



# The Warrior's Salvation

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

**Description:** Loving him was forbidden. Carrying his baby? Unforgivable.

I was raised in shadows, but never allowed to see the darkness.

My father's world of power and whispers? Off-limits.

Until danger forced them to assign me a protector—

Lochlan O'Rourke. Ex-soldier. Psychologically wrecked. And devastatingly off-limits.

I wasn't supposed to fall for him.

But his touch lit a fire no one could extinguish.

His loyalty. His scars. His kiss.

He became mine... before I ever realized the price.

Then came the blackmail.

"Meet us. Betray them. Or watch your father burn."

I chose family. And fed the enemy secrets.

Now Loch thinks I'm cheating.

And I'm carrying his baby.

My mother wants me married to someone clean, someone safe.

But I already belong to a man with blood on his hands and war in his eyes.

Now he's demanding the truth I've buried for weeks.

How do I tell my protector he's about to become a father...

...when he might not forgive me for what I've done?

**Total Pages (Source):** 48

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

1

EVIE

Da's voice is so loud it rumbles the walls. I swear if he were a pitch higher, the windows would shatter. I glance at Jasper who sits across from me massaging his temples as if he's got a headache, and I know it's not just me who is feeling the effects of our father—and boss's—rage. Everyone in the union office is on edge today. It's like they all have PMS or something, and I'm the only woman in here.

"Hey," I whisper harshly, catching Jasper's attention.

His hands lower slowly and his eyes flit open as he glares at me. "What?" His returned hiss is less pleasant than I hoped.

"What the feck is going on in there?" Nodding at our father's office, I glance around the office space. I'm still settling in, and maybe this happens more frequently than I expect, but I get the sense that the fuse burning behind that door isn't just about a passing frustration. Da sounds like he's going to murder someone, like the time Jasper accidentally set the garage on fire and we had to use the fire extinguisher and put it out just as the fire squad showed up with their hoses. I've never seen his face redder.

"Mind yer business, Evie," Jasper growls at me just as the office door bursts open and fresh meat walks in.

I turn over my shoulder to see a tall man, broad shoulders, barrel chest, hair that's piled on his head in a knot, and eyes that drill through me as I look up at him.

Lochlan O'Rourke has shown his face around here a few times, but that's not where I know him from. My father is friends with him, which isn't something that pleases my mother much. She's said so herself on more than one occasion.

I'm not sure what to think of it. In Dublin, the O'Rourke name is synonymous with danger and crime and dark things no one speaks about for fear of their chief hunting nosy busybodies down in the night. I swallow hard, trying not to stare, but it's hard. He's hardly invisible. With biceps like that, ink peeking out from under the sleeves, and the way his jaw muscle flexes, showing off the strength of those lips, I find myself biting mine and picturing his face between my thighs.

"Loch," Jasper says, standing up and thrusting out his hand. The booming behind our father's office door continues, though no one can make out what he's saying.

Lochlan shakes my brother's hand and tilts his head at the source of racket. "He's a bit stiff today, isn't he?" He chuckles, curling his lips into a smile that makes his whole face light up, and I can't help but drool. Every time I've ever seen this man, I've been smitten. He makes my heart beat oddly and my palms get sweaty. He's more than ten years older than me and someone I shouldn't even look at twice, but I'll be damned if my panties aren't soaked the second he walks in the room.

"Evelyn," he says, nodding at me, and I shudder.

"Loch," I reply, feeling my throat start to constrict. I have to remind myself that he's a fucking criminal, a bad influence, someone my mother hates and whom my father should have no business with. But he's looking at me with those blue eyes and my mouth is watering.

"I should calm him," Jasper says, turning toward the office, but the shouting is over now, faded out while I lost my mind for a second.

When Da's office door opens, I tuck my chin to my chest and forget the illicit thoughts racing through my head. I'm here to learn the ropes about labor unions and business and put to use the degree I'm almost finished with. I'm almost done, just a few classes left, and finally, my father has agreed that I can be helpful here, much to my mother's chagrin. She feels it's not safe, though I don't know why. So Da does business with Lochlan O'Rourke. It doesn't mean he's a criminal too.

I know the O'Rourke family does run a few legitimate businesses, and from what I've gathered from working here the past few months, they are unionized much like many of the other businesses in Dublin. It's no mystery why business owners come to my father, and I know his heart. He's a good man, not a criminal. The connection is coincidence and nothing more.

"Draco, you monster," Lochlan jokes, slapping Da on the back in a man-hug, then pulling away. "I came as soon as you called."

"Not a moment too soon," Da says, pulling away. Then he turns to the rest of the office—ten or so desks organized in clusters facing each other. Mine is facing Jasper's, but a third one on the end is empty, reserved for the new accountant who hasn't started yet. "Everyone, I have some news." Da scrubs a hand down his face, and I see the stress weighing on him. His thick black hair is peppered with silver strands, worry lines etched into his forehead and around his eyes. He doesn't sleep much, doesn't do anything but work anymore—and drink. He and Jasper drink a lot.

"We have a slight situation out on the picket line. Our teams from the docks are striking, and we've encountered protestors who aren't thrilled about it. Jasper and I have to handle some situations, which means we may be out on the line until the strike is over." He sighs and rests both hands on his hips as he locks eyes with me. "Evelyn, I'm leaving Mr. O'Rourke in charge, so you'll report to him. But I also need you to get him up to speed. He's new to all of this, but I trust him with my life. He will be learning as he goes, and I'm depending on you to show him everything you

know. What you don't know, Jasper can fill in by phone."

