose, his face more relaxed than usual. "Most assistants would have watched me fix it."

"I believe in exceeding expectations," I reply.

Cillian glances at his watch. "It's late. I'll walk you down."

"I should file these first," I say, wanting time alone in the office.

"That can wait?—"

His phone interrupts. He checks the screen and raises a finger. "I need to answer this."

I turn to my computer, pretending to work while listening to his conversation.

"How many?" Cillian asks, his voice hardening. "No. Keep the docks secure until I send backup."

My fingers press random keys while my ears focus on his words.

"Tell Eamon to stay there. He can keep his temper in check until I get there." He pauses. "Two hours. Make sure those Dorchester bastards know the waterfront belongs to us."

After hanging up, I continue typing as if I heard nothing.

"Orla."

I look at him with a neutral face. "Yes?"

"We need to leave. Now."

I close my files and take my coat. Whatever happened at the docks, Cillian won't leave me alone in the office tonight—a problem and an opportunity to learn more.

"I have an urgent situation," he says as we head to the elevator. "I'll take you home."

"I drove today," I remind him.

"Right." He is distracted as we enter the elevator. "I'll walk you to your car."

The building is almost empty now. Our steps echo through the lobby where the night guard nods at Cillian.

The parking garage is vast and hollow, our footsteps bouncing off bare concrete walls. My car is parked in the far corner, just where I left it—but three men step out from behind a concrete column, walking straight toward us.

Cillian stops walking. His arm moves across my body as a shield.

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"Stay behind me," he says quietly.

I watch the approaching men—two tall, one stocky and compact, all in dark jackets even though it's hot as balls down here. I memorize their faces, builds, and gaits.

"Mr. Kavanagh," the shorter man says with fake warmth. "What a surprise."

"Duffy." Cillian keeps his voice casual while his stance changes. "You're nowhere near your pigsty."

"Just visiting." Duffy looks at me, then back to Cillian. "Pretty companion."

"This is my assistant." Cillian reaches toward his waist, showing the handle of a gun.

"Why would Moran send his errand boy to y office?"

I play the scared assistant while noting every detail—including this name. Moran, apparently a rival.

"Bringing a personal message." Duffy grins, showing off a gold tooth. "Your brother took something that didn't belong to him. Mr. Moran wants it back."

"Messages go through official channels," Cillian says. "Not parking and not in front of ladies."

"We wanted a personal touch?—"

"That was shit idea." Cillian's voice turns hard. "Tell Moran to call my office during

business hours if he wants to talk to me."

I watch Duffy's men get antsy.

"Sure." Duffy steps backward. "But remember—we could send a fax. Or a courier, or something messier."

The threat lingers as they walk to a black SUV and drive away.

Cillian is alert until the vehicle leaves. Then he turns to check on me.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

I nod, acting afraid. "Who were they?"

"No one important." He walks me to my car, scanning every corner. "Business associates with poor manners."

"They knew you were leaving," I note while unlocking my door.

A muscle jumps in his jaw. "Coincidence, they were waiting."

We both recognize the lie. Someone told them Cillian would work late, they didn't sit here all day.

"Drive straight home," he says. "Stay on main streets. I'll call you in fifteen minutes to make sure you arrived."

"You don't need to?—"

"I do." His tone cuts off any argument. "Answer your phone."

I sit in my car, mind racing. These men know Cillian's movements. They might know my address too—a risk I didn't consider. His enemies becoming my enemies—maybe I should make friends.

Driving away, I check my mirror. Cillian watches until I turn the corner, his phone to his ear, gun in his hand now.

I've seen both versions of Cillian Kavanagh today—capable businessman and dangerous criminal. Neither is what I imagined he would be.

My phone rings exactly fifteen minutes later.

"I made it home," I tell him from my apartment.

"Good. Lock up. I'll see you tomorrow."

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He cuts the call without waiting for a reply from me. I go to my window and search the street for black SUVs, strange faces, or any hint I was followed.

CHAPTER 6

CILLIAN

Orla has worked here for three weeks, she is fucking good at her job and already knows the office and business inside out. But something still unsettles me.

"Take these financial projections to my mother," I say, sliding a leather portfolio across my desk. "She needs to review them before the board meeting."

Orla looks up. "Should I schedule a review meeting afterward?"

"No. Just get her signature on the approval form." I wait a beat. "Bring her coffee. Black with one sugar."

"At the house?"

I nod. "Tuesday mornings she works from home. The staff expects you."

I catch a tiny spark in her eyes. No one is happy to see my mother, why would she be?

"I'll go now," she says, collecting the portfolio and her tablet.

After she leaves, I call Mother. "Orla is headed your way with the projections. I'll be there later on."

"You really trust this one?" Mother asks.

"Yes. She's damn good."

Mother chuckles. "I'll be the judge of that. See you shortly."

I arrive twenty minutes behind Orla, parking beside the fountain.

Voices echo from the passage. I trace them to my Mother's sitting room, pausing at the entrance. Orla sits with her, coffee cups on the antique table between them. Neither one notices me.

"Cillian at seventeen," Mother says, pointing to a photo. "Boxing champion that year. Broke his opponent's nose."

Orla looks at the picture. Her gaze lingers too long. "He looks very determined."

"Always has been." Mother turns the album page. "This was our first warehouse, before we expanded."

I step into the room. "Sharing family secrets, Mother?"

Both women turn. Mother smiles while Orla sits straighter.

"Just ancient history," Mother says.

"Fascinating history," Orla adds. "Your family history is a part of Boston."

I take a seat, watching them interact. "Did she sign the papers?"

"Yes." Orla hands me the folder. I notice her eyes drift back to the photo album.

"Show her the Sullivan Docks acquisition," I suggest to my mother, curious.

Mother flips to that page. "A major turning point in 1995. Tiernan negotiated with Sullivan for months."

Orla's fingers tighten on her cup. So, brief I almost miss it. Why would Sullivan Docks matter to her?

"That facility tripled our capacity," I add, watching her face.

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"Impressive," Orla says.

Mother continues through the album, showing business landmarks and family gatherings. When she reaches the company picnic from 2010, Orla goes still.

"A wonderful day," Mother says. "Tiernan invited everyone. That's Jenkins from accounting, and Thomas from finance..."

"Excuse me," Orla interrupts. "Where's your restroom?"

"Down the hall to your left," Mother directs.

Once Orla exits, Mother closes the album. "Unusual choice of assistant, she is very pretty."

I raise an eyebrow. "Pretty is not the problem. Your thoughts?"

"Smart. Observant. Asks questions."

"About what?"

Mother pauses. "The warehouse properties. Your father's associates from the nineties. Our current expansion plans."

A warning pulses in my mind. "Financial details?"

"Not exactly. She picked up on certain names." Mother takes a sip of coffee.

"Thomas Nolan, specifically."

The name is familiar. He was a former accountant. He was murdered years ago in a break-in, if memory serves.

"Watch her," Mother advises. "Useful, yes, but her curiosity seems... dangerous."

Orla returns minutes later, composed yet rattled at the same time. Redness rims her eyes. Something in that photo hit her hard.

"Your mother knows the business better than she lets on," Orla says as we walk to our cars afterward.

I glance at her. "Mother is the brains behind the man. Her social queen act works well as cover."

"Similar to your legitimate businessman facade?"

Bold question.

"We all wear masks, Orla. The point is whether they serve us." I stop beside her car. "What mask are you wearing?"

Her green eyes meet mine directly. "I don't need a mask, I am exactly who you see."

"For now." I open her car door. "I suspect you hide so much more."

She slides behind the wheel. "I'll consider that a compliment."

"It wasn't." I close her door. "Remember one thing - this family misses nothing."

Driving back, I turn over the puzzle of Orla Kelly. Her reaction to that picnic photo. Her questions about past employees.

I should order a deeper background investigation. Yet I pause. Whatever game she is playing, I want to see her next move. My father taught me to keep enemies close.

Though I haven't decided if she's an enemy, an asset, or both. All I know is I'll be watching every step she takes.

CHAPTER 7

ORLA

The invitation was delivered to my desk by messenger, cream cardstock bordered in gold. Boston Children's Hospital Annual Benefit Gala, Saturday at the Fairmont Copley Plaza Hotel.

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"I need you to attend that shitshow with me," Cillian says from his office doorway. "Several major clients will be there."

I pick up the invitation, noting the \$5,000-per-plate price tag. "You want me to take notes or be your date?"

He steps into my office area. "I need you as my date."

I choke on air, I was not expecting that, I was joking. "Your date?"

"My regular plus-one canceled, and arriving alone would cause hysteria and mother's setting me up with daughters. I'd like to avoid that."

A room full of Kavanagh business contacts means access to information I could never get otherwise. Yet it also means hours hoping no one blows my cover by accident.

"Is that appropriate?" I ask, playing my part as the cautious employee.

"It's business," he says with a wave. "The gala starts at eight. I'll send a car for you at seven-thirty."

He turns to leave, then pauses. "Wear the right clothes for the occasion. The company will cover any expenses if needed."

After he exits, I text Doyle.

I am going to that gala this weekend. Should I be worried?

His reply comes fast.

I'll be there. Working security detail. You'll be okay.

I stare at my phone, a flicker of concern crossing my mind. Doyle mentioned taking private security gigs at high-society events months ago—a way to access rooms filled with Boston's elite without raising suspicions. Poor cop trying to earn extra money. The perfect cover for getting close to the Kavanagh network.

When I look at myself in the bathroom mirror, a stranger looks right back at me. The midnight blue dress is elegant enough to blend in, but not flashy enough to catch unwanted attention. It hugs my body, but doesn't show skin, understated but I still feel sexy in it.

I open my jewelry box, and take out the only piece in it that matters to me—my mother's emerald pendant on a delicate silver chain. She left it behind when she abandoned us. Wearing it feels risky tonight, it is too connected to my real identity, but I need the reminder of why I'm doing this.

I practiced dancing yesterday, preparing for any rogue socialite who asks me to dance. I went over every detail about my fake life story, so I won't trip up. I have a mental list of names, people who might be there tonight—people who I think may have been connected to my father's murder.

The buzzer sounds. There is a town car waiting for me outside, like Cinderella's carriage, only it won't turn into a pumpkin.

The Fairmont's ballroom is overflowing with the who's who of wealth and power, every well-to-do family in the city has someone here tonight. Crystal chandeliers, white-clothed tables, floral arrangements taller than most children. Boston's elite mingle in tuxedos and couture gowns that I couldn't ever afford even on my new

salary.

Cillian looks very different from the man I see daily at the office. His tuxedo fits like the sewed it onto his body, hugging his broad shoulders and trim waist. He draws eyes from every corner of the room. Men, and women turn to look as we pause just inside the doors.

"Ready?" he asks, offering his arm.

I place my hand in the crook of his elbow, nothing but solid muscle beneath fine fabric. "I'm ready."

We join the crowd. Cillian guides us through the trophy wives, and politicians, introducing me as "Orla Kelly, my new executive assistant."

"James Richardson, Boston Harbor Development," Cillian says, introducing me to a silver-haired man with a politician's smile.

"Pleasure," Richardson says, holding my hand longer than necessary. "So you're the one keeping his office running smoothly?"

"I try my best," I reply with a smile.

"She's essential," Cillian adds.

Richardson talks about waterfront properties. I listen carefully, noting their coded references to "special access points" and "flexibility"—it is likely they're discussing smuggling.

While they talk, I scan the room for faces I might know. Anyone that could blow my cover. Near the service entrance I see Detective Doyle in a private security uniform,

watching the crowd. Our eyes meet briefly before I look away, my heart racing. His presence changes everything, even a hint that I might know a cop will set Cillian off. Seeing him here makes the danger real. One mistake from either of us could unravel everything, and put me in real danger. No one will look for a missing person that doesn't exist.

More introductions, small talk and fake smiling. Judge Martin Palmer, who mysteriously never presides over cases involving Kavanagh interests. City Councilwoman Helen Zhao, who chairs the port authority portfolio. A customs official whose children attend an elite private school on a civil servant's salary.

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I make a note of each face, each connection, building a mental map of the Kavanagh's criminal network while being the best fake-date any man could ask for.

"Care for a dance?" Richardson appears at my side. Cillian left me alone to go speak with the mayor across the room.

"Mr. Richardson?—"

"James, please," he interrupts. "One dance while Cillian is occupied."

I weigh options fast. I don't want to offend the man. "Of course."

On the dance floor, Richardson holds me closer than he should. "How long have you worked for Cillian?"

"Six weeks," I answer.

"Interesting timing," he muses. "Right after the Donovan situation."

That gets my attention. Donovan—a name from my father's notes and one I have heard around the office.

"I'm not familiar with any situation," I say.

Richardson smiles. "No reason you would be. It is ancient history now." His hand slides lower on my back. "What did you do before joining Kavanagh Import & Export?"

"Administrative work for?—"

"Mind if I cut in?" Cillian appears to save me from having my ass groped, his tone pleasant but his eyes stone cold.

Richardson steps back with a smug smile. "Your assistant was just telling me about her last job."

"Another time," Cillian says, taking my hand. "The hospital director wants to introduce us to some of the other donors."

He guides me away, his palm warm against my back. Once we're across the dance floor, he turns to me.

"Richardson has a reputation," he says.

"For being hands?" I reply, keeping my voice low.

Cillian's jaw tightens. "Dance with me."

He pulls me into his arms as the orchestra begins a waltz. Unlike Richardson, his lead is natural, confident without unwanted advances.

"You can dance," I say.

"Not by choice. My mother insisted. She called it a life lesson, our school mates called it gay."

We float across the floor, his hand resting properly at my waist, mine on his shoulder. The dance feels intimate.

"Tell me about the Donovan situation," I say.

His steps pause briefly. "Richardson mentioned that?"

"He said it happened when I joined the company."

Cillian watches my face. "A former business associate who made some unfortunate choices. Nothing you need be concerned about."

He's evasive about it. "I should know about things that may crop up in the office."

His mouth curves. "You're persistent."

"It's why you hired me."

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The music changes, a slower more sensual rhythm. Cillian adjusts our position, pulling me closer. I notice the scent of his cologne, the warmth of his hand against mine.

"Why the emerald?" he asks, glancing at my necklace. "I haven't seen you wear jewelry once."

"It was my mother's."

"It matches your eyes," he says.

"It is a special occasion," I reply, uneasy about his attention to detail. "I wanted to look pretty. To fit in."

We dance in silence for the rest of the song, I fight unwelcome awareness of him as a man rather than the murderer I believe he is. His hand at my waist is strong, firm. Our bodies move in a harmony.

"You're different tonight," he says.

"How so?"

"More relaxed. Less uptight."

"Is that a problem? Is this not supposed to be fun?"

"No," he says, voice dropping. "It's nice to see you relaxed."

His eyes hold mine, and for a moment, I forget why I'm here. Forget he's a Kavanagh. Forget my father's blood soaking his desk.

I pull away. "I need a moment." I say, and flee to the powder room.

I splash cold water on my wrists, avoiding my reflection. What am I doing? Detective Doyle is a guard in this very building. My father's murderers are working the room outside these doors. I danced with Cillian Kavanagh, and enjoyed it.

I touch the emerald pendant, I need to remind myself. This isn't real. None of it. I'm here for justice, not to trip over pretty words and strong hands.

When I return to the ballroom, Cillian is watching for me, he looks concerned. I put on Orla Kelly's sweet smile and make my way back to him.

"Everything alright?" he asks.

"Perfect," I lie.

As we move back into the crowd, I notice Detective Doyle is watching us. A silent reminder of the promises I made at my father's grave.

No matter how Cillian looks at me, no matter how good his touches feel, I can't forget who he is and what his family did. Even if, for just one dance, I almost did.

CHAPTER 8

CILLIAN

I watch Mitchell cowering against the side of a shipping container. The warehouse echoes with his ragged breathing and water dripping from the leaking roof. Eamon

stands in front of him, waiting for my instructions.

"You sold shipping manifests to the Murphy crew," I say. "Cost us a quarter million and put three of our men in the hospital."

Mitchell trembles, his eyes darting between me and my brother. "Mr. Kavanagh, I can explain?—"

Eamon strikes without warning, his fist connecting with Mitchell's jaw. Blood and teeth splatter across the concrete floor.

"Eamon." My voice stays flat. "He needs his teeth to talk."

My brother backs away, his knuckles stained red. He glances toward the car where Orla waits, she can see everything. I never planned to bring her, but the call came during our Connecticut expansion meeting. There wasn't time to drop her off. Now she is witnessing how we handle betrayal.

Mitchell spits blood. "They paid me fifty grand. My wife needs surgery—insurance wouldn't cover?—"

"You should have come to me," I cut him off. "We take care of our own."

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"I was afraid?—"

"Now you understand afraid." I step forward, adjusting my cuffs. "Names. Every Murphy contact you spoke with. Every document you copied."

Eamon grabs bolt cutters from a nearby table. Mitchell's eyes go wide.

"He needs his fingers to write," I say. Eamon drops the it with a clang.

Mitchell sings like a canary. Names, dates, documents—everything pours out of him while Eamon records it. I watch Orla from the corner of my eye. She is motionless, face neutral. No disgust, no fear. Either she's witnessed this before or she possesses exceptional control. Or she's some sort of sociopath.

When Mitchell's well of information runs dry, I nod to Eamon. "Get his shit together. Then take him to the boat."

"Please," Mitchell begs, "my wife?—"

"Will receive the best medical care," I reply. "Your children's education will be taken care of through college. But you'll never see any of them again."

His sobs follow me as I walk away. Punishment and mercy delivered together, just as my Father taught me.

Orla is waiting when I get back into the car. "Should I reschedule the vendor meeting?" she asks, as if we just left any normal business lunch.