My curiosity piqued, I slowly rise from my seat and smooth my hands down the front of my grey slacks. "Da, I'm new here too. I mean..." I swallow hard as I see Lochlan staring at me intently. "There has to be someone here that knows more than me."

"Not someone I trust with everything." Da's eyes pin me to my desk, and my hand flutters to the cross around my neck. "Now, this could take a few days, maybe a few weeks. If you have questions, you can call me or Jasper. Everything else will fall on Lochlan's shoulders." His eyes sweep across the half-dozen other employees in the room and then land on Jasper. "Go on ahead. I have a few things to finish up," he says to Jasper.

Da nods at Lochlan before grunting. "I'll be back in a few minutes and give you the tour, Loch. Make yourself at home."

I bite my lower lip as I watch Da and Jasper walk out of the office and I'm left standing there gawking at Lochlan, who looks as lost as I feel. The others shrug and refocus on their work, and I feel warmth pooling in my belly, joining the swirl of anxiety as I realize he really means it. I'm going to have to show Lochlan what to do and I'm not even sure what that fully means yet, but it's my chance to prove to my father that I'm capable. My business degree—almost in reach—is supposed to help me with that, and I'm not going to back away from a challenge.

"Evelyn, I'm going to?—"

"Evie," I blurt out, tucking some hair behind my ear. "I like to be called Evie. Sorry." Wincing at my own stupidity, I look away to avoid eye contact. My cheeks burn like the sun and I smile. He's got to think I'm an idiot. Twenty-one years old and I'm acting like a fucking child with a crush. I don't know how to even act around him. He's so fucking hot.

"Evie," he says smoothly. His voice is low, so I'm the only one who can hear him. The others on the other side of the room are busily typing away at their computers. "I'm going to settle in and make a few calls, but you can come in in about" —he glances at his watch— "fifteen minutes?" His eyebrows rise, and a single dimple appears when he smiles softly. "Get me caught up?"

I don't trust myself to speak without making a fool out of myself, so I nod and curl more hair around my ear, realizing I'm still pinching my cross necklace between my thumb and forefinger.

Lochlan grins at me like he understands how flustered I am, taking two steps backward before turning and walking through Da's open office door. He flicks a glance over his shoulder, and I swear he winks at me, but I'm too flustered to focus now.

My hands shake as I log back into my computer, unlocking it and shutting the screensaver down. If having a damn crush on him wasn't bad enough already, my da has to go and bring him into this office to oversee my work. Once or twice a month visits to our home are bad enough. I end up with dreams about a torrid affair or fantasies of him that make me want to touch myself, and now I have to work with him face to face for a few days or weeks?

I smile as I open my email client and wait for it to load up so I can at least attempt to distract myself from the flurry of endorphins racing through my body. I enjoy the feeling of being this aroused, but I know it's going to distract me and probably get me in trouble. I'll have to fight through the cloud of lust for a while, but maybe in doing so, I'll prove to myself that I'm capable of more than my mother thinks I am.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

My eyes pore over the screen as I read the subject lines and senders of at least thirty emails I have to catch up on since lunch time. One, in particular, catches my attention, as it has no name for the sender, only a series of numbers and letters in a generic domain host. It says "Open Immediately" in the subject line, so I select that one and read.

Ms. Evelyn O'Leary,

This email regrettably is to inform you that your illegal activities can't continue to go unnoticed. You must make an account of all the evil you've done through this union, and I am going to see to it that you do. I will be in touch with you, but be warned, if you do not respond or if you try to involve outside authorities, the evidence I have will come to light, and the entire union will be dismantled. Please understand there is no other way, though I do deeply regret that this has to happen.

I'll be in touch.

...

I stare at the screen blankly, wondering what this is about. I check the sender again, then the signature—no name. The IP address isn't even tracked. It's been routed through the dark web or something, and it makes me wonder what the hell is actually going on. First, Da's screaming fit, then Lochlan O'Rourke in the office, and now this?

I glance up at the office door thinking maybe I should tell Lochlan, but he's not really my boss. Da is. And if I'm in charge of showing him what I know, then it means he

knows less than I do. Still, after seeing Da so upset, I'm not sure I want to worry him if it's nothing. Some people like to prank others, and maybe that's all this is. For now, I'll just sit on it and hope nothing comes of it. If it does, I will have it saved in my files.

"Evie!" I hear Lochlan boom, and I tense.

Now, if I can keep my libido under control while this hunk is in the office working side-by-side with me, I'll be doing well. I'm just not promising I won't go home and rub off when this day is over.

2

## LOCHLAN

Sitting behind Draco's huge desk with his responsibilities weighing on my shoulders isn't exactly my idea of a mission, but after losing my cool one too many times in previous assignments, my brother, the chief, thinks I need to take a step back. I scowl at the mess of files on the desk and massage the bridge of my nose. Who'd have thought I'd be the one benched? I'm the only one professionally trained to do the jobs Ronan needs done.

"Evie!" I boom and sit back in the chair with a sigh. The first thing I am going to ask is who the fuck is responsible for cleaning up this mess, because a man in Draco's position shouldn't be pushing paperwork like this. He should have people for that. And I should be out there on the street where the O'Leary boys are headed to do the real fighting, not stuck behind his desk covering his ass.

The door pushes open, but instead of it being Evie as I expect, it's Draco himself, Ronan's new right-hand man, a replacement after his last one was gunned down in cold blood a few months ago. I swipe my hand over my face to mask the frustration



I've let creep back into my expression and stand.

"Ready?" he asks, and I nod as I stand.

"Can't be that hard, right? I'm not actually making decisions, just being a talking head in this office to make sure they all do their jobs." I glance around the small office feeling very out of place. The wood paneling with bulletin boards chalk full of notes and flyers make this place feel straight out of the nineties. It's like Draco runs an old-school setup even with all the latest technology at his fingertips.

"Well, come on, then." He gestures at me to follow him, and I round the desk. Pretending to be okay riding a desk is harder than I thought it would be. My days of hunting down criminals in Afghanistan are long over, and even as an enforcer here in Dublin since I've returned home, I've been on the prowl, pushing back my family's enemies and keeping our territory safe. Until now.

"We'll go through the offices first and then the warehouse, so you can get a feel for everything." Draco speaks as he walks, passing through the main office space where heads are down or staring at their computers. I'm in charge of fewer than a dozen people here, but also more than seven hundred other staff and union members across the city. While I don't know the ins and outs of how unions work, that's not really why I'm here.

Evelyn, Draco's only daughter, will handle the bulk of the legitimate work being done. She knows what's going on and can handle that. What I'm here for is to keep the rest of the operation running smoothly, which is why I'm taking this little tour.

"Of course, you met the gang here," Draco says, pausing near the doorway that leads out to the outer office and the elevators down to the warehouse. "We have fourteen more staff, recruitment offices downstairs, and three other offices around the city to handle member affairs." He nods at Evelyn, who is timidly standing by her desk,

probably on her feet to heed my call.

"I'll be right back, and then you can help me go over the files on my desk." My eyes lock with hers as I speak, and I still sense the hints of attraction in her gaze. It's there every time we bump into each other, but I'm not surprised. There isn't a woman alive who doesn't check me out, except the ones who are off limits anyway. But Evie is the daughter of my good friend, and I've watched her grow up over the past five or so years since getting home. It's tempting, but probably a bad idea.

Turning, I follow Draco through the outer office where he mentions a slew of names I forget before he even presses the elevator call button. He rambles off the different functions of the union and what each of his staff does to keep the organization running smoothly—fundraisers, education for workers to advance their careers, publicity and marketing, and legal defense, which is the department that sees all the real action.

Then he leads me down to the warehouse where the less well-known work is done. The massive open room is dark, so he flips the light switch and steps inside. Following, I rest my hands on my hips and let my eyes scan the crates, some of them with lids nailed in place, others still open, waiting to be filled and transported.

"We'll get a shipment later this afternoon, but of course the team thinks they're all laptops for government security..." Draco heads toward one of the crates that has its lid cockeyed, not yet full of the merchandise. He pushes the heavy wood to the side and leans in, taking out one of the heavy steel-grey cases by its handle, and sets it on the lid. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you that you have to be present when these are being loaded. They're not locked, so anyone could open one."

His thumbs press the buttons on the front at the same time and the case clicks open, the top popping up a few centimeters. Then he glances over his shoulder at the open door, and when he's assured the coast is clear, he lifts the lid to show me what's really

going on.

"Four hundred of these will come in from Alberta later this morning. They'll be delivered to dock nine and brought here in their own crates. They have to be taken out, the labels replaced, and then transferred into these crates for shipment to Glasgow this evening." Draco narrows his eyes on me as I examine the weapon in the container, encased in black foam for protection during transport.

The stolen Glocks probably originated from somewhere in the States and were stolen enroute to their expected destination. It's how O'Leary works, why Ronan partners with him. No matter what our customers need, he finds it and produces it for us. We get the cut, and he does the shipping, and everyone makes a penny on it. Meanwhile, we have happy customers and all the while, no one is the wiser. Union workers think they're doing a service to the union for laptops being sent toward government and military causes.

"Got it," I tell him, slapping the case shut. It clicks into place, and I look up at him. "So, the men working in this warehouse aren't in the know?" I ask carefully.

"Neither does Evie, so you have to keep her busy or send her home before the shipment arrives." Draco takes the case by the handle and sets it down gently into the crate, then readjusts the lid. I help him position it. It's heavy but not overly so for a two-man lift.

"And I'm assuming these records are somehow hidden?" I raise my eyebrows at him while I brush the sawdust off my palms, and he purses his lips.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

"Why do you think I have that much shit on my desk?" Shaking his head, he scrubs a hand over his face. "I'm gonna be real with you, Loch. This situation on the picket line is getting tense. They've been getting hammered out there. We're trying to keep our guys out front so when Doyle moves in, it's our men taking the brunt of it, but a few loyal laborers who aren't part of this game have gotten hurt pretty badly."

My anger flares and I clench my hands into fists. I should be on that front line pretending to be a picketing worker just like my brothers who are there to defend our territory. Instead, Ro took me out of the game and I'm babysitting Draco's gun running operation and his little girl.

"Well, I'm not afraid to fight," I tell him, but I know he'll never go over Ro's head and put me out there. He needs someone making sure the shipments get out on time, and I've burned Ro's trust in me after my last fuck-up. Lost my temper one too many times and it cost me.