"No." I slide into the backseat, watching for any cracks in her composure. Nothing. She is not afraid of me, nor is she upset by what she just saw. "We'll be at the office in thirty minutes."

The office gets very quiet once the sun goes down, only a few staff stay late. I send my security detail to wait out in the hall and pour myself a Redbreast 21 in a crystal tumbler. I pull my tie loose and sink into my leather chair.

Mitchell joins a long list of traitors I've dealt with recently. There must be something in the water. Our family business demands loyalty. Those who betray us pay dearly, it has always been that way. It doesn't matter who it is—a traitor is a traitor.

With each one I have to deal with, the life I once planned slips further away. My Harvard Business Review subscription collects dust beside my MBA thesis on sustainable import practices. I had big ideas, lofty dreams—I never imagined that my family would be the one thing stopping me.

A knock at the door interrupts my thoughts. Orla walks in without waiting, a manila folder in hand.

"The quarterly figures you asked for." She stops, noticing the whiskey. "I can come back tomorrow."

"Stay." I motion to the chair across from me. "Want a drink?"

She pauses, then puts the folder down, and sits. "Yes, please."

I pour and pass her a glass. "Today a little outside of your office duties."

"I work for the Kavanaghs." She drinks without reaction to the strong liquor. "I am not a fool. I understand what that means."

"Do you?" I watch her closely. "Most people would run after seeing what you saw today."

"Most people lack perspective." Her gaze meets mine directly. "The world runs on hard choices."

An unexpected answer. I sit back as the whiskey warms my veins. "What do you know about me, Orla?"

"You graduated top of your class at Harvard. You worked at Wellington Partners before rejoining the family business. You speak four languages and built a reputation for both your intelligence and ruthlessness."

I tap the rim of my glass. "Research or office gossip?"

"Both." Her mouth curves slightly. "Plus, your diploma is hanging up behind your desk."

I turn toward the framed certificate, partially covered by filing cabinets. No one ever notices it.

"Why come back?" she asks. "You had your foot in with a legitimate business."

The question is not an easy one to answer. I drink again before I do.

"Family obligations trump personal desires."

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"That depends on your family." She says. "What were your desires?"

I stand up and move to the windows. Boston sprawls before me, a city my family has shaped from the underworld for generations. Those sparkling lights in the night are our playground—we own this city.

"I wanted to build stuff, not destroy it. Create jobs, not fear. My thesis outlined turning our shipping network into the most efficient east coast operation through both technology and partnerships." I look back at her. "My Father called it naïve, fantasies, and said I should stop trying to fix things that are not broken."

"Why not just do it anyway?"

Most people accept that I abandoned my education for family duty.

"who says I haven't?" She smiles. "The Connecticut expansion. Our new digital tracking systems. Allowing for payment in crypto not just fiat." I return to my desk. "Small steps toward changing things, while keeping the surface undisturbed."

Orla nods. "A quiet resistance, not a revolution. Smart."

"Exactly."

She finishes her whiskey. "Your brother disagrees with you? He doesn't strike me as a man with vision."

"Eamon believes in old ways. Protection through fear. He thinks my methods will

make us look weak, and that we will lose control."

"But you still work as a team."

"We protect the family. That's how it works."

Orla puts down her glass. "Thanks for explaining."

"Thanks for not running." I pour us each another finger of whiskey. "Not many people would stick around to ask questions."

"Still waters run deep, I know you are more than meets the eye."

Our conversation changes from business to books, travels, philosophies. Each exchange reveals parts of her I didn't know. I find myself drawn to her mind, her ability to challenge me without confronting me. She's whip smart, sexy as all hell, and doesn't seem to know either.

Hours pass. The office is dark except for my desk lamp. We move from sitting across the desk to the comfortable chairs near the window. The gap between boss and employee shrinks with each question, each answer.

"Why don't you have any personal photos in here?" she asks.

"Getting personal at work is dangerous."

"People need to know you're human."

"Being human costs too much in my world."

"It must be lonely."

"I can handle it." I pause, taking in her features in the dim room. "Usually."

She looks up, and I lean in, pulled by a force I can't resist. Her eyes meet mine, then drop to my mouth. Electricity sparks in the space between us.

I move closer. Her eyes close. I shouldn't be looking at her like this—I should not be so close. This is an HR violation, it is going against my gut on every level.

My phone rings. We pull apart as I grab it.

"Kavanagh," I answer.

"Security breach at the service elevator," my head of security says. "The motion sensors activated, and cameras have been tampered with."

"I'll be right down." I end the call and stand. "Work calls."

Orla rises, composed despite what almost happened. "I should leave."

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"My driver will take you." I fix my tie. "We'll review Connecticut tomorrow."

She nods and walks to the door, then turns. "Thank you for trusting me."

After she leaves my office, I stare at our empty glasses. Tonight I crossed a boundary, sharing thoughts I hide from everyone with her. Exposing my vulnerabilities to a woman I've known only a month.

CHAPTER 9

ORLA

"This way," Cillian says, guiding me through stacks of shipping containers four stories high. "I need to verify the McAllister shipment has arrived intact." He is antsy today, crankier than usual.

I trail beside him, my tablet in hand. I have the packing lists open, and ready. The container stacks are near the docks, remote enough that any noise vanishes. It's the ideal place for both legitimate business and things you'd want to hide in plain sight.

"These quality checks matter," Cillian says as we pass workers who nod. "My father believes in hands-on management."

What he doesn't say—this facility is for more than furniture and electronics. I've seen the manifests with weight discrepancies. The couches are stuffed with other things. Weapons, most likely. My Dad's notes mentioned this particular stack repeatedly.

"Check these against the packing list," Cillian says, handing me a folder. "I need to speak with the night manager."

I nod, accepting the documents while scanning the area. Four security guards. Cameras at every corner. Two exits both with access control, security guards and cameras. I flip through papers, noting the real discrepancies while pretending to mark off the packing list.

A security guard approaches Cillian, whispering something. His casual stance vanishes, replaced by hyper-vigilance.

"Stay close," he murmurs, returning to my side. "We have some uninvited guests." This place gave me the creeps before I knew we were not alone. Now all I see is that maze from mouse-trap and imagine we have nowhere to run.

Three men emerge from behind a shipping container. Not workers—the way they stand I can tell they are not laborers. Two keep their hands near jacket pockets, I know they are armed. They don't even try hide their guns.

"Mr. Kavanagh," the tallest one says. "Wasn't aware you'd be visiting today."

"Malone." Cillian moves in front of me, his voice cold. "This is Kavanagh property. Your boss knows the boundaries."

"Boundaries are pretty flexible," another man says. "Mr. Donovan sends regards."

The Donovan crew has pushed into Kavanagh territory for months, according to Detective Doyle's. There is a war brewing—these men are not here to exchange pleasantries.

"Leave," Cillian says, "and I'll consider this a misunderstanding."

I sense the movement behind us. A fourth man his, eyes fixed on me. Cillian sees him but can't deal with both threats at once.

The tall one—Malone—laughs. "Nice assistant. Shame to risk her safety over boundaries and all."

Everything happens at once. Malone reaches into his jacket. Cillian rushes forward. Security guards come running from hidden corners of the yard.

The man behind us lunges for me, grabbing my arm. Instinct and training kick in.

I strike his solar plexus with my elbow, stamp his instep, and twist away. When he stumbles, I step aside and push him into a crate.

He rushes at me again. I duck, and sweep his leg. He falls hard.

I stay defensive but don't attack—a normal woman might know basic self defense, but not offensive moves. My cover matters most. I can protect myself—but I Orla would never attack a man.

Cillian moves with brutal force, nothing like the flawless executive from the office. He is a deadly weapon, one I should run away from while I still can.

In thirty seconds, it's over. The Donovan crew dead on the concrete floor. My attacker stares at me, blood dripping from his nose.

Cillian turns to me, his eyes wide. He looks from my stance to the man on the ground.

"You took him down." Not a question.

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I make my hands shake, using real adrenaline. "He grabbed me. I just... reacted."

Cillian turns to his security team. "Get them out of here. Call Patrick. This needs to handled."

The bodies 'disappear' into dark vans. Cillian walks over to me.

"Are you hurt?"

"No." I rub my wrist as if it hurts. "Just shaken up."

He points toward the car. "We're done here."

In his black Mercedes, Cillian is silent he drives a while before speaking to me.

"Where does an executive assistant learn to fight like that?" he asks.

I've rehearsed this answer. The best lies mix with truth.

"My ex-boyfriend made me take self-defense after my apartment was broken into," I say. "Three months of Krav Maga basics."

"Basics," Cillian says. "You dropped a man twice your size."

I look at my hands. "Adrenaline, I guess. The instructor said muscles remember when brains panic."

He drives, his jaw tight. "Most people freeze their first time in danger."

"I froze when my apartment was invaded," I say, another partial truth. "That's why I took the class."

"Thank you," I say. "For protecting me back there."

His knuckles are red and raw. "It's part of my job. Though you managed well enough on your own."

The car is suddenly too hot inside. Each breath seems to add to the humidity. The leather seats, the shared danger—it all creates an unwanted closeness.

I notice things I shouldn't. His jawline. A scar near his eyebrow. How his eyes check mirrors for danger every few seconds.

"Are we—" I ask. "are we being followed?"

"No," Cillian says.

We stop at a red light. His phone buzzes with texts he ignores. Heat mists up the windows—danger and attraction mixing.

"Your job description keeps getting longer," he says as we pull up to my apartment. "Spreadsheets, shipping manifests, close combat with thugs."

I offer a small laugh. "Not what I expected when I applied."

His eyes find mine. "Nothing with my family will ever match expectations."

I grab my purse, needing space from this moment, from him. My hand reaches for the

door handle.

Cillian's hand closes over mine, stopping me. "Wait."

I turn back, my pulse racing so hard I can hear my heartbeat in my ears. His eyes darken as they search my face. Without warning, he moves across the center console, his hand gripping the back of my neck.

His mouth crashes against mine with raw hunger. The kiss isn't gentle—it's possessive, claiming, marking. His tongue demands entrance, and I open for him without hesitation. The taste of him—mint and adrenaline and danger—floods my senses.

My hands grab his shirt, pulling him closer despite the awkward angle. His fingers tangle in my hair, tugging my head back to deepen the kiss. A moan escapes me as his teeth catch my lower lip, biting just hard enough to send a jolt of electricity down my spine.

His other hand slides up my thigh, leaving a trail of fire through my skirt. I arch toward him, my body betraying every rational thought in my head. His mouth moves to my neck, teeth grazing the sensitive skin beneath my ear.

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"I want you," he growls against my skin, the words vibrating through me.

I grip his shoulders, nails digging into expensive fabric. "Cillian?—"

He pulls back enough to look at me, his eyes nearly black with desire. His thumb traces my swollen lips, still wet from his kiss.

"Come upstairs with me," I whisper, throwing caution to the wind.

For a moment, I think he'll accept. Then rational thought returns. He pulls back, though his hand lingers on my neck.

"No," he says, voice rough. "Not like this."

The rejection stings, but his eyes promise this isn't over—just delayed.

I reach for the door, my legs unsteady. He catches my wrist before I can exit.

"Orla." His voice stops me. "You kicked ass today."

His praise shouldn't matter. His family killed mine. Yet warmth flows through me, I fawn at his praise like a love starved puppy.

"Goodnight, Cillian."

I walk into my building on shaky legs, my body still throbbing from his touch. I can feel his eyes on me until I go inside. In the elevator, I rest against the wall, fingers

touching my lips where I can still taste him.

The warehouse proved two truths. It might be harder to hide my ass-kicking skills than I thought, and my attraction to Cillian Kavanagh is getting dangerously close to clouding my judgment.

CHAPTER 10

CILLIAN

I have avoided being alone with my assistant since I kissed her in my car, and very nearly went up to her apartment to do far worse things to her. Orla has got under my skin, and I can't trust myself not to blur the lines between pleasure and work. But this New York trip was unavoidable, now I am alone with her. In another city—and she is going to be everywhere.

I press the penthouse button and watch the elevator numbers climb. Orla stands an arm's length away, her reflection caught in the polished doors. The subtle scent of her perfume fills the small space, intoxicating me with filthy thoughts about what might be under her dress.

"We have two hours before the Matsui meeting," I say. "Did you get a chance to review those contracts?"

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "Finished them on the plane. I've highlighted their weaknesses in the counteroffer."

The doors slide open to our suite. Manhattan spreads beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, a concrete jungle bathed in afternoon light. Two bedroom doors flank a spacious common area that is decorated with leather furniture and modern art.

"The Hong Kong group arrives at four," I remind her, tossing my keycard on the glass desk. "They'll press on relentlessly about shipping access."

"I'll prepare for that." Orla heads toward her room, heels clicking against marble floors.

Once she disappears, I loosen my tie and pour two fingers of scotch. It was strangling me—or it was her that made it impossible to breathe all the way up here. I swirl the amber liquid, watching the ice melt. The Matsui meeting is just a cover—my real agenda is to get information about our West Coast competition. Another game in an endless chess match.

When Orla returns, I catch her looking around the suite. Not admiring the luxury or art, but noting exits, cameras. Her eyes sweep the room for ways out, or in. An interesting skill for an executive assistant.

The restaurant is buzzing with energy and the guests ooze power and status. Banking executives cluster in hushed conversation near the bar. Tech billionaires hold court by the windows. Our table has clear views of both the entrance and kitchen doors—always have your eyes on the all exits.

"Matsui extends his apologies." Harrison Reed slides into the chair across from me. His tailored suit can't hide the fighter's build beneath. "I'll be handling the arrangements moving forward."

I recognize the play immediately. Reed Shipping controls territory we've been eyeing along the Pacific coast. They are not going to roll over and let me in. His presence here confirms my suspicions about this dinner.

"Unfortunate," I say, signaling the waiter for wine. "I prefer to discuss partnerships in person."

Orla is at my right hand, iPad ready. Her eyes flick between us, while she pretends to read the menu.

Throughout dinner, we trade barbs disguised as business talk. The dance of words conceals the true negotiation happening beneath the surface. I can't exactly call him a greedy cunt to his face—not in public.

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"Boston harbor has been under increased scrutiny lately," Reed says as the waiter clears our dessert plates. "DEA presence makes commerce... complicated."

I take my time with the wine. "Every port has unique challenges. Business doesn't have to be complicated."

"True." His smile never reaches his eyes. "Though your family's current challenges seem particularly acute. That dock worker incident. The Colombian imports flagged."

My temperature rises—he knows details that never went public—he's got information that no one outside my family should have.

"Markets evolve," I reply. "So do our methods."

"Evolution requires adaptation." His gaze shifts to Orla. "Or we face extinction."

I place my napkin beside my plate. "The Kavanagh family has survived for generations. We understand change better than most."

His eyes narrow at the implied threat. "We'll see."

While paying the bill, I notice a man sitting alone at the bar. Dark suit, angled away, but he's watching our reflection in the mirror. When we get up to leave, he signals the bartender.

The parking garage echoes with our footsteps. Concrete pillars casting shadows, creating perfect blind spots every few yards.

"We need to get out of here for a while," I murmur, my mouth barely moving.

Orla nods once. Her hand slips into her purse, and I know she's not reaching for car keys. She is full of surprises.

We reach the middle level and I can sense we might not be alone.

"Get the car," I tell Orla.

"Mr. Kavanagh." The a man steps out of the shadows. "Just a friendly conversation."

"My office handles appointments," I reply, shifting to block his access to Orla.

His hand slips inside his jacket.

I drive the heel of my palm into his sternum. My knee cracks against his thigh. I twist his wrist until the gun clatters to the ground. Orla pulls up next to me, the engine growls as I reluctantly get in the passenger side of the car. "this meeting, the whole trip seems to be some sort of setup." She says hightailing it out of the parking and seamlessly joining the traffic.

"You think?" I snap, my agitation getting the better of me. "Just drive, I will get someone to clear the building and our rooms before we go back."

"Drive where? It's peak hour traffic in Manhattan. It'll take an hour to get around the block. We could walk faster." She's right, we're sitting ducks in the car, but at least we're sitting in a gridlock that is too public to create chaos.

Midnight finds us back in the suite, we drove around until we found a coffee shop to wait for my security to give the all clear. The New York skyline glitters through floor-to-ceiling windows, a sea of lights against the darkness. Orla stands at the glass,

silhouetted against the view, her reflection ghosted onto the city outside.

I pour two glasses of whiskey and join her, offering one silently. She accepts with a small smile that changes her entire face. For a moment, I glimpse a different Orla—not the assistant, but a woman with desires and secrets.

"It's beautiful," she says, turning back to the view. "Makes a person feel small and powerful all at once."

"The Kavanagh family started with nothing," I say, standing closer than necessary. "My grandfather lost his parents during the famine, came here alone at fourteen. Started it all with one fishing boat."

"And now you control half of Boston's imports." She turns toward me, her hip against the glass. "Legal and not-so-legal."

The acknowledgment of the truth hangs there. She's never directly referenced the family's other businesses before.

"We provide services that people need," I reply. "Some things the government doesn't approve of, but people don't stop needing or wanting them."

"And what about you, Cillian?" She stares at me over the rim of her glass. "What do you want that you don't have?"

I consider deflecting with something about work.

Instead, I answer honestly. "In my world, everything's a transaction. Everyone wants something."

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"And you don't want the same things?" Her voice drops lower, a challenge in her tone.

"Oh, I want something." I step closer, drawn in by whatever magnetic force has pulled at me since she first walked into my office. "But it's not what a Kavanagh man should want. What do you want Orla?"

Her breath catches as I move into her space. We stand impossibly close, not touching but feeling the heat between us.

"What do I want?" she whispers.

"The same thing I do." I take her glass, setting it aside with mine. "This."