"You know what you can fight for?" Draco asks me, pressing his hand to my shoulder. "Fight to keep us on schedule. It's harder than you think. And make sure Evie doesn't sniff around out here." He pats my arm once and walks off toward the back exit.

Scowling, I return to the hall where I flip off the light and shut the door. I know this is a lesson in self-control, but I think Ronan is wrong for locking me down. So who the fuck cares if I split one of the Doyles' head open for looking at me wrong? He deserved it.

I, on the other hand, don't deserve to be sidelined, but here I am.

Back at my office, which feels weird to call it that, I pass by Evelyn's desk. She's focused on responding to member emails when I tap her shoulder and curl my finger at her. She looks up at me as I beckon her back to the back office where I have a mountain of paperwork, which apparently is all the information I need to organize myself. It makes sense that Draco would keep it off his servers, but what a shitty way to do things today. Has he never heard of cybersecurity and firewalls?

"Yes, sir?" Evelyn stands in the doorway of the office wringing her hands, biting her lip when I turn around.

"What sort of stuff do you handle around here?" I sit down and thumb through a few of the files. There are names I recognize and those I don't. She watches me as she answers.

"I, uh..." She clears her throat and continues. "I help Da coordinate new members, follow up with current ones. I handle complaints and dispatch them to the right department, mostly legal. And I?—"

"The shipments?" I ask, interrupting her. Draco thinks she knows nothing, and she probably does, but in a place this small, word gets out. I need to know how ignorant she really is about this business of gun smuggling. I'm sure he's cooking books too, probably laundering, maybe some drug smuggling. I'll get into it more as I pore over these files, I'm sure.

"We accept donations for our educational wing from time to time, and our members at the docks also help track and monitor shipments. There are four shipping companies we contract with, so we?—"

"I mean your father's shipments?" I ask pointedly. I narrow my eyes at her, and she scowls at me.

"Look, Mr. O'Rourke, I'm not stupid. I know who you are and what you and your family do for a living. If you're insinuating that my father runs some sort of crooked business out of his labor union, you're wrong." She huffs and crosses her arms under her tits, making them push out slightly. She's cute when she's pissed, and I like the way her cleavage peeks out of that cream-colored top she's wearing.

Now the attraction that's typically in her doe eyes as she stares at me is masked behind defensiveness. She's naive. I'll give her credit for that. And she's loyal. It's just like Draco to raise a family loyal to him, even if they are ignorant of whom they're defending. It's a good quality to have.

"I'm not insinuating anything." My hand rests on the evidence that would show her exactly who her father is, but I'm under strict orders to keep her little innocent mind free from worry. "I'm asking what he ships." But now that I know she really is as ignorant of his real work as he says, I know where I stand. "When do his shipments go out? The schedule?" I raise my eyebrows and she blanches sheepishly.

"My God, I'm so sorry," she rushes, then walks over to the desk to lean over my shoulder. Her hand reaches for the mouse, and she presses her tits on my shoulder. She smells good, like flowers or something. It makes me wish she'd look at me the way she normally does. "Here..." Her clicks on the mouse bring up a shipping roster and she straightens. The way she brushes hair off her face in a flustered manner catches my attention.

She smiles nervously and then nods. "If you need anything else, I'll be at my desk." Evie backs away, flustered again, probably feeling the charge of chemistry between us that I feel.

So maybe riding a desk isn't all bad. At least there's some eye candy, and I can see the merchandise Draco ships for our family up close and personal. I watch her walk out thinking it will be much easier to tolerate this task of overseeing Draco's work and

keeping his daughter out of the know. Especially if she gets that flustered every time she comes into this office.

3

EVIE

I launch the dart, and it flies from my hand across the room to the board where it sticks far to the right of the bullseye in the center. Jasper claps his hands loudly and laughs, almost doubling over and stumbling around. He's had one too many drinks this evening, but I'm not too far behind him. I scowl playfully and pick up my beer, taking a swig.

"If you're gonna have the balls to demand to live out here, you should at least have the decency to practice darts so you can beat me." He straightens and takes his final dart. One eye narrows as he lifts it and pumps his arm a few times before letting it go sailing toward the bullseye. It sticks right in the center next to his other darts. Meanwhile, three of mine are in the outer ring and one sticks to the wall beneath the board entirely.

"Shut up," I grunt, pushing him hard as I take the last swig of my beer. "It makes sense. You're never home anyway. Why would they give you this place to live in when you spend a lot of your time out on the road?" The old mother-in-law suite in the far rear of my parents' property sat empty for years, and when I turned twenty-one last fall, I asked if I could rent it.

"Da only lets you stay here so you are close and he can watch you," Jasper explains as he waltzes over to pluck the darts out of the board and wall. I'm well aware of my father's ulterior motives and I don't care. I get my own place where I can be independent away from their nosiness, and he gets to feel in control of me still.

"So, you have to bring women home to Mummy and Da's house." I wink at him and turn toward the fridge.

This used to be nothing more than our game room until I insisted I wanted to rent it. Now the large studio is my apartment, complete with access to the pool and shower house. I can come and go as I please with little interference by my parents but with the security of knowing if something happens, they're right here. I'm not sure if I'd actually like living on my own away from here, but this is nice.

When I return from the fridge with two beers, ready to play the next round, Jasper sets the darts down and pushes the beer away. "No thanks," he croons as he runs a hand through his hair. "I have an appointment."

"Ah, so you really are bringing a lady home to Mum and Da's house?" Snickering, I set his beer aside and crack mine open.

"Nah, it's something for work. Gotta follow up with one of the wounded members." Jasper is too dedicated to work, always running errands after hours. It's a noble trait, but I think he does it just to make Da proud, and he is wasting his time. Da is already proud of both of us, and Jasper doesn't have to work so hard.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

"Hey, about work," I say, sipping my beer, probably my last for the night if he is leaving so early. "I got this strange email. I didn't say anything to Da because he's so upset over the strikes and the way people keep assaulting union members on the picket line..." I bite my lower lip as he shakes his head.

"They used fucking napalm, Evie. That shit sticks to anything it touches and burns. This guy is in the burn unit, begging them to cut his leg off to ease the pain. Can you imagine?" I see the rage in Jasper's eyes and I can imagine.

I have no clue why some people are so angry. Those dock workers only want fair pay and more sick leave. They're striking for a good reason and it's like the men whose shipments aren't getting put out quickly anymore are so angry they're willing to kill the striking workers. It sickens me. Nothing is so important that it's worth getting violent over it.

"I heard. I know Da is pretty upset about it, so I never said a word." I feel guilty even bringing it up to Jasper, but I'm not sure how to handle the strange email I got. If I tell Lochlan, he'll only get a big head thinking he's right, and my father is like him. Besides, he's not really running the show. He's just occupying a desk for a few days or a week until this strike is over and Da can focus on business again.

"What was it?" he asks, eyeing the beer I brought him. He'll end up taking it along to his meeting, I'm sure.

"Just someone saying the union has done evil and illegal things, that they have evidence and they'll be bringing a reckoning..." I've racked my brain a dozen ways from Sunday to try to figure out what sort of illegal things anyone may have done.

The most I can guess is that they're just more angry factory owners whose shipments aren't going out on time and they want to scare us into backing down.

I personally am on the side of the members. They do deserve better pay and more sick leave. No one should have to work for pennies and never get time off.

"Don't worry about it." Jasper tosses his hand at me in a dismissive gesture and scrunches his face as he reaches for the unopened beer. "People do that shit all the time. You're new, so you haven't been around long enough to see it. If you get another email, just delete it." The crack of the beer opening makes him smile. "I'm gonna scoot. You practice. You're really horrible."

I shove him again and laugh as he darts toward the door, stumbling a few steps to one side. He shouldn't drive, but he's older than me and stubborn. He'll do as he pleases no matter what I say, anyway.

I turn away from the door and the darts with beer in hand and see the stack of books on the foot of my bed calling to me. I have so much homework and only a few classes left to finish my degree. Graduation in a few months means finally having that damn certificate to say I'm trained to do the job I'm already doing. Maybe Da will give me a raise or a promotion. I'm not sure, but I do know it means I can work anywhere at that point.

I'll still work for Da, though, because you do for family. It's what Mum says. "You do for family." Like somehow, just by being born into a family, it means they come first, loyalty to them, fidelity...

Grunting, I slump onto the bed and set my beer down on the nightstand, taking my Philosophy of Business textbook off the stack and opening it. But I'm saved by the bell—or ringtone, actually. Kelly, my best friend since year eight, texts me with an invitation phrased more like a demand.

Kelly 8:47 PM: Meet me at The Underground. I need to dance...

A smattering of emojis follows her message, and I grin at my phone. I can't drive for sure, way too drunk for that, but I can Uber, and it gets me out of boring schoolwork. So I flop my book shut and strut to my closet to pick out the skimpiest little dress I have.

Thirty minutes later, I'm tugging at the hem of the slinky black minidress and my heels click on the pavement as I strut past the line of thirsty nightclub hopefuls. Not once have I had to pay a cover charge or wait in line. My curves and the fact that everyone in this city knows my father's name get me in anywhere I want to go.

"Ms. O'Leary," the bouncer says with a grin. "Come on in." He unclips the velvet rope and nods at me as I walk past a cluster of frustrated-looking women who are next in line.

"Thanks, Fridge," I say, patting him on his thick bicep.

This is our usual place, and I can't wait to find Kelly and get another drink. The music pulses so loudly, I can't hear myself think. I spy Kelly at the bar slipping some cash across the smooth waxed surface as she hovers over two fruity pink drinks. She sees me and grins, gesturing wildly for me to join her.

Her wild red curls have been tamed into a braid, and she takes one of the glasses and begins sipping while I yank the mini dress's hem back into place again.

"Any action yet?" I shout over the din of the beat.

"Just got here," she returns, nearly choking on her drink. She laughs and pushes mine at me, and I pick it up and drink it in three big swigs. I don't want to stand by this bar talking. I want to dance, and I want to find a hottie to help me work off some of this

pent-up sexual energy I've been carrying around with me for two days having to drool over Lochlan O'Rourke with no relief.

"Let's go, then!" I tell her, grabbing her wrist. She puts her drink down hurriedly and sets the empty glass on the bar, and we are already bouncing to the beat before we get onto the dancefloor.

The crowd is thick. Men and women surround us as we thrash around to the music. As usual, Kelly is flirty and a little seductive. She grinds on me a little as she makes eyes at some men. They like watching her do that. And with the mood I'm in tonight, if they begged for a threesome, I might just take them up on it.