My hand slides to the back of her neck, pulling her toward me as my mouth claims hers. There's no hesitation, no surprise—as if we've both been waiting for this moment since the that first kiss.

Her lips part, inviting me deeper. What starts as a kiss ignites into hunger—weeks of tension and physical desire exploding. Her fingers pull at my shirt, yanking me closer as my hands slide down her back, pressing her body against mine.

I push her back against the window, Manhattan spread below us as I trail kisses down her throat. She tilts her head back, a soft moan escaping when I find a sensitive spot beneath her ear.

"We shouldn't do this," I mutter against her skin, even as my hands grip the curve of

her waist.

"Stop thinking," she says, pulling my mouth back to hers.

Her kiss is demanding, erasing any remaining doubts. I reach around to the zipper of her dress, drawing it down slowly to give her time to reconsider. Instead, she shrugs the fabric from her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor.

She stands there in black lace bra and matching underwear, her body pale and perfect against the backdrop of the night sky. I've imagined this moment countless times, but reality has nothing on my fantasy.

"Your turn," she says, unbuttoning my shirt.

When one snags, she pulls impatiently, popping it off. The small act of desperation—her need as heated as mine—breaks something inside me. I lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her to the bedroom.

I lay her on the king-sized bed, following her down, not wanting to break this connection even for a moment. She runs her hands down my chest, nails dragging lightly over skin as I work to remove my belt.

"I've thought about this," I confess, hovering above her. "Having you like this."

"Have you?"

I unhook her bra, her perfect breasts fill my palms. When I lower my head to take one nipple into my mouth, she gasps, back arching off the bed. I lavish attention on each breast before trailing kisses down her stomach, I pull her underwear off slowly, dragging it down her legs.

She watches me through half-closed eyes as I kneel between her thighs, she can see how hungry I am to taste her pussy. I press a kiss to her inner thigh, then another, working my way closer to where she wants me most.

"Stop teasing," she demands, sliding her fingers into my hair so she can control my movements.

I smile against her skin. "Patience is a virtue."

"Virtue is a Grace, which is not my name."

I lick slowly up her wet pussy. The first stroke of my tongue makes her moan. I fuck her with my tongue, until her thighs tremble. When I add my fingers, curling inside her, she screams my name.

I feel her orgasm building up, her body tense beneath my touch. I don't stop, I want her to come on my face. To lose all control and fuck my mouth. I need to taste her as she comes, to feel the waves of her climax as her pussy pulses around my finger. God, she is everything I imagined, and more—she tastes like sin, as she comes on my face. Her hands gripping my head so I can't move as she fucks my tongue through her orgasm.

While she's still coming down, I rip off the rest of my clothes. Her eyes open, her gaze trails down my naked body as I move above her again.

"You're fucking hot," she murmurs, hands reaching for me.

I position myself so my cock is at her pussy, pausing for one final moment. "Tell me you want this."

"I want this," she answers, pulling me closer. "right fucking now."

I push inside her with one slow thrust, both of us freezing at the perfect feeling of my cock inside her tight little pussy. She wraps her legs around my waist, forcing me deeper.

"You feel fucking incredible," I breathe against her lips.

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I move, her nails digging into my back. The feel of her stretching with each thrust, taking my cock inside her, squeezing it with every thrust. Her gasps in my ear, the scent of her skin—everything combines. I've had women before, but nothing like this. Nothing so intoxicating, sinful, fucking all consuming.

"Harder," she begs, meeting each thrust.

I drive into her. The headboard hits the wall with every push. Her cries get louder, less controlled. I feel her pussy tightening around me again, I want to feel her come on my cock. To make her shudder, and shake and lose all control.

"Look at me," I growl when her eyes flutter closed. "I want to see you. I want to watch you come on my cock, to see your eyes when you lose yourself."

Her gaze locks with mine as lust overtakes her. The unexpected intimacy—seeing into her while we are joined in the most primal way—pushes me to insanity. I can't hold back, I can't go slow or care if I am breaking her sweet little pussy, I just hammer into her, hard, deep—so deep I hear her whimper and moan. I fuck her like she is mine, and I don't stop until I have filled her tight pussy with my come, claiming her, making her.

We collapse together, pulse racing, skin damp with sweat.

I roll to my side, pulling her against me. Her head rests on my chest, auburn hair spilling across my skin.

"That was worth the wait," she murmurs, voice still husky from screaming my name.

I laugh softly. "If I'd known what I was missing, I wouldn't have bent you over a desk long ago."

She props herself up on one elbow, looking at me in the dim light. Without makeup, without the mask, she looks much younger, more vulnerable. Something protective comes alive in me.

"This isn't a good idea," I say.

Her palm rests over my heart. "Does that worry you?"

I think about it, I have never had a real connection. A relationship of any depth—in my line of work it is too risky. I've kept women at a distance for years, protecting both them and myself. But something about Orla has me thinking I could let my guard down, and see if I can have both.

"It should," I admit. "But no."

She smiles—a real smile that reaches her eyes, not the polite expression she wears at the office. I realize I've rarely seen her truly smile before.

"Why me?" she asks. "You could have anyone. You probably have had everyone."

I trace the curve of her cheek, running my thumb over the fullness of her lower lip. "Because you're not like anyone else. From the moment you walked into my office, there was something about you."

"Really?"

"You see through me," I say, the truth surprising even myself. "Not my name, or the power and the money. You looked at me like I was human."

Her expression softens. She leans down to kiss me, a gentle press of lips that feels more intimate than fucking her was.

"I see you," she whispers against my mouth.

My hand slides into her hair, deepening the kiss as my cock gets hard all over again. Slower this time, calm rather than desperate. I roll her beneath me, worshipping every inch of her body with hands and mouth. She returns the favor, doing ungodly things that make me groan, teasing until I can't stand it anymore.

When she straddles me, taking control, I let her. Her body moves above mine, bathed in light, the most erotic thing I've ever seen. I grip her hips, controlling her movements. She is going to make me come too fast if I let her go wild riding me like she is. Chasing her own orgasm, grinding her clit against me to make herself come. I cock inside her so deep she shudders each time I pull her down onto it. "Fuck." She whispers, but it sounds like a strangled scream. Her movements become more frantic as she fights against me to take control—it's power struggle, a fucking sexy one.

"Let me come," she says through gritted teeth.

"Beg me." I hold her down so she can't move my cock buried to the hilt in her slick, wet pussy. She looks me in the eye, I feel her body react to my words. Her pussy tightens, her nails dig into the skin on my chest.

"I don't beg." She says, defiant and so fucking hot. I feel it, the way she is tightening around my cock, and the look in her eyes tells me she knows what she is doing. I'm holding her down, but small movements that I can feel are making my cock ache to just fuck her and let her come. She's trying to drive me crazy, to make me do it—I am stubborn, I need her to beg. To ask my permission for her pleasure.

"You will beg for me," I lift her up so only the tip of my cock is inside her, "You're

going to beg me to come on my cock.” Her body quivers but she stays stubborn.

“Make me.” She says with a wicked smile as I pull her down onto my cock so hard she loses her breath for a moment. With it I lose control, and take her challenge to heart. Without any mercy I fuck her, and I don’t stop until she screams.

“Please—” only then, I slide a finger over her sensitive clit, and grind up inside her pushing us both over the edge. She comes in violent screams, as her pussy gushes around my cock, while I empty myself as deep inside her as I can go.

After, she curls against me, her breathing slowing down finally. I hold her close, watching shadows play across her face. This woman who challenged me from day one now lies vulnerable in my arms, trusting me with her body if not with all her secrets.

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I press a kiss to her forehead as she drifts off. Whatever game we're playing, whatever secrets she is keeping, I know one truth with absolute certainty—Orla Kelly is not a woman I will ever be done with.

CHAPTER 11

ORLA

I wake to sunlight pouring through unfamiliar curtains and a warm body pressed against mine. For a moment, everything feels warm, comfortable—that fuzzy glow after a late night.

Then reality crashes into me like tsunami on my island vacation.

I slept with Cillian Kavanagh. The heir to the empire that murdered my father. The fucking enemy.

I watch him sleep. His face lacks its usual coldness, a bruise darkens his jaw from last night's fight, and a cut marks his eyebrow.

What the fucking-fuck have I done?

I slip from the bed trying not to wake him. The hotel suite is massive. I gather my scattered clothes, and get dressed in privacy of the bathroom. Avoiding the mirror. I can't face myself right now, I feel like a traitor, like my father must be turning in his grave.

When I open the door, Cillian stays asleep. His phone buzzes from the nightstand. I pad over to the bed, I pause, but he doesn't move. The screen shows three missed calls from "E" – Eamon.

Next to the phone is his wallet, watch, and room key card. My eyes wander to his suitcase in the corner, only half-unpacked.

This is my chance.

I check that Cillian is still asleep, then go to his luggage. I search through clothes, check all the inner pockets, run my fingers along the lining.

Nothing.

His laptop bag is leaning against the desk, but I'd need a password or his fucking gorgeous face. The safe in the closet is locked.

I turn to his suit jacket draped over a chair. The pockets are empty except for a pen and business cards. I almost give up when my fingers run over thickness in the lining.

A hidden pocket.

I feel the nearly invisible zipper and open it. Hidden inside is a flash drive.

My pulse races. This could be the evidence I need. But how to access it?

His phone buzzes again. He stirs. Fuck!

I slip the drive into my bra and go stand at the window, pretending to admire Manhattan.

"Morning," he says, his voice rough.

I turn, forcing a smile. "Morning." I feel like the worst person on earth, I have betrayed my father and stolen from Kavanagh. What is wrong with me?

He sits up, sheet falling to his waist, showing the muscled torso that has scratch marks from my nails on it. A Celtic tattoo decorates his ribs, it was hidden in last night's darkness.

"What time is it?" he asks.

"Just past seven."

He checks his phone and frowns. "I need to call Eamon."

I nod. "I'll order us coffee."

He stands up naked, grabs pants from the floor. I can't stop myself from looking at him, at his cock— and thinking about all the ways it felt so good inside me. "Order breakfast too. The meeting has been moved to eleven."

As he goes to the bathroom, phone in hand, I exhale when he shuts the door between us. The drive burns a hole in my bra.

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I call room service, then perch on the bed. I need to copy the drive's contents, but Cillian won't leave me alone. My laptop is on the small coffee table, but I know he will ask what I am doing or worse see his drive and know.

Through the bathroom door, Cillian's voice carries—loud, harsh words about "shipment" and "interference" filter through, nothing specific.

I need a plan. I could say I want to shop before the meeting, but he might want to come with me. I need him to leave me here, but I have my doubts he will, not after last night.

The bathroom door flings open. Cillian walks out with a towel around his waist, water drops on his chest. He looks worried, and agitated.

"Problem?" I ask.

"Change of plans. We are going back to Boston tonight."

"What happened?"

"Business." He watches my face. "Nothing for you to worry about."

I stand up. "After last night, I you don't think I can handle business."

His mouth curves up. "You are a feisty, stubborn woman." He says. "Where did you learn that?"

The question hides deeper meaning. I stick to my story. "My father was stubborn, must be in my genes."

"It is annoying," he growls, tucking hair behind my ear. "But such a gid damned turn on, you make my cock hard with that sass."

My heart speeds up. Does he suspect? I lean into his touch as distraction, hoping he leaves my boobs, and bra out of this. "Not all woman will just roll over at your feet, you know."

His thumb traces my jaw. "You did, last night."

"I did not roll over." I say, remembering how he held me above him.

His phone rings. He answers with irritation. "I told you I'd call back." His face darkens as he listens. "When?"

I move away, straining to hear details. Whatever has us racing back to Boston might help me get a copy of this drive.

Cillian ends the call. "Our flight leaves at two. Meeting still happens, but shorter."

"I'll pack," I say.

He walks to me, cupping my face with surprising gentleness. "About what happened?—"

I wait.

"I don't mix business with pleasure," he says. "Last night was an exception."

"Adrenaline," I suggest.

"More than that." His eyes hold mine. "But it's complicated."

A knock at the door saves me. Cillian goes to answer, and signs for breakfast.

While he tips the server, I touch my bra, feeling the drive. It might be the justice I have been looking for, the answers. Yet as Cillian turns, catching my eye with a look that heats my skin, I face an unwelcome truth.

I'm in bed with the enemy. And I want to do it again.

CHAPTER 12

CILLIAN

Three days since New York, and Orla has been acting unlike herself. She arrives earlier. Stays even later. But gets less done. Her phone vanishes when I walk in. She avoids my eye contact. She is up to something—something shady that I will not like.

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I spot the signs. I always do.

From my desk, I watch her take a call, turning away so I can't see her lips move. I notice these changes against my will, proof I kept the distance between us for good reason. Despite what happened in New York, and how she felt wrapped around my cock. I can't trust her.

No one in my family can afford to trust anyone.

I call Matthews.

"My office. Now."

He arrives and stands silently in front of mt desk. Years of military training shows in his posture.

"I need you to watch Orla Kelly," I say. "Discreetly. No contact. She takes lunch at twelve-forty. Start there."

"How much detail? What am I looking for?"

"Photos. Any meetings. Stay out of fucking sight, I want to know who she talks to, where she goes."

"Got it."

After he leaves, I look out over the harbor. The water is a dirty blue-gray. My fingers

tap against wood—I rarely get this distracted.

The woman who proved her worth to me in New York. Who fits into my world. Who matched me in bed as if we'd been fucking for years.

Now a question mark.

Matthews texts at 12:43.

Secretary moving on foot.

I grab my jacket. "Push the one o'clock," I tell the receptionist who is at her desk during lunch.

Matthews waits in his car two blocks away from the office.

"Parker Street," he says as I shut the door. "Coffee shop at the corner. She goes there a lot, they know her name and order by heart."

Through the window of Parker Street Café, I see her. Green blazer, auburn hair tied back, sitting where she can see all exits.

A man walks up to her table. Gray hair, cheap suit, worn shoes. The way he stands there screams cop. My hackles go up right away.

"He's law enforcement," Matthews says.

I nod.

The man sits down. No warmth passes between them she is not happy to see him, it looks like it is just business. But what business does she have with a cop?

I cross over the road to the pizza place next door where I can see their reflection.

Their talk looks like it is getting heated. He leans in and she pulls back. I catch what looks like "federal" and "timeline" on his lips.

Matthews goes inside orders a coffee he won't drink, and gets close enough to listen. My phone vibrates in my pocket.

Mat:

Federal task force moving soon... taking too long... growing close to target.

Target. Me. My family. Our business.

Everything falls into place. Not a spy, or an enemy. Law enforcement. A professional betrayal wrapped in sex and sass.

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The man hands her a folder. She touches it but doesn't open it. There is a look in her eyes I've never seen. She looks at him again and then at the folder under her hand. He checks his watch, stands, touches her shoulder. I want to rip his arm off at the shoulder—I don't want anyone touching what is mine. She feels like she is mine. He leaves, pulling his collar up against the cold wind. Orla stays there, her cold coffee and sandwich on the table.

I beat her back to the car, without being seen.

"Tail him," I tell Matthews. "I want a name, address every fucking thing there is to know."

In my office, I review import documents while watching the clock. Orla walks in twenty minutes late from her lunch break—not at all like her. She sits at her desk and pretends to work, but I can feel her distraction from here.

Matthews sends a text:

Raymond Doyle. Detective, Organized Crime Division. 20 years BPD.

I search our databases. Many arrests. Many awards. Known for hunting down and dismantling Irish gangs for decades. He has a vendetta, a passion for hunting men like me. A man who it seems has been fixated on my family for two decades. What does he want? What does he know?

Orla knocks waiting to bring in a pile of paperwork for signatures. I wave her in, seeing her in a new light. She holds out the papers, a pen. Her fingers brush mine, and

what once felt intimate now feels like a calculated seduction.

"All okay?" I ask, signing without reading.

"Of course." Her voice stays flat. She doesn't know that I know.

"You look a little distracted."

"Just tired." A good lie from someone I just watched meeting with a cop.

As she takes back the papers, I notice the silver chain at her neck, tucked into her blouse.

"The Richardson shipment arrives Thursday," I say. "We should talk about it."

"I'll get the documents and manifest ready."

"Orla."

She stops at the door without turning to face me.

"Your work in New York impressed me. I value people I can trust."

Her shoulders rise. Just an little. Just enough.

"Thank you," she says, and walks out.

I weigh up my options. Confronting her I will loses our chance to control what information she passes on to the pigs. It might spook her, and she'll be gone for good. A thought I shake off right away. Watching her gives me the power to plant false leads, to find out if I have one rat or an infestation.

This woman who I let into my office, into my plans, my fucking bed is trying to destroy me.

I text Eamon.

Security problem. Talk tonight.

I check with IT what files she has accessed this week. A pattern forms—shipping records, money transfers, client lists. Building blocks for RICO charges.

I need to plan my move against this threat with cold focus.

I shut the laptop and look at her desk. She is talking on the phone, glancing up to see if I am watching her.

I am. And she knows it.

CHAPTER 13

ORLA

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The exclusive Darby Club brims with noise as Cillian guides me inside, it has been two weeks since we went to New York. Things haven't been the same at work, or between us since we had sex.

Generations of Boston's Irish elite have celebrated here, though I doubt many of those gatherings involved quite as many criminals as tonight's event will. They don't usually all come out of the shadowy underworld at once.

"Ready to meet the extended family?" Cillian asks, his palm pressed against my back.

I nod, adopting Orla Kelly's pleasant smile while Orla Nolan is making a note of all the faces. "Of course."

Tiernan Kavanagh commands attention near the bar, accepting congratulations on his sixtieth birthday with the confidence of a man who owns everyone in the room. Niamh circulates between guests, the perfect hostess draped in emerald silk.