Two songs pass and a third starts, and I'm getting thirsty again. But a handsome blond man with his hands in the air and his shirt open in front dances our way. He's hot, in his mid-twenties, maybe. His eyes lock on mine, and all I see are the corded abs he's put on display.

Nudging Kelly aside, he takes her place and dances far too close for comfort. He's good-looking, but not like Lochlan. Still, I don't mind a quick fix to my problem, and if he's game, maybe I am too.

The skull and crossbones tat on his right pec is sort of hot too—the sort I imagine Lochlan might have. Men like him always have tattoos and scars. He's a bad boy, probably used to shooting people or beating them to death. And while I don't know what he looks like shirtless, I can imagine it's much like this sexy man in front of me. I can't fight the temptation to reach out and touch his sweaty body, and he doesn't shy away.

"Wanna go somewhere quieter?" he asks, shouting in my ear. It vibrates me to my core. I glance at Kelly, who has found her own handsome man to snuggle up with on the dance floor.

This one, whose name I don't even know yet, has my legs spread, knee between my thighs as his pelvis thrusts up and down my leg in beat to the music.

I don't really want to leave the club, but I'm not a sex-in-public sort of girl. I glance around looking for a solution, but my slightly drunk brain doesn't see one. I'm not about to get in a car with him, and he's not following me home, so I'm not sure how to make this ache between my legs go away unless he's gonna rub me off in this dark club with gyrating bodies surrounding us.

A realization that I'm either going to fuck him here in public or I'm going to have to pass on his offer begins to sink in. His hand grips my hip, and I can feel his swollen dick through his jeans rubbing my leg.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

"I, uh..." I start to say, probably too quiet for him to hear me, and then like a large predator is smashing through trees that bend or break ahead of him, Lochlan O'Rourke appears out of nowhere. Bodies are pushed to the side, and he grabs the man in front of me by his neck and shoves him hard.

I gasp, backing up, as a spot opens up in the middle of the crowd. The man stumbles to his knees then stands back up. He looks furious, like he's going to attack Lochlan, but when his eyes rise to meet Loch's face, he blanches and shakes his head.

"Sorry, man..." he shouts. "I didn't know."

The blond backs away, hands raised in defense, and I scoff and scowl at my unwanted protector.

"What the hell was that for?" Before my words even form fully, Lochlan grabs me by the bicep and starts hauling me toward the exit. I glance over my shoulder, wincing as the sheer force of his movement catapults me away from Kelly. She's lost in drink and dance, and I find myself being manhandled out of the club and into an alley.

"What the actual feck?" I jerk my arm away from Lochlan as the door shuts and the music is nearly silenced. I can hear the thump of the bass and ringing in my ears. His chest is heaving and he looks furious.

"Do you even know who that was?" Lochlan plants his hands on his hips as he glares at me like he's my fucking father.

"What does it matter? It's not like I'm marrying him." I tug at the dress again, acutely

aware of how high my hem was creeping. My fingers brush over my slick panties, damp with arousal, and for a split second I don't see Lochlan as the problem but my solution. But here? In the alley, after he basically assaulted me, is not the way I want that to happen.

"He's a fucking murdering ass, that's who. He just got out of prison, or didn't you see the tattoo on his chest?"

Embarrassment creeps in and I feel my cheeks start to burn. I swallow hard, thinking how despite my abhorrence to men treating me like their little doll they have to protect, I'm grateful that he did stop that. You never know who might pick you up on a dance floor.

"What the feck are you even doing here?" I hiss, trying to mask my relief with feigned anger. God, he's hot and I'm drunk and I want him.

"I own the place, and if you know what's good for you, you won't come back. Evelyn, this?—"

"I fucking told you to call me Evie," I snip, turning to stomp up the alley. I want to go back in and I don't care if he doesn't like it.

Loch catches up with me, grabbing my elbow again. "Where are you going?"

"I am going back inside." I try to yank my arm away again, but he's too strong. I stumble and almost fall, and he pins me against his body as my head spins. My tits are crushed against his ribs, one almost halfway out. If he looked down, he'd see my nipple exposed.

"I'm getting you a cab and you're going home. Your da would kill you." He glares at his phone, and I splay my hand on his chest. His heart is throwing itself against his

ribs violently. I let my eyes flutter shut and wonder what he'd feel like between my thighs.

"Well, I don't want to go home," I say, but my protests are getting weaker. I'm tired and drunk. I shouldn't have had so many beers with Jasper.

"Well, you're going home. A Mob dive isn't a good place for you, Evie." Lochlan's voice softens and instead of hearing a man who's angry with me, I hear concern. Then I hear, "Jasp... Evie's at the Underground. Come get her. She's wasted and she was about to fuck Hacksaw... Yeah... No, I'm with her. She's not going back in."

My eyes are heavy, body feeling gooey as I lay my head on his chest. "Loch, you're such a jerk," I coo, sucking in a deep whiff of his cologne. He smells good, manly and intoxicating. I wish I weren't so drunk because I'd probably try to kiss him.

"I know, Evie... I know."

The next thing I know, Jasper is here and Lochlan is laying me in his back seat. I don't want to go home to wet dreams, but at least they'll be of Lochlan O'Rourke's thick biceps as he wraps his arms around me. And hopefully, I won't wake up with a raging hangover.

4

LOCHLAN

When Jasper drives off with Evelyn in his back seat almost passed out, I slink back into the club and find my way back to the bar. I watched her saunter in, already mostly drunk and dressed like a floozie. Draco would kill me if he knew I let her prance around the dance floor like that, grinding on her friend, then that asshole who would've taken her home and done unspeakable things to her. When he asked me to



keep her safe, I took it personally.

Moody, I slump into a seat and nod at Siphon who slings drinks. He tips his chin up at me ever so slightly, letting me know he's on his way with my Tennessee Fire, and I cross my arms, leaning on the bar with my elbows planted. The music still thumps, but they've turned it down a bit now, ever since I made a show of telling that prick off. He should've known better than to fuck around in my club, and especially with Draco's daughter. It's not like people here don't know how things work.

"Pissy tonight, hey?" Connor sinks onto the stool next to me facing outward toward the dance floor while I flick a glance at Siphon hoping he's got my drink ready. I've already had a few, but not enough to simmer my bad mood. This week hasn't been the best, and I haven't found a way to calm down yet.

"Do you even know me?" I grumble, thinking of that pervert putting his hands on Evie's hips, dry humping her thigh like he owned her. Things like this irritate the fuck out of me and I can't even say why, though Ro's wife Maeve would tell me some psychobabble about PTSD and why Maelyn's death is the root cause of it all.

I still see the building engulfed in flames when I shut my eyes at night, hear her screams when the room is silent. It's why I prefer the pounding noise of the club, why I sleep with the fan on.

"Fecking hell, Loch. Lighten up." Conner bumps me with his shoulder, and I grunt disapprovingly. None of them get it, and I don't want to sit and talk about my feelings to explain. It'd be better if they just fuck off entirely. The past eighteen months have been nothing but one fucking terror after another.

If it wasn't dealing with my brothers and their women getting kidnapped or attacked, it was watching my own life start to unravel. I know I'm spiraling, drinking too much, angry all the time, and there is no fucking way to stop it. So I just keep my

head down and bite my tongue a lot. Eventually, my life will stop spinning, and I'll see straight again. Or I'll die first. One or the other.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

"Picket line got hit again yesterday..." Connor is keeping tabs on what's happening with the DoYLES and the way they're pushing in on our territory. They want the docks because it means they can control imports and exports in Dublin, at least part of them. But knowing Ronan, they'll come to full-scale war before he allows that to happen.

"I heard." Nodding at Siphon who delivers my drink, I look down and take it, and he gets the point. He's not oblivious to who I am or the fact that this is a family-owned establishment. But he is smart enough to know when to avoid a conversation.

"Ro thinks they're gonna go after O'Connor again." Connor speaks out of the side of his mouth before slurping a large drink of beer. I don't want to hear about the front line, the way Doyle and his men are assaulting legitimate labor strikes to push our buttons. I want to get wasted and fucked and pass out so I don't have to feel so damn angry.

"Yeah, well I'm benched, so tell someone who fucking cares." The whiskey goes down smoothly, burning my throat, warming my gut, and Connor scoffs and shakes his head.

"What the hell is wrong with you? You came home from overseas and you were fine. Then all of a sudden, you turn into this raging maniac. You know why Ro benched you. You're a hothead. Look at the way you flung poor Evie O'Leary out the side door like a two-bit whore who bit your cock." Connor isn't ready for me to launch off the chair and pin him to the wall by his neck, and I'm surprised by my own swift action. My jaw is clenched, hand wrapped around his neck at the mere mention of my treatment of Evelyn.

"You have no right," I growl, blinking rapidly in a frantic attempt to rein in my temper. "Draco put me in charge of her safety and you feckin' saw who she was dancing with."

My chest heaves. I loosen my grip, and Connor shoves me away, then jerks his jacket back into place. He's angry with me, and maybe he has a right to be, but I can't shirk my duty to protect Evie.

"You need to get a grip, Loch." My younger brother steps up to me and presses his chest against mine, staring me down like he's going to put me in my place. "You know if you blow your lid the way you did two weeks ago again, Ro will send you away. He won't have you fecking up with so much on the line."

My mind races, anger swirling around my thoughts and hooking in with barbs that tear at my conscience. My memories are all jumbled—seeing Maelyn walk into that building, seeing Evie pass out on Jasper's back seat. I was her partner, tasked with keeping her out of the line of fire. It was my job and I failed.

"I'm..." I can't speak right now. Words don't come. Connor puts a finger into my chest and his nostrils flare.

"I saw it in your eyes when you heard about Siobhan being taken... You're not right up there." His finger taps my temple, and I swat his hand away. "You gotta back the feck off."

Shoving him hard, I let out a roar, and people scatter around us. He slams into the wall and comes back at me with his shoulder lowered, readying to ram my gut, but I sidestep him and stick out my foot and he goes tumbling into a group of people dancing. They gasp and move away, and I stalk toward him as he gets up, but he holds up his hands in surrender and shakes his head.

"I'm out... I'm done with this shit, Loch. Get your head out of your ass before you hurt someone or yourself." Connor dusts his hands and moves toward the front of the club, and people around me are staring.

Blocking them out, I turn and head back to the bar where my drink sits. Maybe he's right and I'm out of control, but how am I supposed to somehow magically get in control?