"Come meet my uncle Patr," Cillian says.

I spend the next hour being introduced to Kavanagh family, associates, and enemies, each handshake another piece of the puzzle I am trying to build. Pat Kavanagh imports through Canada. Kevin Murphy handles union negotiations with strategy and baseball bats. Sean Flannery runs distribution across New England. I note the connections, territories, way they all interlock and need one another.

"Your girl asks smart questions," an older man—Tommy Doyle—tells Cillian after I inquire about his 'waste management' business. A paper-thin cover for money

laundrying, based on his vague answers.

"She manages my schedule, my accounts, and apparently me," Cillian replies with a rare public display of affection, his arm around my waist.

My smile stays fake as guilt cuts inside me. Every bit of information I get inside this room pushes the Kavanaghs closer to prison. Puts him in a cage he will never escape.

A traditional band assembles in the corner—fiddle, tin whistle, bodhrán, accordion. The music plays, and memories rush back. Dad teaching me to dance in our kitchen, explaining how his parents brought these songs from Cork.

"You know this one." Niamh materializes beside me.

"The Star of the County Down," I reply without thinking. "My grandmother loved traditional music."

She watches me. "Did she teach you to dance as well?"

"A little." The band changes it up, a faster reel, and couples fill the small dance floor.

"Cillian never learned properly," Niamh says. "His father considered it to be frivolous."

Across the room, Eamon watches me, whiskey in hand. He hasn't approached me all evening, not even to say hello, but his eyes follow me. He senses there's more to me than my cover story, he doesn't like me.

"Mrs. Kavanagh," a club manager interrupts, "the cake is ready whenever you are."

"Thank you, Michael. We'll gather the hoards now."

The birthday toast follows Irish tradition. Tiernan stands as his sons flank him, the family on full display. Glasses raised. Irish whiskey burns down my throat as Tiernan speaks about legacy, loyalty, and the future.

"To the Kavanaghs," the crowd choruses.

I drink with them, playing my part while guilt eats me alive. Three city councilmen. A judge. Two police captains. The corruption runs deeper than even Doyle suspected, I still feel deeply uncomfortable at how comfortable I am around the bottom feeders of humanity.

The dancing continues after cake. Cillian surprises me by holding out his hand to me.

"Your mother said you can't dance," I say as he leads me to the floor.

"She said, I never learned properly. Not that I couldn't manage to fling a lass around the floor." He guides me into his arms as the band plays a waltz. "Besides, I have excellent motivation to try now."

We float across the floor, and I allow myself to enjoy the moment. The past fades away. My purpose here forgotten in the haze of being so close to him. The need for revenge blurs at the edges. There's just music and Cillian's hot body pressed too close to mine.

"You dance better than your mother gives you credit for," I say.

"Any man can dance with the right woman," he replies. He thinks I am right, he has no idea the traitor he is holding in his arms is here to end him.

When the song ends, Cillian checks his watch. "I need to speak with my father for a moment. Wait here?"

I nod, watching him move through the crowd to find Tiernan, who is sitting down now, accepting birthday wishes from a parade of murderers and madmen. Each one speaks close to his ear, private conversations whispered right here at this public celebration. Crime never stops, it just there lurking right beneath the shiny surface.

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"He trusts you."

I jump, and turn to find Eamon at my elbow, his posture casual but eyes glare daggers at me.

"I worked hard to earn his trust," I reply.

"That's not what I mean." He drinks. "Cillian doesn't bring women to family functions. Ever. Not once in my life has he had a plus-one to anything public."

I hold his gaze. "I appreciate the invitation even more then."

"I bet you do." Eamon moves closer. "You know a lot about Irish music for someone with your background."

"My grandmother?—"

"Yeah, I heard that line." He cuts me off. "Here's the thing about my brother. He sees the best in people. I see what they hide. The ugly bits they think are concealed."

Before I can respond, Cillian returns, noting the confrontation. "Everything okay?"

"Just getting to know Orla better," Eamon says, walking away. "She can dance with your two left feet, that's a talent." He mocks his brother and then he's gone.

Cillian frowns. "What did he say to you?"

"Nothing important." I touch his arm. "He asked about my dancing and taste in music. It's warm in here. Mind if we get some air?"

The balcony has a priceless view of Boston Harbor, boats and buildings reflected on dark water. A cold breeze carries the salt scent of the ocean. I shiver despite the fact I was sweating moments ago.

"I apologize if Eamon offended you," Cillian says. "He is protective, but his manners need work."

"It's fine. Family are like that."

"Yes." He pauses, gazing at the harbor. "Family, a blessing and a curse."

"at least you have family." I inject my own loss into this moment. I wish I had a sibling with no manners to look after me now.

"I want to build something that lasts." Cillian says looking off into the dark, "Something my children could inherit without..." He stops. "Without the legacy my father will leave us."

Children. Future. Words that make my blood boil for revenge—the things he robbed me of. I will destroy this man's dreams. Put his family in prison, tear them apart and leave him with no legacy at all. It's justice—but standing here, it feels cruel.

"What about you?" he asks. "Where do you see yourself in five years?"

Five years. Will he be in prison? Will I live in witness protection? Am I even going to live that long?

"I haven't thought that far ahead," I admit.

"I have." Cillian turns to me. "You've become special to me, Orla." It's an odd thing to say, he has been distant since New York, treated me like I am an outsider again. Now he's calling me special, dancing with me—showing me off to his family. Dragging me deep into his world.

He leans in, and I meet his kiss. I don't even hesitate. His hand wraps around my throat, and aphrodisiac and a threat all laced in seduction. When we part breathless, I see something dangerous in his eyes—not the cold, deadly Kavanagh businessman, but a man falling in love.

It is truth bomb that could blow both our lives apart. I care for him too, beyond the vengeance. This kiss was two betrayals—his coming betrayal by me, and my betrayal of my father's memory by feeling this way for him.

"We should go back inside," I whisper, needing to escape these tangled emotions.

Cillian nods, taking my hand as we rejoin to the celebrations inside. The music plays, but now it echoes a funeral march to my ears. The guests are all jolly from too many drinks, and the room is hot with body heat and the reality of this entire night is suffocating me.

How do I reconcile this? The Kavanaghs ordered my father's death. I came here for justice. For him. Now with each day, each touch, justice and vengeance blur into nothing compared to the pull he has on me.

The ruby choker Niamh loaned me for tonight throttles me, a sign that she has accepted me. As family—as Cillian's woman.

A family I'm going to destroy.

CHAPTER 14

CILLIAN

I spot the pattern during my Monday security scan, three days after my father's birthday celebration. Every week, I review access logs - a habit that catches problems early. The IT report shows unusual files being pulled in our archived accounting records.

"These all trace back to Ms. Kelly," Wagner says.

"How long has this been happening?" I ask.

"Six weeks. Started out broad, then she narrowed it to specific subsidiaries from 2014-2015."

I nod at Wagner to go. Not random searching – a very targeted investigation of specific years and accounts. The dates match up to when we made some major financial adjustments. Restructured assets, and trusts none of the accounts are red flags if I scan over them.

I deep dive into the information she has been looking at. Orla's digital pathway cuts through our archives with a singular purpose. South Harbor Holdings. Emerald Shipping Logistics. Cormorant Enterprises. All shell companies for moving money from the family business into the mainstream. All of them with accounting 'adjustments' we made.

All of the companies my father had assigned to Thomas Nolan.

The name finally clicks in my mind. Our accountant, he died in 2015. One of only a few outsiders we ever trusted with sensitive work. My father liked him, and by the names of the accounts he managed, he had faith in his ability to keep secrets and do his job.

I pull up his old personnel file. Thomas Nolan, 48, survived by a daughter. Died March 8, 2015. Orla's focus on these exact dates can't be coincidence. I don't believe in those.

Those quarterly reports contain transfer authorizations that we need to stay buried. I use my security code to access the restricted files. The March 2015 transfers grab my attention - they all have Eamon's signature on them. My brother hates paperwork. I have never seen him sign anything.

Three Cayman transfers, processed only days before Nolan died. The timing alone raises my suspicions. When Nolan died we all presumed it was a threat, a message from our rivals and nothing more. But my brother's signature, the fact that someone is digging into that short time frame—it doesn't sit quite right. My father was running things then, I didn't have access to all the information. I was getting my degree and making lofty plans.

A knock at my door interrupts my racing thoughts.

"Come in," I say.

Orla walks in. "The Jensen revisions you wanted me to do."

I watch her as she puts them down. She is calm and collected—still has no idea that I know she's a fucking traitorous rat. Either she really is hiding nothing or she hides

everything well.

"Thanks. How's the archive reorganization going?"

"On track. I've fixed the 2013-2015 files and put them in the new system. Much easier to find things now. That we have technology not brown folders piled to the roof."

She mentions that exact period of time. I make a mental note, that is where she chose to start her filing project.

"You didn't need to do the years prior?" I say.

Her pause lasts a fraction of a second.

"Prior to that we don't need to keep the records by law, so they can stay a mess." she answers. "I doubt the IRS will go back to the stone age if they ever do audit us."

It sounds legitimate. Any assistant might have done the same thing. But my gut says it is more than that, she is poking at 2015 for a reason, but what?

"I value your attention to detail," I say. "Show me what you've done."

We walk to the archives, and I watch how she moves among the files. She knows our system too well for the short time she has been here.

"These subsidiary accounts use different reporting methods," she explains, pulling South Harbor Holdings files - the exact company from her digital searches.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Quarterly reports don't match up to the yearly totals. Most companies have small variances, but yours usually match perfectly. These have manual adjustments, journals, corrections."

She found the exact discrepancies we created to move funds discreetly. Knowledge that an employee shouldn't have—secrets she shouldn't know.

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"That goes beyond organizing files," I say.

Her hands shakes. "My last job included identifying errors and discrepancies. I notice patterns."

I take the folder and look at her notes. She notices far to fucking much.

"You have audited these companies very carefully."

"They had the biggest problems," she says, looking straight at me. I know we have a problem, that I am going to have to get rid of her.

Back in my office, I call the head of IT security. "Track Orla Kelly's system access. Every file, every search. Run deeper background checks on her. I have a bad feeling."

Logic points to her being an investigator, possibly even law enforcement. Yet I can't reconcile that idea with the woman who shared my bed, whose touch felt so genuine. Could she really be that good of a liar?

I watch archive room footage from past weeks. Hours of Orla working through files, taking photos with her phone when she thinks no cameras can see her. The same documents linking Eamon to large financial transfers before Nolan died.

Eamon texts.

Moran's crew are poking about at south docks. What must I do with them?

Family matters need my attention, but this security issue can't exactly be ignored—or left alone. I need to know who she is, what she wants and why my brother was signing bank transfers?

I look again at Nolan's photo. A greying man with green eyes that I am sure I have seen before, he's familiar but I can't place the memories.

I decide that a security audit gives me perfect cover for a full investigation without alerting Orla. I need more facts before I confront her.

I close the files and text Eamon.

Keep them entertained. I'll join you soon.

I need to hit something, anything to get rid of the anger that is building up inside me. I should want to kill her, to get rid of her, but when I see her it just stops and all I can think of is how badly I want to fuck her again.

The files spread across my desk tell a story I don't want to believe. Thomas Nolan's employment records. His daughter's obituary.

I lean back in my chair, studying the evidence my brother Eamon collected overnight. Financial accounts. Archive access logs. Photos of Orla meeting Detective Doyle at Parker Street Café—often.

My door opens without a knock. Eamon barges in, slamming it behind him.

"What are you going to do with her?" he asks, sinking into the chair across from my desk.

I tap the folder containing Orla's real identity. "She's Thomas Nolan's daughter. She

has been out for revenge for seven long years."

"Dad's accountant who got himself killed." Eamon's jaw tightens. "The one?—"

"The one you shot, yes." I watch his reaction. "She's building a case for the cops. There is Federal involvement through Detective Doyle."

Eamon processes what I have said, his hands clenching. "What do you want me to do with her?"

"Nothing." I close the file. "She has information we need. She knows how much the feds know. And who else might be involved. For now, we keep our pretty little enemy very close, I will handle her."

"Are you going to interrogate her?"

"I want to extract everything she knows without her even realizing what's happening." I stand, moving to the window. "Confronting her directly gives her the opportunity to lie, or run away. But isolated, comfortable, thinking she's safe?—"

"She might reveal more." Eamon nods. "Where?"

"The beach house. No surveillance except ours. No interruptions. No family asking questions." I turn back to him. "I'll take her away for the weekend. Make it seem romantic."

"Risky move, getting that close to someone you know is hunting you."

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"She's already close. Has been for a while." I return to my desk. "The question is whether she's working alone. Is this a personal vendetta or an official investigation."

Eamon shifts in his chair. "And if it's both?"

"Then we handle both." I pick up the photos from the café meeting. "But I need to know everything first."

"Does she know you know?"

"Not that I can tell, she thinks she is very careful." I doubt she suspects we are on to her.

"So, she feels safe with you."

"For now." I check my watch. "Which gives me an opportunity to use that false sense of security."

Eamon stands. "Do you need backup at the house?"

"No. Too obvious." I don't want her to get tipped off. "This needs to feel natural. The boss she slept with, making his romantic move on her."

"You think she'll buy that shit?"

I remember New York. The way she lost all control in bed with me. How real it felt despite everything I now know.

"She has feelings for me. That wasn't fake." I lock the files in my desk drawer. "I'll use that weakness to get what I need."

"And after you have the information?"

The question is stuck there between us, what I have to do and what I want to do. After seven years hunting our family, Orla Nolan knows too much to simply walk away alive. I know better than to leave witnesses.

"We'll see what she know," I say. "Then decide what is best for her."

An hour later, I find Orla at her desk, typing reports. She looks up as I approach, offering a small smile, and wonder how fake it is? Was he ever happy to see me? Was New York fake too?

"Working hard?" I ask.

"Always." She saves her document. "The Richardson contracts need your signature on them by five."

I perch on the edge of her desk, invading her personal space the way I have for weeks. Watching her reaction, seeing every micro-expression.

"I was thinking," I say. "We both need a break after this week's excitement. How about getting away for the weekend?"

Her fingers pause over the keyboard. "Away? With you?"

"My family has a beach house. Private. Quiet. Good place to decompress." I lean closer. "Just the two of us. Fire place, cozy, nice view."

She looks me in the eye, and I search for any sign she suspects my true motives. Instead, I see what looks like genuine excitement at the invitation.

"That sounds wonderful," she says. "When do you want to go?"

"Tonight. We can leave after work, be there by eight." I stand. "We'll cook dinner, walk on the beach, forget about work for forty-eight hours."

"I'd love that." Her smile appears more genuine now. "But I doubt you ever forget about work."

"Perfect. I'll pick you up at six." I start to walk away, then pause. "Orla?"

"Yes?"

"Bring that emerald necklace you wore to the gala. It looks beautiful on you."

Her hand moves unconsciously to her throat. "Of course."

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By Sunday night, I'll know exactly who Orla Nolan really is and what threat she poses to my family. The woman who invaded our lives seeking justice will face Kavanagh justice in return.

CHAPTER 15

ORLA

Cillian comes up beside me, offering me a glass of wine. "My grandfather built this place forty years ago. No one knew about it except immediate family."

I accept the glass. "No business associates?"

"No. That was the point." He stays close. "This was where we came to be normal. No Kavanagh business allowed."

The house sprawls out across the rocky outcrop with ocean views from every room. I spot security cameras hidden in the interior decor, satellite equipment disguised as part of the architecture, reinforced, bulletproof windows. Even in retreat, the Kavanaghs prepare for the worst.

"Penny for your thoughts," Cillian says.

"Just taking in the view." I taste the wine. "Thank you for bringing me here." I don't think he understands how much I needed a break, but it's myself I need a break from most.

His invitation was out of the blue—a weekend away, he’s been very careful about not being alone with me since New York.

We eat dinner overlooking the ocean, seafood Cillian cooked himself. Night wraps around us as conversation flows through bland topics—books, travel, music. Easy subjects that I don’t have to lie about.

After dinner, we move to the great room where Cillian builds a fire. I settle into a leather sofa, wine glass in hand, watching him arrange the logs.

"You build fires like a boy scout," I say.

"Dad taught us some camping skills. Said every man should know how to survive outdoors." Flames rise as he sits beside me. I think about a man like his father teaching his sons how to ‘run and hide’ if they need to. "Though it was more than camping."

"What else?"

Cillian moves closer. "The skills went beyond fishing and fire-building. How to disappear. How to live a life without leaving any trace you exist."

I try look mildly interested while my pulse speeds up.

"Unusual lessons for kids."

He watches the fire. "My childhood wasn't normal. I figured that out young."

"How young?"

He pauses. "I was twelve when Dad took me to a warehouse near the docks. A man

was tied to a chair. Dad said he worked for us but he had talked to the pigs."

My fingers tighten around my wine glass.

"I thought we were going to scare him." Cillian stops. "Dad handed his gun to our lieutenant and said, 'Show my son what happens to traitors.'"

My blood turns ice cold in my veins. I think of my father—an accountant who found things he shouldn't have. A man who believed in honesty, and integrity.

"What happened?" I ask, already knowing.

"The lieutenant shot him in the head." Cillian meets my eyes. "Dad made me watch. Said a Kavanagh needs to understand consequences."

His admission is raw. This powerful man who maintains boundaries with everyone shares his darkest memory with me. A boy forced to watch murder in order to become the man beside me.

"That changed how you see things," I say, putting down my glass.

"It made me see everything." His voice is hard. "I saw my father and our family differently after that day."

"Is that why you want to change things?"

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"Yes." He shifts toward me. "I can't change our past. But I can change the future."

A war wages inside me. He is telling me the truth while I lie to him. Each honest moment from him makes my deception worse. My mission means I have to stay Orla Kelly, the fascinated assistant and convenient lover. Yet part of me wants to match his honesty.

"Cillian," I start, my heart racing. "I need to tell you something."

He faces me, waiting.

"About my past." I pause. "I wasn't completely honest."

His body stiffens.

"My father—" I choose words. "He worked in finance. For a company that handled Kavanagh accounts years ago."

"What was his name?"

One small truth among many lies. A test to see his reaction before risking everything.

"Thomas," I say. "Thomas Nolan."

"Nolan. The account executive from Eastern Harbor Investments."

I nod. "Yes."

"That was almost seven?—"

His phone rings. Cillian checks the screen and frowns.

"I need to take this," he says, standing. "It's Eamon."

He walks to the deck, closing the glass door. I sit motionless, my heart pounding. How much should I tell him? Where does a small truth become dangerous admission?

Through glass, I watch Cillian transform—back straightening, head raised. His voice carries faintly.

"When was that?" A pause. "What exactly is Doyle asking about her?"

My blood freezes. Detective Doyle. Questions about me. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"No. Keep it contained. Pay a visit to Walsh at the records office. Make sure those files are lost forever." Another pause. "We're coming back tonight. Have security ready at the house."

Fear grips me. Doyle promised to keep his distance while I gathered the evidence. Why risk exposing everything now? I can't help the panic that is rising inside me, I could be in real danger—this was a terrible idea.

Cillian returns transformed. The man who shared his childhood trauma vanishes, replaced by the Kavanagh heir—calculating, dangerous, deadly and ice cold.

"We need to leave," he says, moving toward the bedroom. "Pack your things."

"What happened?" I ask, playing ignorant.

"Business emergency. I'll explain in the car."

I follow him, my mind racing through the ways to get out of this, to escape. My partial truth about Thomas Nolan is there—not enough to reveal my true identity but raising questions I can't answer if he asks me.

Fifteen minutes later, our bags are back in his car. The beach house is dark as we drive away. The connection we shared over wine and firelight disappears and he changes from man to monster right in front of my face.

I watch the passing trees while Cillian makes calls. Each instruction confirms that I am in deep shit. One detective asking the wrong questions could be the end of me.

The silence in Cillian's car grows thicker with each mile. He hasn't spoken since ending his third call, but I feel his anger like a weight. Every few minutes, his eyes flick to me, checking if I'm watching him.

I am.

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The phone calls painted a clear picture. Detective Doyle was asking questions. The files that need to stay buried, files I have copies of on my phone. Security measures at "the house." All centered around me and my 'safety'. He must think I am an idiot if he thinks I don't hear and see all these things.

My hands are folded in my lap, to hide the shaking and my racing pulse. Cillian drives like he's in an F1 race, taking the fastest route back to my apartment. Not his place. Mine. The distinction feels important. Our time away is very much over.

"You'll be out all night?" I ask, testing the waters.

His jaw tightens. "Always something with my family."

The words drip with threats and lies. Family business. Not shipping concerns or import delays. The other kind of business. The kind that you do not want witnesses for.

We stop at a red light. Cillian's phone buzzes again. He glances at the screen but doesn't answer. The caller ID shows "E." before he dismisses it.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"It will be," he says, eyes on the road as the light turns green.

I want to ask about Doyle, but he doesn't know I heard his conversation. About what questions he's asking. I need to know if my cover remains intact or if I should run tonight while he works. But asking would only confirm what we both know.

Instead, I watch the city pass outside my window. Familiar streets that might soon be nothing but memories if I have to disappear. The life I built as Orla Kelly crumbling with each silent mile.

Cillian parks outside my building, the engine is still running. He is not coming up.

"Thank you for the getaway," I say, reaching for the door handle.

"Orla."

I pause, hand on the latch.

"Be careful," he says, his voice softer than expected. "Boston can be dangerous for people who aren't... real."

Our eyes meet. Behind his controlled expression, I see the regret, the silent warning. He's giving me a chance to get away.

"I'll remember that," I reply.

He gets out, walking around to open my door. The gesture feels strange now, formal and stiff. He walks me to the door, and stops there.

"Good night," he says, leaning down to kiss me.

The kiss feels like goodbye. Gentle but final. His lips linger against mine for just a moment before he pulls away.

I want to ask him so many things. About Doyle. About what comes next. The words gather on my tongue?—

But I stay silent. Some questions have answers I'm not ready to hear.

"Good night, Cillian."

I walk into my building without looking back. Through the glass doors, I watch him return to his car. He sits there for a while staring at nothing before driving away.

In my apartment, I check my security. The hidden cameras I installed. The backup files encrypted in multiple locations. The go-bag packed and ready for me to disappear right now.

Tomorrow there will be consequences for whatever Doyle did tonight. I pour myself whiskey and try to forget the taste of Cillian's goodbye kiss. I should leave—right fucking now.

CHAPTER 16

CILLIAN

My phone blares at six a.m., cutting through sleep. The beach house trip cut short only yesterday, and now another bigger crisis demands my immediate attention. Eamon's name flashes on the screen— again. She ran, like a thought she would, only I never thought she would run to me, not from me.

"What?" I ask, jumping from bed.

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"South Boston they blew the shit out of our storage facility," Eamon says. "Five men down, two critical. They disabled security remotely and only took shipping records."

"Moretti's crew?" I pull on pants while Orla sits up, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"Looks that way. This was a clean job. Eight minutes in and out."

I turn to Orla. "Get dressed."

She moves quickly, no questions. Seven minutes later, we are speeding down I-93, whatever we started in my bed earlier abandoned.

"What happened?" she asks as I push past ninety.

"Attack on our off-site storage facility. I need to handle it myself." I keep details minimal, watching her from the corner of my eye. I still can't trust her, this could have been her—except she was with me.

She's not afraid, panicking, she is not even shocked.

"What would they want at a storage facility?" she asks.

"We'll see when we arrive," I answer, filing away her reactions.

Cars fill the lot when we arrive. EMS treat injured staff while private security secures a perimeter. The cops are not invited—not yet. Eamon meets us at the door, blood staining his shirt sleeve. He looks between me and Orla, confused why I would bring

her—why she is even still alive no doubt.

"They went straight for what they wanted, and knew where to find it" he says, walking beside me. "Turkish and Ukrainian manifest records. They took both digital and paper files."

"Our people?" I ask.

"Peters and Mahoney are in surgery. The others took clean head shots." He looks to see Orla's reaction, unsure of what I am doing with her.

I mull it over, it is a very strange thing to steal from us. Moretti wouldn't make this move, it is not about territory and that is his only motive. This is something else, I have a prickly feeling about this.

"Dad wants half-hour updates."

I turn around to send Orla home—this goes beyond an assistant's job—she shouldn't be here. This is family business. But she is already on her phone.

"Orla Kelly from Kavanagh Import. We need shipment KIE-3072 rerouted to Providence immediately. I'll send authorization codes and a new documentation now."

She meets my eyes, phone against her chest. "The missing files match the accounts on those shipments, they might be planning something."

"Thank you," I say, masking my suspicions. "That works."

Orla returns to her call as Eamon catches my eye. His look says what I'm thinking. How the fuck does she know about our Providence backup plan?

"Cloud backups will recover most of the data," she says, approaching with a tablet. "But the Eastern European manifests are a problem. They were kept separate for—" She stops, choosing words. "—regulatory audits."

"How do you know about those files?" I ask.

"I've organized your digital systems for three months." She meets my eyes. "I see patterns, I told you that."

Her answer sounds defensive.

I catch Eamon's attention and signal with a small nod toward Orla. He understands without words.

Four hours into our recovery plans, Orla brings a proposal I never expected.

"We can use Gibraltar," she says quietly, showing documents on her tablet. "If we route through their servers, we can bypass all compromised systems."

I stare at her. Our Gibraltar operation is known to only eight people in the fucking world. She is not one of them, it doesn't exist on paper. A tiny blip in a tax haven far away.

"How do you know about Gibraltar?" I ask, actually I accuse. I am done with her lies and secrets now.

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"Contingency planning," she answers. "Disaster recovery plan, section five, from last month's update."

A good lie. Those documents only mention "European alternative routing" with no specific locations.

"Make it happen," I say.

As she walks away, I text Eamon.

Track everything she touches, get a tap on her phone something is not right here.

He responds.

On it.

By midnight, we resume our operations. All our clients remain unaware of problems while our underground logistics are routed through alternate channels.

Orla is in the kitchen making coffee. She pours me a cup.

"Good work today," I say. When I want to scream at her, yell and shake her, demand she tells me all her secrets.

"Just doing my job," she replies.

"It is not your job to know about Gibraltar?" I watch her face fall, then recover.

"I pay attention. You mentioned Gibraltar on calls."

I sip the coffee. "My mistake, I will be more careful about what I say."

It's a test she fails without knowing. Those details mean she was digging places she shouldn't be digging.

"Go home, rest," I tell her.

"I want to finish securing the Baltic route," she says. "I will rest once I know all our data is safe, and that things are running smoothly."

Perfect response.

"You can work from the security office," I say. "Code 5931."

"Thanks," she says, walking out.

I count to thirty, then check my security app. Camera 16 shows her on the elevator. Camera 22 captures her on the third floor. Camera 24 records her entering the security office with my code.

What she doesn't know is that office connects to our restricted archives with records dating back years, including Thomas Nolan's time with us. Records valuable to law enforcement.

Records that contain things she knows—but shouldn't know.

I send Eamon another text.

She took the bait. Watch only.

If she did this—police, rival family, or something else—I need to know.

I drink my coffee while watching her. Orla goes into the records and pulls files from five years ago. Not random browsing an exact file, just one.

Why?

CHAPTER 17

ORLA

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Inotice the changes immediately when entering the office. The security guard inspects my badge twice, comparing my face to the photo. Inside, nothing appears as it should. The archives entrance now needs fingerprint verification. Cameras point at every corner, all the blind spots are now covered. Someone worked very late last night doing this.

Cillian waits at my desk. "Morning." Cold. Distant. Nothing like the man who kissed me goodbye, or opened his door when a ran to him instead of running away.

"Morning," I say. "Extra security?"

"After the breech, we can't be too careful." He stares a moment longer than normal. "Where are we with the new manifests and changed customs paperwork?"

"I'll have everything done by noon." I sit at my desk and turn on my computer as he walks away.

Two new guards roam the executive floor. The receptionist has to ID check each visitor. Conversations seem to stop when I walk past. They know I was at his house, that I arrived with him inthe middle of the night—everyone thinks I am sleeping with the boss.

Michael from IT arrives at noon.

"Security upgrade," he says, eyes fixed on my computer. "It won't take long, go grab a coffee."

"Right now?"

"Mr. Kavanagh's orders." He glances toward Cillian's office. "Take a break while I do this, it is fast I promise."

I nod. "Want coffee?"

"No." He sits, already typing.

In the break room, I pour a cup while my mind races. This "upgrade" is a fishing expedition. Cillian needs to know what I know. Good thing I never kept anything on my company devices. Every photo, every document is encrypted, hidden away in my apartment and on a cloud drive no one will hack.

Through the doorway, I watch Michael. He is checking my device history, temporary files, searches, saved and deleted data. He spends extra time in the archive database, reviewing which files I've opened.

When I return with coffee, he closes a window. "All set. System runs faster now too. Call the help desk if anything acts up."

"Thanks."

After he leaves, I examine my desktop. The archive shortcut is two inches left of its usual spot. My recent files list comes up empty. They hunted for proof of my snooping in 2015 records.

Cillian walks past my desk three times before lunch. Each time with a different excuse. Each time he's watching me.

At five thirty, I pack up to leave. The office is almost empty, everyone has gone for

the day. In the elevator, I plan ahead. Time is running out faster than expected. I have to let go of Cillian and get the fuck out of this mess, now.

The parking garage echoes each step I take. My parking space is next to a pillar, and when I round it I see Eamon Kavanagh leaning against the driver's door.

"Working late?" he asks.

I keep my face blank. "It is five-thirty, not exactly late."

"You read any interesting things lately." His voice stays casual while his body looks ready to pounce. "Shipping manifests. Employee files from 2015. Financial transfers, asset registers."

"Your brother asked me to organize the archives," I say, holding my keys tight. "Make it more accessible, I am doing my job."

"Really?" Eamon moves off my car. "Cillian or my father?"

"Cillian."

"He never told me about that project." Eamon walks around me, forcing me to turn. "What do you want with Thomas Nolan's records?"

My father's name. A trap.

I keep still. "Who?"

"Our former accountant. He died a few years back. You pulled his files several times."

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"I organize alphabetically. I don't pick which folders to sort. That place was chaos."

Eamon stops directly in front of me. "You're a liar."

"What?"

"You accessed those specific files multiple times. Why?" He steps closer. "Are you working for the feds? State police? Or selling information to our competitors?"

"I work for Cillian," I say, standing my ground despite his closeness. "Call my references."

"We did." His smile turns cruel. "Found some gaps."

My heart races but I hold his gaze. "I don't understand, you're cornering me in the carpark over gaps in my resume?."

"You'll understand soon enough." He moves aside. "Drive safe, Orla Kelly. Boston roads kill people every day."

I unlock my car without taking my eyes off him, get inside, lock the doors. In my mirror, Eamon watches me drive away.

I stop at a coffee shop ten blocks from the office. After buying a drink, I sit in the corner booth for fifteen minutes, making sure no one followed me. The bathroom is private.

I text Doyle.

Mycover is blown. Need to get out.

His answer comes quickly.

There's a Family meeting Thursday. We need you to wear a wire, you can't get out until then.

I stare at my phone. Seven years of waiting comes down to this choice. Justice for Dad versus what I feel for Cillian. Revenge matters more than my heart.

I type.

Are you fucking crazy? Eamon is on me like a rash. How will you wire me? Huh? He is watching me, they all are.

Park bench. Public Garden. Noon Thursday.

I erase our conversation, flush the toilet, wash my hands. My reflection shows Orla Kelly, a tired, overworked assistant. I don't recognize her at all—she is really thinking about protecting the monsters that killed her father.

At home, I plan for Thursday, how to get away in the middle of the day. How to make sure he invites me to dinner. What to wear to hide a wire. How to avoid the additional security checks. What to do if I get caught. How to stop feeling guilty about Cillian, and tell my heart that I can't catch feelings for him.

While planning, I push away my thoughts of Cillian. How his touch felt. How he looked at me at the beach house. How betraying him will feel.

I focus on Dad instead. The blood pooling under his desk chair. The papers scattered across the floor. The justice I have been waiting seven years for.

CHAPTER 18

CILLIAN

Islam my office door and pour three fingers of whiskey. My hands shake—rage, not fear. Eamon's words echo in my head from three days ago.

"She's digging into Thomas Nolan's files. That's not random, Cillian."

Thomas fucking Nolan.

The whiskey burns down my throat. I grab my phone.

"Matthews. My office. Now."

He arrives in two minutes. Good.

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"I need a full investigation on Orla Kelly," I say. "Everything. Background, financials, phone records. I want to know what she ate for breakfast when she was twelve."

"How deep?"

"Ocean floor deep." I drain the glass. "And Matthews? This stays between us until I say otherwise."

He nods and leaves. I pour another drink.

Three days of waiting. Three days of watching Orla work at her desk, answering her questions, letting her touch me while suspicion eats at my gut like acid.

The first report arrives Tuesday. Bullshit employment history. References who remember her face but nothing else. A background that crumbles when you push.

Wednesday brings phone records. Multiple calls to Detective Fergus Doyle. The same cop who's been sniffing around our business for twenty years.

My blood turns to ice.

Thursday's delivery hits like a sledgehammer. A newspaper clipping. Obituary for Thomas Nolan, accountant for Kavanagh Import & Export. Survived by daughter Orla.

I stare at the photograph. Younger, but unmistakable. The woman who moaned my

name in New York. Who let me inside her body while she planned my destruction.

I call my father.

"The accountant's daughter has been in my bed," I tell him without preamble.

Silence. Then: "Which accountant?"

"Thomas Nolan. She's been working for me as Orla Kelly. False identity. Meeting with cops."

"Bring her to my office," he says. "I'll extract what we need to know."

"Don't kill her. Not yet."

"I make no promises."

I hang up and watch Orla through my office window. She types at her computer, efficient as always. Beautiful as always. Lying as always.

My father appears in the main office, casual as Sunday morning.

"Ms. Kelly," he calls. "A word about the Robinson account?"

She follows him, trusting. Why wouldn't she? She's played this game for months.

I activate surveillance and spread the evidence across my desk like a war map. Every lie. Every deception. Every moment she made me believe.

The feed shows my father settling behind his desk. Orla sits across from him, hands folded. Picture of innocence.

"Your aunt in Chicago," my father begins. "Margaret, wasn't it?"

"She moved to Arizona," Orla replies smoothly. "The heat helps her arthritis."

Lies flow from her mouth like water. My father nods, cataloguing each one.

I think of her beneath me in that New York hotel. How she said my name like a prayer. How she fit against me like she was made for it.

All fake. All calculated.

My phone buzzes. Meeting concluding.

I wait outside my father's office, evidence file in hand. When Orla emerges, her step falters the moment she sees me.

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Good. Let her be afraid.

"My office," I say. "Now."

She follows without argument. I close the door, turn the lock. The sound seems to echo forever.

"Nervous?" I ask.

"Should I be?"

I place the file on my desk but don't open it yet. "Seven years. That's how long you've been planning this."

Her pupils dilate. Fight or flight kicking in.

"I don't know what?—"

"Don't." I open the file, spread the contents across the wood. "Orla Nolan. Daughter of Thomas Nolan. The accountant who died in his home office seven years ago."

She goes very still. Like prey realizing the predator has found them.

"How long have you known?" she asks.

"Three days. Long enough to understand how thoroughly you've fucked me over." I move closer. "These meetings with Detective Doyle. Building a case?"

Her eyes stay fixed on the photos.

"You infiltrated my life. My business." I lean against the desk. "My bed."

"Your father killed mine."

"And you thought sleeping with me would balance the scales?"

Color floods her cheeks. "That wasn't part of the plan."

"What plan? Destroy the Kavanaghs? Get revenge? Wear a wire to family dinner?"

She flinches at the last part.

"I couldn't do it," she says quietly.

"What?"

"The wire. I was supposed to wear it three days ago. Record you and your family."

She meets my eyes. "I couldn't."

Something twists in my chest. "Why not?"

"Because I—" She stops herself. "It doesn't matter now."

My phone rings. I answer it, watching her face.

"Kavanagh."

"Mr. Kavanagh, Detective Doyle here. I believe you've discovered one of my confidential informants."

Orla's eyes widen.

"Your informant," I repeat.

"Ms. Nolan has been gathering evidence about Thomas Nolan's murder. Evidence that points to your lieutenant, not your father. We can work together on this."

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"How thoughtful of you."

"Call it mutual benefit. Twenty-four hours to decide."

I hang up.

"Confidential informant," I say to Orla. "Not even a real cop. Just bait they dangled in front of us."

"I came for justice."

"You came for revenge. There's a difference." I press the intercom. "Security to my office."

Her chin lifts. "I never wanted to hurt you."

"But you did. Every day. Every lie. Every time you let me touch you while planning my destruction."

Two guards appear in the doorway.

"Escort Ms. Nolan out of the building," I tell them. "She's no longer employed here."

She walks past me, close enough that I catch her scent. The same perfume that clung to my sheets.

"This isn't over," she says quietly.

"Yes, it is."

I watch her leave, then turn back to the evidence scattered across my desk. Photos of secret meetings. Fake documents. Lies built on lies.

All to destroy the man she let inside her body.

The whiskey bottle calls to me from across the room, but I ignore it. I have work to do.

Starting with finding out exactly what Thomas Nolan discovered that got him killed.

CHAPTER 19

ORLA

The security guards escort me through the lobby without touching me. A courtesy I don't deserve. Every employee watches as I pass—the assistant who fell from grace. Their stares burn into my back.

The building doors open to harsh afternoon sunlight. I blink against the brightness, legs unsteady beneath me.

"Your personal items will be delivered tomorrow," one guard says. "Provide an address."

I give them my real one. No point in lying anymore.

They disappear back inside, leaving me alone on the sidewalk. People flow around me—businesspeople, tourists, normal humans living normal lives. I stand frozen in the current.

My cover is blown. Seven years of planning destroyed in twenty minutes.

I walk to my car on autopilot, hands shaking as I fumble with the keys. The engine starts on the third try. I sit behind the wheel, staring at nothing.

My phone buzzes. Doyle.

"Where are you?" he asks without greeting.

"Parking garage near the office." My voice sounds hollow.

"Drive to Murphy's Diner. Now. We need to talk."

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The line goes dead.

Doyle waits in a corner booth, coffee growing cold in front of him. His face shows the fury I expected.

"You blew it," he says as I slide into the opposite seat. "Two years of work. Gone."

I order coffee from the waitress, buying time. "Not gone. Changed."

"Changed? You're compromised. Burned. Useless to this investigation."

The coffee arrives. I wrap my hands around the cup, seeking warmth. "Cillian knows who I am."

"And? What did you tell him?"

"Nothing about you. About the case." I meet his eyes. "I couldn't do it, Doyle."

"Couldn't do what?"

"Destroy him. Destroy his family." The admission tastes like ash. "They're not what I expected."

Doyle leans forward, voice dropping. "They killed your father."

"Eamon killed my father. On orders from Vincent Collins." I pull out my phone, showing him photos I took yesterday. "Financial records. Collins embezzled for

years. Dad found out."

Doyle studies the images. "Where did you get these?"

"Cillian's private files. Before he discovered me." I slide the phone across the table.
"Collins used Eamon. Made him think Dad threatened the whole family."

"Convenient story."

"True story." I lean back. "Check the accounts. Follow the money trail. Collins vanished three years ago for a reason."

Doyle's phone rings. He checks the caller ID and frowns. "Kavanagh."

My blood freezes.

"Detective Doyle," he answers, putting it on speaker.

"I believe you've discovered one of my confidential informants," Cillian's voice fills our booth.

I close my eyes. He's hunting me already.

"Ms. Nolan has been gathering evidence about her father's murder," Doyle says.
"Evidence that points to your lieutenant, not your father."

A pause. "Vincent Collins."

"You know about him?"

"I'm learning." Cillian's tone stays neutral. "We should meet. Discuss mutual

interests."

"Twenty-four hours," Doyle says. "Then I proceed with what I have."

The call ends. Doyle stares at me across the table.

"He's protecting you," he says.

"He's protecting his family."

"Same thing now." Doyle downs his coffee. "You're in deep, Orla. Deeper than you realize."

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I know. The thought terrifies me.

My apartment feels different when I return. Smaller. Temporary. I spread my father's evidence across the table—crime scene photos, financial records, witness statements. Seven years of my life reduced to paper and grief.

I pour whiskey into a tumbler. Dad's favorite brand. The one thing I kept from his house after the police released it.

The crime scene photo stares up at me. Dad slumped over his desk, blood pooling beneath him. Accounting papers scattered everywhere. The image that drove me to this moment.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I whisper to the photo. "I fell for his son."

The whiskey burns down my throat. I pour another.

My phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number.

You have something that belongs to me

Collins. It has to be.

I grab my gun from the bedroom, check the clip. Full. Safety off. I place it on the table beside the evidence.

Another text.

We should talk. Before others get hurt.

I don't respond. Collins killed my father to hide his theft. Now he knows I have proof.

The apartment door's locks seem inadequate. Three deadbolts and a chain won't stop a determined killer. I check the windows—fire escape access, good sight lines to the street.

My phone rings. Unknown number.

"Orla Nolan," I answer.

"The accountant's daughter." Collins' voice sounds exactly as I imagined—smooth, cultured, deadly. "You've caused considerable trouble."

"Not as much as you will."

He laughs. "I doubt that. You're alone now. No Kavanagh protection. No police backup."

"I have evidence."

"Which dies with you."

The line goes dead.

I grab the evidence files, stuff them into a bag. Staying here means death. I need somewhere safe until?—

A knock at my door. Three sharp raps.

I raise my gun, approach the peephole. The hallway appears empty.

Another knock. "Orla. It's me."

Cillian's voice.

I lower the gun, open the locks. He stands in the doorway, fury and something else written across his features.

"How did you find me?" I ask.

"Phone tracker. Simple surveillance." He enters without invitation, closing the door behind him. "Expected anything less?"

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The apartment shrinks with his presence. Gone is the polished businessman from the office. This man looks dangerous. Predatory.

"What do you want, Cillian?"

His eyes scan the evidence spread across my table, the whiskey bottle, the gun I still hold.

"Truth," he says. "Everything."

I set the gun down but keep it within reach. "Which truth? There are so many."

He moves closer, and I see the war in his eyes. Anger and desire. Betrayal and need. The same conflict tearing me apart.

"Start with your father," he says.

I point to the crime scene photo. "Thomas Nolan. Accountant. Father. Murder victim."

He picks up the photograph, studies it. "You found him."

"Seventeen years old. Came home from debate practice." My voice cracks despite my control. "He was supposed to help me with calculus that night."

Cillian sets the photo down carefully. "Tell me about Collins."

I pull out the financial records, spread them across the table. "Two million stolen over three years. My father discovered the discrepancies. Collins couldn't let him report it."

"So he used Eamon."

"Your brother thought he was protecting your family. Collins fed him lies about Dad planning to expose everything to authorities."

Cillian studies the documents. "You have proof of this?"

"Account numbers. Transfer dates. Communication logs." I meet his eyes. "Your brother pulled the trigger, but Collins gave the order."

He straightens, decision made. "I need those files."

"They're copies. Originals are somewhere safe."

"Smart." He moves around the table toward me. "Collins called you tonight."

Not a question. "Yes."

"What did he want?"

"To kill me before I testify."

Cillian's face hardens. "He won't touch you."

"Why?" I challenge. "I'm your enemy. I infiltrated your life, your family. Why protect me?"

He stops inches away, close enough that I smell his cologne. The same scent that clung to my skin after New York.

"Because despite everything," he says quietly, "you're mine now."

The words hang between us, loaded with promise and threat. My pulse races beneath his stare.

"I destroyed any trust between us," I say.

"Yes." He reaches out, fingers grazing my cheek. "But you're still mine."

My phone buzzes on the table. Another unknown number.

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Cillian picks it up. "Answer it. Speaker."

I obey, hands trembling.

"Ms. Nolan," Collins' voice fills the room. "I hope you're reconsidering our conversation."

Cillian's eyes turn cold as winter.

"I have nothing to say to you," I reply.

"Pity. The Donovan crew is very persuasive. They'll be visiting soon."

The line goes dead.

Cillian grabs my shoulders. "Pack everything. We're leaving. Now."

"Where?"

"Safe house. Family protection." His grip tightens. "You're under Kavanagh care now."

I look around my temporary home. Evidence of my real life, my mission, my father's death. Everything that brought me to this moment.

"What happens after?" I ask.

"After, we find Collins." Cillian's voice turns deadly soft. "And he pays for what he took from both of us."

CHAPTER 20

CILLIAN

I find Orla at her apartment in Dorchester. Three hours since security walked her from Kavanagh offices. My fury pulses fresh with each heartbeat.

Her lock yields to my pick in seconds. Dad made sure I mastered this skill regardless of my Harvard degree.

She sits at a small table, whiskey tumbler in hand. Papers cover the surface—crime scene photos, bloodstained accounting documents in evidence bags, investigation notes. She keeps her eyes on her work when I enter.

"How did you find me?" she asks, drinking.

The room lacks personality—plain bed, desk, table. No photos. No mementos. This place serves as headquarters, not home. Nothing connects to the woman who shared my bed.

"Phone tracker. Simple surveillance." I shut the door. "Expected anything less?"

Her eyes meet mine without shock. Gone is Orla Kelly, my assistant who moaned beneath me in New York. Here sits Orla Nolan, a woman who invaded my world with cold calculation.

"What do you want, Cillian?"

"Truth. Everything."

She points to the empty chair. I stay on my feet.

"Thomas Nolan was your father." I keep my voice flat. "Our company accountant who died seven years ago. You fabricated your way into my business, my life."

"Yes." No reaction crosses her face.

"Doyle called me. Told me about the wire you planned to wear."

She laughs without humor. "Yet you came without backup. Curious decision."

I move closer, placing my palms on the table, leaning toward her. "I want to hear it from you. Every detail. Now."

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She holds my gaze, then pushes a photo toward me. A crime scene. A man slumped over a desk, blood pooled beneath him, spreadsheets soaked red.

"Thomas Nolan. My father." Her voice cracks. "I found him like this when I came home from debate team. I was seventeen."

The photo shows what the police report couldn't convey. The brutality. The intimacy of the kill.

"Your father began investigating discrepancies in our shipping accounts," I say. "He found evidence of money laundering."

"He trusted the wrong person with what he discovered." Orla drains her glass. "He thought he was doing the right thing."

"And you? What was your endgame? Turn evidence over to Doyle? Take down my family?"

"Justice." She pours another drink with unsteady hands. "At first I wanted revenge. Blood for blood. But I needed proof—evidence that would stick in court."

"Why not go to the police with what you had?"

"The same police who closed his case after three weeks? Who reported it as a robbery gone wrong despite nothing being stolen?" Her calm facade cracks. "I needed evidence that couldn't be buried or bought off."

I circle the table, approaching her with predatory focus. "So you lied your way into my company. Into my bed."

She stands, refusing to be cornered. "Yes."

"Was any of it real?"

Pain flashes across her face. "I didn't plan New York."

"That's not an answer."

"What answer would satisfy you?" she asks. "That I compromised my mission every time you touched me? That I hated myself after copying your files? That I've spent months torn between my promise to my dead father and my feelings for you?"

I advance until she backs against the wall. "And what feelings would those be, Orla? Or is that even your real name?"

"Orla is my real name. Everything else was fabricated."

"Everything?"

Her chin lifts in defiance. "Not everything."

My palm strikes the wall beside her head. She doesn't flinch.

"Tell me about the meeting with Doyle today."

Her eyes never leave mine. "He wanted information on the Russian shipping arrangement. Proof of smuggling. He offered immunity."

"And you gave him what he wanted."

"No." She swallows. "I didn't."

My laugh lacks humor. "Expecting me to believe that?"

"I discovered something yesterday. The money trail leads to James Sullivan, not your father." Her voice steadies. "Sullivan ordered my father's death when his embezzlement was discovered. Your brother pulled the trigger, but Sullivan gave the order."

The name hits me hard. Dad's right-hand man for fifteen years. His most trusted lieutenant.

"You have proof?"

"In those files. Account numbers, dates, signatures. Sullivan was stealing for years. My father found out."

I remain close, crowding her against the wall. Her scent—familiar yet different now that I know the truth—clouds my judgment.

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"Seven years of planning for revenge. You built an entire identity."

"Yes."

"You wormed your way into my family."

"Yes."

"Into my confidence."

She doesn't look away. "Yes."

"Into my bed."

A flush spreads across her cheeks. "That wasn't planned."

"But you didn't stop it."

"No. I didn't." Her breathing quickens. "I told myself it was tactical. Getting closer to you meant access to information."

"And was it? Tactical?"

Her eyes darken. "No."

I shouldn't want her. Not now, knowing who she is, what she planned. Yet desire cuts through my anger, inseparable from betrayal.

"You've destroyed any chance of trust between us," I tell her, my face inches from hers.

"I know." Her voice drops to a whisper.

"I should turn you over to my father."

"But you won't." She says it with certainty.

My hand moves to her throat, not squeezing, just resting there—a reminder of power dynamics between us. "Why am I here, Orla? Why come alone instead of bringing security?"

"The same reason I didn't give Doyle what he wanted." Her pulse races beneath my fingertips. "There's something between us that makes no sense."

My mouth crashes onto hers with punishing force. I consume her gasp, teeth clashing, anger transmuting to brutal need. She matches my fury, biting my lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

I pin her wrists above her head with one hand, my other ripping her blouse open. Buttons scatter across the floor. She fights against my grip, not to escape but to touch me. I hold her harder, leaving marks.

"You're mine," I growl against her mouth. "Even in your lies."

"Prove it," she challenges, eyes wild.

I tear her bra away, exposing her breasts. My mouth closes over one nipple, biting hard enough to make her cry out. Her body arches toward me instead of away. I suck the pain away, my tongue circling the hardened peak while she writhes against me.

"You want this?" I demand, releasing her wrists to grip her ass, lifting her against the wall.

"Yes," she pants, fumbling with my belt. "Like this. With truth between us."

Her skirt tears under my hands. I rip her underwear away, exposing her completely. My fingers find her already wet, ready despite—or because of—our anger.

"Look at me," I command. "I want Orla Nolan, not your fake persona."

Her eyes meet mine, defiant yet vulnerable. "Then take her."

I push two fingers inside her roughly. She cries out, head falling back against the wall. "Cillian!"

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"My real name on your real lips," I say, working her with punishing strokes. "No more lies."

She claws at my shirt, ripping it open. Her nails rake down my chest, leaving red trails. Pain and pleasure blur as I lift her higher, her legs wrapping around my waist.

I free myself from my pants, position at her entrance. "Last chance to stop this."

"Fuck me," she demands, her voice raw. "Make me feel you."

I drive into her with a single brutal thrust. We both cry out as I fill her completely. Her heat grips me like a vise, wet and tight and perfect. I pull back and slam in again, establishing a merciless rhythm.

"This is us," I growl into her ear. "Stripped bare. No masks. No pretense."

"Yes," she gasps, meeting each thrust. "Harder."

I comply, pounding into her against the wall, each stroke punctuated by her cries. Her nails dig into my shoulders, pain fueling my desire. I bite her neck, marking her as mine despite everything.

"You're mine," I repeat. "Say it."

"I'm yours," she admits, voice breaking. "God help me."

I reach between us, my thumb finding her sensitive spot. She tightens around me

instantly, trembling on the edge.

"Come for me," I command. "Orla Nolan, come for me now."

She shatters, screaming my name as her body convulses around me. The sound of my true name on her true lips pushes me over. I thrust once more and explode inside her, claiming her on the most primal level.

We slide down the wall together, still joined, sweat-slick and panting. Her head falls to my shoulder as reality slowly returns.

"What happens now?" she asks into the silence.

I stare at the ceiling, feeling her pulse still racing where we remain connected. "I investigate Sullivan. If you're right?"

"I am."

"If you're right," I continue, "there will be consequences. Family justice."

"And me?"

I turn to face her, seeing her without masks for the first time. "I don't know."

The admission costs me. Kavanaghs always know next steps, always maintain control. But with Orla Nolan, I've lost my strategic footing.

"Your father wouldn't have killed mine," she says. "Not over accounts. Sullivan acted alone."

"You sound certain."

"I've spent two years studying your family. Tiernan Kavanagh is many things, but he's not careless. Killing an accountant creates questions. Sullivan got my father out of the way before he could report the embezzlement."

I sit up, reaching for my discarded clothes. "I need those files."

"They're copies. Originals are with my attorney, set to release if anything happens to me."

A contingency plan. Smart.

"You sleep with a gun under your pillow?" I ask.

She doesn't deny it. "Wouldn't you, in my position?"

I finish dressing, then gather the evidence spread across her table. "I'll contact you tomorrow. Stay here. Don't leave."

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"Am I a prisoner?"

"You're under my protection until I verify these accusations."

She wraps the sheet around herself, watching me with wary eyes. "And if they're true?"

"Then Sullivan pays for my father's betrayal and your father's murder."

"Family justice," she echoes my earlier words.

I pause at the door. "The man who took you from my office today—he reports directly to Sullivan."

Understanding dawns on her face. "I'm a loose end."

"Yes. So keep your gun close tonight."

I leave without looking back, her files tucked under my arm, the taste of her still on my lips. The ground beneath my feet feels unstable, family loyalty at war with new information.

Sullivan will be investigated. Quietly. Thoroughly. And if Orla's right, he'll face Kavanagh justice for betraying my father and murdering hers.

CHAPTER 21

ORLA

I wake alone in my apartment, the taste of Cillian still on my lips. My body aches from last night—not pain, but memory. Seven years hunting the Kavanagh's, and now I've let their heir claim me against my own wall.

The evidence files lie scattered across my table where Cillian left them. Dad's blood-stained accounting papers mock me in morning light. I promised him justice. Instead, I found complications.

My phone shows no messages. No calls from Doyle. No word from Cillian about his investigation into Sullivan.

I make coffee with shaking hands, replaying every moment from last night. His mouth on mine. His hands pinning me. His voice saying "You're mine" like a brand burned into my skin.

At ten thirty, my phone rings. Unknown number.

"Yes?"

"Doyle here. Burner phone. Development you need to know."

I grip the phone tighter. "What kind of development?"

"Cillian Kavanagh requested access to old case files this morning. Official channels. Your father's murder investigation."

My pulse jumps. "He's really investigating?"

"Looks that way. Also pulled financial records dating back five years. He's digging

into Vincent Collins."

Relief floods through me. He believed what I showed him.

"Any contact from their side?" I ask.

"None. We're maintaining distance like agreed." Doyle pauses. "But Orla—be careful. This could be theater. Designed to make you trust him."

"I know." Though part of me hopes it isn't.

"Call if anything changes."

The line goes dead.

I pace my small apartment, energy crackling under my skin. Cillian investigating Collins means he took my evidence seriously. But Doyle's warning echoes—this could all be manipulation.

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At noon, footsteps echo in the hallway outside my door. I grab my gun, move to the peephole.

Cillian stands there, but he looks different. Exhausted. Disheveled. His usually perfect suit wrinkled, hair messed, knuckles scraped raw.

I open the door, keeping the gun visible.

"Jesus, what happened to you?"

He enters without invitation, shrugging off his jacket. "I found Collins."

My heart stops. "Where?"

"Hiding in a warehouse near the docks. Under Donovan protection." Cillian drops into my chair, wincing. "Had an interesting conversation."

I notice blood on his shirt collar. "You fought him?"

"Him and three of Donovan's men." Cillian flexes his damaged knuckles. "Collins talked before he died."

The words hit me like ice water. "He's dead?"

"Very." Cillian meets my eyes. "Eamon killed him an hour ago. Family justice."

I stagger backward, gun forgotten. "Eamon? But he?—"

"Killed your father on Collins' orders. Yes." Cillian stands, moving toward me. "Collins confessed everything before he died. The embezzlement. Manipulating Eamon. Framing your father as a threat to our entire organization."

My legs give out. I sink onto my couch, mind reeling.

"Eamon knows the truth now," Cillian continues. "About what Collins made him do. About your father's innocence."

"And?" My voice sounds distant.

"He volunteered to face whatever punishment you deemed appropriate."

I laugh, sharp and bitter. "Punishment? Like what—say he's sorry?"

"Or die by your hand."

The words hang between us. Cillian's face shows no emotion, but his eyes burn with intensity.

"You'd let me kill your brother?"

"Justice requires payment." He sits beside me, careful not to touch. "Your father died because of Collins' manipulation and Eamon's action. Collins paid with his life. Eamon awaits your decision."

I stare at my hands. Seven years planning revenge. Now the moment arrives, and I feel empty.

"Where is he?"

"Safe house. Guarded but not hidden." Cillian pauses. "He wants to meet you. To explain. To face whatever comes."

My phone buzzes. Text message from unknown number: Your boyfriend found Collins. But Collins wasn't working alone. Watch your back.

I show Cillian the message. His face hardens.

"Donovan," he says. "Collins was feeding them information about our operations."

"For how long?"

"Years. Maybe since your father's death." Cillian stands, pacing. "They know you have evidence. They know I'm protecting you."

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"Meaning?"

"Meaning we're both targets now."

A chill runs down my spine. "What do you want to do?"

"End this. Tonight." His eyes meet mine. "Collins is dead. Eamon faces justice. But the Donovans still threaten everything we've built."

"We?"

He stops pacing. "You're part of this now, Orla. Like it or not."

My gun sits forgotten on the table. The evidence files mock me with their promises of simple justice. Nothing about this feels simple anymore.

"And after? When the Donovans are handled?"

"After, you decide what happens with Eamon." Cillian moves closer. "And what happens with us."

The weight of choice settles on my shoulders. Revenge. Justice. Love. All tangled together in ways I never anticipated.

"Where's the safe house?" I ask.

"Twenty minutes north. Isolated." He watches my face. "You want to see him?"

"Yes." I stand, grabbing my jacket. "But I'm keeping my gun."

"I'd expect nothing less."

As we leave my apartment together, I realize I'm walking deeper into Kavanagh territory with each step. No longer hunting them from outside.

Now I'm part of their world, whether I chose it or not.

The question is: what kind of justice will I demand?

CHAPTER 22

CILLIAN

The safe house is twenty minutes north of Boston, hidden among thick woods. I park beside Eamon's black BMW, noting the two guards flanking the entrance. My brother waits for justice. Orla will deliver it.

"Ready?" I ask as we approach the door.

Orla checks her gun one final time. "Yes."

The guards nod as we enter. Inside, the main room holds sparse furniture—couch, table, chairs. Functional, not comfortable. Eamon sits by the window, staring at nothing.

He looks up when we enter. His face shows exhaustion, guilt, acceptance. This is a man preparing to die.

"Orla." He stands, hands visible. "Thank you for coming."

She studies him like a predator evaluating prey. "You killed my father."

"Yes." No denial. No excuses. "Vincent Collins told me your father planned to expose our entire operation to federal authorities. Said he threatened the family."

"And you believed him."

"I was twenty-two. Stupid. Desperate to prove myself." Eamon's voice carries seven years of regret. "I didn't question orders from my father's right hand."

Orla moves closer. "Tell me how it happened."

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I watch this confrontation unfold, ready to intervene if needed. But Orla deserves this moment.

"Collins gave me an address. A photo. Said your father was meeting with FBI handlers that night." Eamon meets her eyes. "I broke into your house. Found him at his desk, working late. When he saw me, he asked if I was there about the missing money."

"The missing money," Orla repeats.

"I didn't know what he meant. Collins said your father was stealing from us, then turned informant when caught." Eamon's hands clench. "Your father tried to explain. Said Collins was embezzling, that he had proof. I thought it was lies to save his life."

"So you shot him."

"Once. In the head. Quick." Eamon swallows hard. "He didn't suffer."

Orla's gun appears in her hand so fast I barely see the movement. Pointed at Eamon's chest. Her finger rests on the trigger.

"Seven years," she says. "Seven years I've planned this moment."

Eamon doesn't move. "I'm ready."

Silence fills the room. Guards outside remain unaware of the execution about to happen. I could stop her. Should stop her. Eamon is family.

But justice has its own demands.

"Do it," Eamon says quietly. "I deserve worse."

Orla's hand shakes. The gun wavers. "My father believed in justice, not revenge."

"Sometimes they're the same thing."

"No." She lowers the weapon slightly. "They're not."

My phone rings, shattering the moment. Jackson's number.

"What?" I answer, annoyed at the interruption.

"We have a problem. Three black SUVs just hit Orla's apartment building. Witnesses say armed men went straight to her floor."

Ice fills my veins. "When?"

"Twenty minutes ago. Building's surrounded now. Cops think it's a home invasion."

I look at Orla, who watches me with growing alarm.

"They're looking for you," I tell her. "Your apartment."

"But I'm here."

"The Donovans don't know that." Understanding hits me. "They think you're home. Collins must have given them your address before he died."

Jackson's voice continues through the phone. "Cillian, there's more. They took

someone. Female, matches Orla's description from a distance."

My blood turns cold. "Who?"

"Building manager says a woman was visiting apartment 3B. Auburn hair, same height and build."

Orla grabs my arm. "Sarah. My cousin Sarah was supposed to stay there this week while I was... while I was working the case."

"They took your cousin," I say.

Eamon stands. "They'll kill her when they realize their mistake."

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Orla spins toward him. "This is your fault. All of it. If you hadn't killed my father?—"

"You're right." Eamon grabs his jacket. "Which is why I'm coming to get her back."

"Like hell."

"She's there because of me. Because I started this mess seven years ago." Eamon checks his gun. "I owe you this."

I step between them. "We all go. Together."

"Why?" Orla demands. "She's not your blood."

"No. But you are mine now. Which makes her mine too."

The words hang in the air. Orla stares at me, something shifting in her eyes.

"We don't have time for this," I continue. "Every minute we waste is another minute they hurt an innocent woman."

Orla holsters her gun. "Fine. But after we get Sarah back, this conversation continues."

"Understood," Eamon says.

We load into my car—unlikely allies bound by guilt and necessity. During the drive back to the city, I call Jackson.

"Donovan's got the girl at his warehouse. West side. Bring everyone."

"How many boys?" Jackson asks.

"All of them."

I hang up and focus on driving. Beside me, Orla stares out the window. In the back, Eamon cleans his gun with methodical precision.

"Your cousin," I ask. "What's she like?"

"Stubborn. Smart. Looks enough like me to fool strangers." Orla's voice tightens. "She's a teacher. Never hurt anyone in her life."

"She'll be okay," I say. "We'll get her back."

"You don't know that."

"I know the Donovans. They want information, not blood. Sarah's safe until they realize she can't give them what they want."

"And then?"

I don't answer that question.

Twenty minutes later, we arrive at an abandoned factory two blocks from Donovan territory. Jackson meets us with weapons and building plans he pulled from city records.

"Eight guys inside the warehouse," he reports. "Your cousin's in the office area with three watching her."

Orla studies the building layout. "Ways in?"

"Three. Front door, loading dock in back, old storm drain on the east side."

I point to the drain. "Eamon and I take the tunnel. Orla stays here with Jackson."

"No." Orla's voice cuts like steel. "I'm going in."

"Too risky."

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"She's my blood. My problem." Orla meets my eyes. "And I can handle myself."

True, though I hate admitting it. She moves with her gun like she was born holding one.

"Fine. But I call the shots inside."

"Deal."

We load up with vests and guns. Eamon checks his piece with steady hands.

"Remember," I tell everyone, "we get the girl and get out. No heroes."

As we prepare to move, my phone buzzes with a video message. I play it on speaker.

A young woman sits bound to a metal chair. Auburn hair, green eyes, same stubborn chin as Orla. Blood runs from her nose. Her lip is split.

"Two hours," Donovan's voice says from behind the camera. "Shipping routes for your south harbor facility, or she dies. Slowly."

The video ends.

Orla stares at the phone. "They're hurting her."

"Not for much longer," I promise.

We reach the storm drain entrance. Dark water flows beneath the street, carrying the smell of rust and garbage. The tunnel runs straight toward the warehouse.

"Everyone ready?" I ask.

"Jackson here. Boys are in position."

"We're set," comes another voice.

"Place looks quiet. You're good to move."

I look at Orla and Eamon. Strange partners for this job. A woman hunting justice, a killer wanting forgiveness, and me trying to protect what's mine.

"Let's get her back," I say.

We enter the tunnel, moving toward whatever waits ahead.

Behind us, the city goes about its business, not knowing that Sarah Kelly's life depends on what happens in the next hour—and that saving her might be the first step toward healing seven years of pain.

CHAPTER 23

CILLIAN

The storm drain stinks like hell. Water soaks through my shoes as we wade toward the warehouse. Orla stays close behind me. Eamon follows, gun out.

My phone buzzes. Jackson

Ready when you are.

We reach the grate under the building. I give it a shove. Rusty metal squeaks but opens.

"Two minutes," I tell Jackson. "Then make noise at the front."

Orla grabs my arm, points up. Someone walks around above us. Back and forth, back and forth.

I wait for his footsteps to move away, then climb through.

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The basement holds old junk and broken crap. Stairs go up to where they've got Sarah.

"Office area, back corner," Eamon says, looking at his phone.

We head up the stairs. Voices carry down—three guys, maybe four.

"—girl doesn't know shit."

"Boss wants us to keep trying."

"She's not talking because she can't. Wrong fucking girl."

They figured it out. Sarah's running out of time.

I call Jackson. "Go."

Gunshots explode outside. Jackson's boys hit the front door. The guys inside start yelling, running toward the noise.

We move fast. Two idiots sprint past us, leaving the office alone.

Sarah sits tied to a chair behind glass walls. One guy guards her, gun ready. Her face shows bruises and dried blood. But she's breathing.

"I take him," I tell Orla.

She nods.

I kick the door open. The guard spins around, raising his gun. I put two in his chest before he can shoot. He drops.

Sarah looks up. "Cillian?"

"We're getting you out." I cut the ropes. "Can you stand?"

"I think so." Her legs shake. "They kept asking about boats and routes. I told them I don't know anything."

"Good girl."

Eamon shows up. "More coming. Back door's blown."

Three guys with guns walk toward us. Jackson's distraction didn't work on everyone.

"Window," Orla says.

I boost Sarah up first, then Orla. As I climb out, bullets shatter the glass behind me. We hit the fire escape, Sarah stumbling.

"Got her," Eamon says, catching Sarah.

The metal stairs shake under us. Below, our cars wait with engines running.

"Move your asses," Jackson yells.

Sarah's legs give out. Eamon picks her up, carries her down while Orla and I watch for shooters.

Bullets hit the railings. The bastards made it to the window, firing down at us.

"Go," I push Orla toward the cars.

She reaches the first one as Eamon loads Sarah in back. I slide in next to them as Jackson floors it.

Tires scream. The warehouse gets smaller behind us. Orange flames show in the windows—Jackson's cleanup crew doing their job.

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"Hospital?" Jackson asks.

"Safe house. Doc Moran can patch her up."

Sarah sits between me and Orla, shaking. Orla takes her hand.

"Thank you," Sarah whispers. "All of you."

Eamon turns around. "Sorry this happened. My fault."

"How's it your fault?" Sarah asks.

Orla looks at me. Sarah doesn't know about her dad, about Eamon, about any of it.

"Bad timing," Orla says. "We'll talk later."

Dr. Moran finishes examining Sarah in the safe house bedroom. Bruised ribs, split lip, exhaustion. Nothing permanent.

"She needs rest," he tells me quietly. "And probably counseling. Kidnapping leaves psychological marks."

I nod, walking him to the door.

When I return, Sarah sits on the couch with Orla beside her. They share the same stubborn chin, the same green eyes. Family resemblance that nearly got Sarah killed.

"I should call work," Sarah says. "Tell them I'm sick."

"Already handled," Orla replies. "I called your principal. Said you had a family emergency."

"What kind of emergency?"

Orla looks at me, then at Eamon who sits across the room. "The kind where your cousin infiltrated the Irish mob for seven years to find her father's killer."

Sarah blinks. "What?"

"It's complicated."

"Try me."

For the next hour, we explain everything. Thomas Nolan's murder. Orla's fake identity. The evidence against Collins. Eamon's manipulation and guilt. Sarah listens without interruption, face growing pale.

"Jesus, Orla," she says when we finish. "You could have been killed."

"Almost was. Several times."

Sarah turns to Eamon. "You killed Uncle Thomas?"

"Yes." Eamon meets her eyes. "I believed lies about him being a traitor. I was wrong."

"And now?"

"Now I try to make it right. Starting with saving you."

Sarah considers this, then looks at me. "And you? What's your role in this?"

"I fell for your cousin despite everything she did to my family."

"Fell for her?"

I reach for Orla's hand. "More than fell. She's mine now."

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Orla's fingers tighten around mine. "It's complicated," she repeats.

"Complicated doesn't begin to cover this," Sarah says, but she's smiling slightly. "So what happens now?"

"Now we finish what started seven years ago," I reply. "Collins still needs to pay for your uncle's death."

"Collins is the one who ordered the murder?"

"And stole two million from my father while doing it."

Sarah shakes her head. "This is insane."

"Welcome to our world," Orla says.

That night, after Sarah falls asleep in the guest room, Orla and I sit by the fireplace. The events of the day settle between us like dust.

"She handled it well," I say.

"Better than I expected." Orla stares into the flames. "She's stronger than she looks."

"Runs in the family."

Orla turns to me. "Thank you. For saving her. For protecting someone who means nothing to you."

"She means something to you. That makes her important to me."

"Even after everything? The lies, the deception?"

I pull her closer on the couch. "Especially after everything."

Her lips find mine, soft and grateful. The kiss deepens as weeks of tension and fear release into need. I taste salt—tears she didn't know she was crying.

"Orla," I whisper against her mouth.

She responds by straddling my lap, her body pressing against mine with desperate hunger. Her hands work at my shirt buttons while I grip her hips, holding her close.

"Here?" she asks, glancing toward the hallway where Sarah sleeps.

"Quietly," I reply, capturing her mouth again.

She rocks against me, friction building through our clothes. My hands slide under her shirt, finding warm skin marked with bruises from our earlier confrontations. Each mark tells a story—our story, written in violence and desire.

I lift her shirt over her head, exposing breasts that fit perfectly in my palms. My mouth follows my hands, tasting her skin while she arches above me.

"Cillian," she breathes, fingers tangling in my hair.

I work her jeans open, sliding my hand inside to find her wet and ready. She gasps as I stroke her, her body trembling on my lap.

"I need you," she whispers urgently.

I free myself from my pants, positioning her above me. She sinks down slowly, taking me inch by inch until we're joined completely. Her heat surrounds me, perfect and tight.

We move together with careful restraint, mindful of our sleeping guest but unable to deny our need. She rides me with slow, deliberate motions while I thrust up to meet her. Each movement builds pressure between us.

"Mine," I growl against her throat.

"Yours," she confirms, voice breaking with pleasure.

I feel her body tightening around me, close to release. My thumb finds her center, circling with precise pressure. She bites my shoulder to muffle her cry as she comes, body convulsing in my arms.

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The sight and feel of her climax pushes me over. I thrust up hard, spilling inside her with a groan I bury against her neck.

We stay connected afterward, breathing hard against each other. The fire crackles beside us while the safe house settles into quiet.

"What are we doing?" she asks softly.

"Living," I reply. "Finally living instead of just surviving."

She rests her forehead against mine. "Tomorrow brings Collins."

"Tomorrow brings justice."

"And after?"

I cup her face in my hands. "After, we figure out what comes next. Together."

She nods, then climbs off my lap to gather her clothes. I watch her dress, memorizing every curve revealed in firelight.

"Sarah will be safe here while we handle Collins," I say.

"I know." Orla sits beside me again, fully clothed but still warm from our joining.

"Your father was right. This ends tomorrow."

"One way or another."

We sit together until the fire burns low, planning for tomorrow while treasuring tonight. Whatever Collins brings, whatever justice demands, we'll face it united.

The Nolan case will close. Sarah will go home to her teaching job. Orla and I will find our path forward.

But first, Vincent Collins pays for seven years of lies.

CHAPTER 24

CILLIAN

Dr. Moran finishes bandaging Sarah's ribs in the guest bedroom. Purple and blue marks cover her skin from the Donovan crew's interrogation.

"Three fractured ribs, mild concussion, extensive bruising," he says, packing his medical bag. "Rest for a week."

I walk him to the door of the safe house. Six men patrol the forty acres of woodland surrounding us. No one finds this place without an invitation.

When I return, Orla sits on the couch while Sarah rests against pillows, still pale from her ordeal. Her auburn hair falls loose around her shoulders—the resemblance to Orla unmistakable.

"How bad is it?" Orla asks.

"She'll live," I reply, sitting opposite them. "The men who took her won't."

Sarah's eyes find mine. "Thank you for coming after me."

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

Orla touches her cousin's hand. "Sarah doesn't understand what she walked into. What our family is."

"I'm starting to figure it out," Sarah says quietly.

The safe house goes quiet except for occasional radio checks from security. I've used the past twenty-four hours assembling all pieces while my men tracked down the Donovan crew responsible.

"You both deserve the truth," I say, grabbing the file beside me. "About what really happened to your father."

Orla takes the folder while Sarah watches. Inside, financial records from 2013 to 2015 tell their story.

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"Vincent Collins, my father's lieutenant, embezzled two million dollars during that time," I say as Orla examines the documentation. "Thomas found the discrepancies three weeks before he died."

Sarah leans forward despite her injuries. "Uncle Thomas was murdered?"

Orla's jaw clenches. "Collins knew Dad tracked the theft. He had to stop him before Dad went to Tiernan."

"So he used Eamon," I continue.

Sarah looks confused. "Who's Eamon?"

"My brother. The one who helped rescue you." I pause. "The one who killed your uncle."

Sarah goes very still. "What?"

"Collins told Eamon that Thomas planned to inform authorities about all operations, not just the theft. Made it seem like your father would destroy the family."

Orla looks at Sarah. "Collins manipulated Eamon into thinking Dad was a traitor."

"Where's Collins now?" Sarah asks.

"Dead," I say simply. "Eamon killed him yesterday when we found out the truth."

The security system beeps. On the monitor, my father's black SUV passes through the main gate.

"Stay here," I tell both women, heading toward the entry hall.

They follow anyway, Sarah moving gingerly. Orla supports her cousin's arm as Tiernan enters. His presence commands the room without effort.

My father looks past me to both women. "The teacher survived, I see."

"She's under our protection now," I say.

Sarah stares at Tiernan with wide eyes. This is her first look at the head of the Kavanagh family.

"You've made an interesting choice," Tiernan says, "extending family protection to outsiders."

"They're not outsiders," I answer. "Collins betrayed you for years."

I pass him a tablet with financial documents. "He used Eamon to kill Thomas Nolan to avoid exposure for his theft."

My father reviews the evidence. I watch anger replace suspicion as his focus shifts from the women to his trusted lieutenant.

"Where's Eamon?" he asks.

"Downtown. He'll arrive soon."

Tiernan nods, then looks back at Orla and Sarah. "Your father was honest. Rare in

our world."

"Yet your son killed him," Orla says without emotion.

"On false information," I add.

Sarah finds her voice. "What happens to Eamon?"

Tiernan walks to the window. "Collins stayed on our organization's edges. Taking percentages while avoiding notice."

"Eamon pays too," Orla says.

My father turns. "The Nolan matter ends now. Collins faced consequences for betrayal."

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"And Eamon?" I ask.

"Manipulation reduces but doesn't erase responsibility."

The door opens as Eamon walks in. He freezes when he sees our father, then spots both women. His face shows conflicting emotions.

"You told them?" he asks me.

I nod.

Eamon turns to Orla and Sarah. "I won't ask forgiveness. I believed a lie and acted on it. That falls on me."

Sarah studies him. "You saved my life yesterday."

"After I destroyed it seven years ago." Eamon meets her eyes. "Your uncle was a good man. I was a stupid kid who wanted to prove himself."

Orla watches him. "Did you know my father?"

"No. Collins gave me a file. A photo. An address."

"You never questioned it?"

"Not enough," Eamon says. "At twenty-two, I wanted to prove myself."

Tiernan cuts in. "Ms. Nolan's evidence against our organization?"

"Limited to Collins and my father's death," Orla replies. "Justice, not destruction."

Sarah looks between all of us. "This is insane."

"Welcome to our world," I say.

My father considers the situation. "Collins disappears permanently. The matter ends there."

"What about Detective Doyle?" I ask.

"Anonymous information about Collins arrives at his desk. Enough to close the Nolan case without touching family."

I look at Orla for her response. This compromise offers justice while protecting my family. Not perfect, but the best option available.

She meets my gaze and nods. "Fair enough."

Sarah shakes her head. "You people settle everything with violence."

"Sometimes violence is the only language people understand," Tiernan replies.

After my father and Eamon leave to prepare, Sarah rests in the guest room while Orla and I stay in the quiet main area. She stands at the window, arms around herself.

"Does this satisfy you?" I ask. "Collins paid, Eamon admits his part, your father's case closes with truth?"

She keeps her back to me. "It has to. The other option destroys everyone."

I move beside her, close enough to feel her warmth without touching. "What happens after?"

She turns, green eyes searching mine. "I don't know. Everything I planned for seven years ends now."

"Stay," I say, the word carrying implications we can't yet express.

"With the family of the man who killed my father?"

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"With me," I clarify. "We take each day as it comes."

She gives no answer but doesn't walk away. Instead, her hand reaches for mine, fingers threading between my own. A silent acknowledgment.

I pull her closer, mindful of everything we've been through. Her body fits against mine, familiar yet different now that truth exists between us. All masks removed.

"I want you," I whisper against her hair.

"Even knowing everything?" she asks, voice uncertain.

"Because I know everything," I correct. "No more lies between us."

She raises her face to mine. The kiss begins soft, questioning, unlike our previous encounters born of anger or lust. This connection acknowledges our shared wounds, our complicated past.

I lift her in my arms, carrying her to the bedroom. Her weight feels right against my chest. I place her on the bed with care, aware of Sarah sleeping down the hall.

She reaches for me, palm against my cheek. "This feels different."

"It is different," I answer, sitting beside her.

Her fingers work the buttons of my shirt, revealing my chest. She traces old scars, new bruises from the rescue. I allow her exploration, surrendering control for the first

time.

I help her undress, removing her clothes with reverence rather than haste. Her skin shows no marks from captivity—that burden fell to Sarah. I kiss her throat, her collarbone, tasting freedom.

"Cillian," she breathes as I move above her.

Our bodies join slowly, deliberately. No rush, no power games. Just connection.

"I see you," I tell her, moving within her. "All of you."

Her eyes stay open, locked with mine. True intimacy beyond physical pleasure. Her arms encircle me, holding rather than clinging. Each breath, each motion communicates what words cannot yet express.

"I never expected this," she confesses as we move together. "You."

"Nor I you," I answer.

Our pace builds gradually, not toward frantic release but shared completion. When she comes, her body arches beneath mine, face transformed by pleasure without pretense. I follow, surrendering completely.

After, we lie facing each other, no barriers between us. Her fingers trace patterns on my chest. Mine stroke her hair.

"What are we?" she asks into the quiet.

"Something that shouldn't exist but does," I answer. "Something worth protecting."

She nods against my shoulder, eyes growing heavy with exhaustion.

"Rest," I tell her. "Tomorrow brings enough challenges."

As she drifts into sleep, I hold her close, watching shadows play across her face. This woman who came to destroy my family now lies protected in my arms. Life's strange symmetry.

Down the hall, Sarah sleeps under Kavanagh protection, an innocent pulled into our world by resemblance and bad timing.

For now, keeping them both safe is enough.

CHAPTER 25

ORLA

Isit across from Detective Doyle at a corner table in Murphy's Diner, watching steam rise from his untouched coffee. Two weeks passed since the rescue, and this marks our first meeting. His face shows the fury I expected.

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"You abandoned the entire case," he says, voice low. "Two years of work. Your father's justice. All of it gone."

I sip my coffee, thinking of Sarah back in Chicago, returned to her teaching job with strict instructions to never mention what happened. She recovered well, considering. Tougher than she looks.

"Not gone," I reply. "Just resolved differently than planned."

Doyle leans forward. "Differently? You're dating Cillian Kavanagh. Living with the family who killed your father."

"The lieutenant killed my father. Not the family." I place my cup down. "Vincent Collins ordered it. He paid for that."

"So the Kavanaghs claim." Doyle's jaw tightens. "Convenient story that absolves them while pinning everything on a dead lieutenant."

"I saw the evidence myself. And Collins' body."

"Evidence that will never reach a courtroom." He pushes a file folder toward me. "What about these? Financial records. Shipping manifests. Everything we needed for the RICO case."

I don't touch the folder. "Those were copied from their systems before I knew the truth."

"The truth? Or the version Cillian Kavanagh wants you to believe?" Doyle runs a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "They've gotten to you, Orla. Stockholm syndrome at its finest."

The comment stings. "I know exactly who they are. What they do."

"Yet you sleep under their roof. In their heir's bed."

My coffee tastes bitter. "What would you prefer? That my cousin died in that warehouse while your department figured out jurisdiction issues? That rival organization would have killed her."

"We would have found her."

"Cillian found her first." I meet his eyes. "And yes, I stay with him now. But don't mistake that for ignorance or manipulation."

Doyle sits back. "Then what should I call it?"

"A compromise." I slide a USB drive across the table. "Anonymous tip. Contains everything on Vincent Collins. His embezzlement. Orders regarding my father. Financial records. Everything needed for a posthumous case."

His eyes widen. "Anonymous?"

"No connection to me or any official investigation. Clean evidence trail leading directly to Collins. He acted without authorization, stealing from the organization."

"Convenient scapegoat." Doyle doesn't touch the drive.

"Justice for my father." I push it closer. "Collins killed him. Collins paid with his life."

You can close the case officially now."

"So you get your revenge while the organization continues operating."

"I get my father's killer. You get to close a seven-year-old murder case. Clean resolution without jurisdictional nightmares or witness protection concerns."

Doyle picks up the drive, turning it over. "And you get to play mob princess with your new boyfriend."

The comment cuts, but I stay composed. "I make no excuses for my choices. I see them clearly. All of them. The good and bad. The protection and danger. The loyalty and violence."

"Your father wanted more for you than this life."

"My father wanted me safe and happy." I stand, leaving money for the coffee. "I've found a path that offers both, complicated as it may be."

Doyle stays seated, looking up at me. "Be careful, Orla. These worlds pull you under when you least expect it."

"I know where I stand." I adjust my purse strap. "The drive contains everything you need. What you do with it is your choice."

Sunday dinner at the Kavanagh household buzzes with conversation as Niamh passes dishes around the formal dining room. Cillian sits beside me, his leg presses against mine beneath the table. A reassurance.

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Tiernan presides at the head of the table, carving the roast with precision. His eyes meet mine briefly—not friendly, not hostile. Acknowledgment of new reality.

"The Sullivan contract finalized yesterday," Cillian says, accepting the potatoes from his mother. "Complete transfer to legitimate operations."

Tiernan nods. "Good. Less exposure through that channel."

The conversation flows around import regulations, property acquisitions, charity functions—business discussed in family code. I follow easily now, understanding layers beneath innocent words.

Eamon sits across from us, his gaze meets mine with uncomfortable recognition. Our shared history—his hand ending my father's life, my choice not to shoot him during the rescue—creates unspoken tension. Neither forgiveness nor accusation, merely acknowledgment of complicated truth.

"Orla," Niamh says, "will you help with the foundation gala next month? Your organizational skills would be invaluable."

The Kavanagh Family Foundation—charitable work funded by less charitable income streams. Legitimate philanthropy with complicated origins.

"I'd be happy to," I reply, accepting my place in this careful balance.

Later, after dinner, Cillian and I walk through the garden behind the house. March chill giving way to early April warmth. Trees showing hints of green.

"Doyle took the evidence?" Cillian asks, voice low despite privacy.

"Yes. He wasn't happy with the arrangement."

"Few people get exactly what they want in this world." Cillian's hand finds mine, warm against evening air. "Collins faced justice."

I stop near a stone bench. "Your family's version of justice."

"That concerns you."

Not a question. Cillian reads me easily now.

"Everything about this new life concerns me," I admit. "I came seeking justice and found complications."

"Regrets?" His eyes search mine.

"No." The answer comes without pause. "Just awareness. Of choices made. Lines crossed. New boundaries formed."

Cillian traces a finger along my cheek. "We exist in gray areas, Orla. Always have. The difference now is acknowledging it together rather than fighting alone."

"And when new lines need drawing? New boundaries?"

"We draw them together." He cups my face. "My family operates by certain rules. Protection. Loyalty. Family above all. You're now part of that equation."

"Not quite family," I counter.

A smile touches his lips. "Yet."

The implication hangs between us, neither rushed nor dismissed. Simply acknowledged as possibility.

From the house, I see Eamon watching through the window, guilt and resentment warring in his expression before he turns away. The past never vanishes, merely transforms into new shapes we learn to carry.

Cillian follows my gaze. "He'll find his own peace eventually. With the right guidance."

"The family takes care of its own."

"Yes." He draws me closer. "Always."

I rest my head against his shoulder, feeling the solid strength beneath expensive fabric. My life now exists in contradiction—safety found with dangerous people, peace within constant calculation, love growing in soil watered with past violence.

Two weeks ago, Vincent Collins died for his betrayal. His choices seven years past finally catching up. My father's murder creating ripples still spreading outward, touching all our lives.

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Justice comes in many forms. Not always clean. Not always public. But arriving nevertheless.

The Kavanagh empire continues operating—shipping, imports, less legal ventures—while I stand within its protective boundaries rather than fighting from outside. A choice made with open eyes.

"We should go in," Cillian says. "Early meeting tomorrow."

I nod, walking beside him toward the house where Niamh arranges coffee in the sitting room, where Tiernan reviews documents in his study, where Eamon pours whiskey to quiet demons.

My new family. My chosen path.

In our bedroom, Cillian helps me undress, his touch lingering on my skin. The intimacy of routine—buttons unfastened, clothes folded, day washing away—says more than grand gestures.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, fingers gentle on my skin.

"Better." I reach for him, needing connection after the day's tension.

His kiss begins gentle, asking rather than demanding. I open to him, pulling him closer. Our bodies recognize each other, a language developed through months of learning.

He lifts me to the bed, his weight settling over me with careful precision. His fingers trace my collarbone, my breast, my hip—territories mapped but now seen without disguise.

"I know who you are now," he whispers against my neck. "Every part."

I guide him into me, our joining slow and deliberate. No roles to play. No personas to maintain. Just us, stripped of pretense.

"This is what truth feels like," I say as he moves within me.

His eyes hold mine, refusing to break contact. "No more masks."

We move together without rushing, savoring each sensation. His hands hold mine above my head, fingers intertwined rather than restrained. Partnership, not dominance.

"Tell me what you want," he says.

"This," I answer. "You. Us."

He kisses me deeply as our rhythm builds. No performance, just pure response. I wrap my legs around him, taking him deeper. His breath catches.

"Orla," he groans, my real name from his lips sending sparks through me.

When I come, the release carries more than physical pleasure—a surrender to what we've become together. He follows, his body tensing then relaxing against mine.

After, he holds me close, my back against his chest, his arm protective around my waist. His breathing steadies against my neck.

"I never thought I'd find peace with a Kavanagh," I confess into the darkness.

His arm tightens. "I never thought I'd trust someone who lied to me."

"Yet here we are."

"Here we are," he echoes, pressing a kiss to my shoulder.

I close my eyes, feeling his heartbeat against my back. An uneasy truce between past and present, justice and compromise, outsider and insider. Not perfect. Not simple.

But mine.