He's right. When our brother's partner was kidnapped by the Doyles, I had some sort of break from reality. I lost it, nearly shot the chief, and now I'm paying for it. Poor Evie probably didn't deserve the way I grabbed her and dragged her out, but something inside me saw a red flag fly and I had to protect her at all costs.

"Give me another," I grunt at Siphon, and he nods at me, turning to refill my glass. Now I'm going to drink until I can't stand straight and hopefully pass out so I'm out of my misery. If not, I'm going to end up hurting someone just like Connor said. And that'll only make me look even less reliable.

5

EVIE

My hands shake as I type on my keyboard. A second email was in my inbox this morning when I arrived at work. I've been feeling sick to my stomach ever since. I'm not sure what to do with it because this one is more threatening than the last one, and Lochlan keeps hovering, walking past my desk like he's watching me or something. I don't know if he saw my screen when I opened it, but I don't want him knowing what's going on.

As much as I want to think I can handle this myself, I know I can't. This is way outside my comfort zone, and I'm not paid enough to deal with things like this. But

my brother's nonchalance about it has me stopping to consider whether I'm just freaking out over nothing. He said things like this happen all the time, that people in the industry don't like unions and will push the small dog around to get their way.

It's the reason the workers are even out on the picket line now, because factories and businesses don't value workers' time and efforts. They strike to make their voices be heard, and right now, their voice is loud and clear. I suck in a deep breath and click the email open again to reassure myself that this is nothing more than some empty threat to rattle my father, though the sender doesn't realize I'm receiving his email right now. They just want him frustrated or scared.

If Da would handle this, I can handle this. I just feel nervous that Lochlan will stick his nose into family business and gather the wrong assumption—that my da really is dirty like him, that he's weak or that the O'Rourke clan can push him around. Da is a smart man, but I worry that a man like Lochlan may gain an advantage over him by manipulating a weakness.

"Everything okay?" Lochlan asks as he makes another pass by my desk, and I nod but scowl at him. I haven't forgotten the way he jerked me off the dancefloor so abruptly that it ruined my night. I may have passed out in Jasper's back seat and woken up in my bed in the middle of the night, but I'm never going to forget how Lochlan treated me like he's my boss.

"I'm fine," I say curtly, smiling professionally at him as he skulks away. He already apologized once, but I am too upset. Yes, he may have saved me from something nefarious that man may have wanted to do—or he may have just interrupted a hot moment that could've quenched the lust I've been trying to douse for days.

Either way, I ended up passed out way too early. Part of me wonders if that bartender slipped something in my drink, but if Lochlan's family owns the club, wouldn't that make him complicit?

"Alright, well if you need anything..." His voice trails off as he walks away, shutting himself into Da's office, and my hand on my mouse maneuvers to open my email client again.

The screen flashes and I see three new emails, one of them from the same strange email address. I glance up at the door, shut with the curtain drawn, and sigh as I feel my chest constricting again. These bastards are relentless, which explains why Da and Jasper are still out there four days later still dealing with picketing and the damn assholes who like to stir up conflict on the picket line.

My eyes rake over the new emails and I choose to read the one I know will be more threats first. The others are just business, things I can handle when my mind is clear. But this one has several attachments, images by the looks of it. I open the email and scan the contents, more threats about paying better attention to whoever this is or there will be "hell to pay."

Then I wait for the virus scanner to finish checking the attachments and start opening them. One by one, the images flash on my screen—a picture of Mum and Da's house, Jasper's car, my apartment. There are stills of Da on the picket line looking angry, one where he has his handgun in his grip staring off into the distance. I can see the picketers behind him and I know he's brought that gun there for protection. Mum hates it, but I understand why he does it.

It makes me shudder in fear, though, to see these images. Why would they take pictures of my family and my home? Why try to push me this far, and for what reason? This doesn't seem like the run-of-the-mill sort of empty threat Jasper told me happens all the time. This seems more serious.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

Looking up at the office door, I wonder if this is over my head, if Lochlan would be the better person to handle these emails. My job is supposed to be simple—responding to member complaints, assigning tasks to new staff, making sure shipments are on time. I just wish I knew if this was going to blow over or if Lochlan would overthink things.

Instead of letting this get outside the family, I choose to call Jasper. I know he and Da are busy, but they did say to call if I had any questions, and rather than worrying our father, I know Jasper will be able to reassure me or help me out.

But his phone rings through several times before going to voicemail. He may have left it in his car, or maybe he's in the middle of something. So I leave a fast voicemail for him to call me when he gets the message and lock my phone, but before I even put it back in my desk drawer, it chimes with an incoming text.

Unknown 10:37 AM: Don't do that...

I pause, scanning the room to see if someone is watching me, but everyone is busy working. No one has even looked up from their computer. Then my phone chimes again.

Unknown 10:38 AM: I'm here, and if you don't do what I ask, I'll make sure everyone knows Draco O'Leary is a criminal. Now, meet me in the parking lot. You have two minutes.

My throat constricts. I blink a few times as I read the message again, but I'm not sure what to do. Whoever this is must've seen me calling Jasper. That was the warning to



"not do that". But why? And where are they?

For a second, I think about not doing what they say. What will happen if I just sit here and pretend I haven't gotten a message at all? What would happen if I tell Lochlan, and he goes out to the parking lot to meet this freak? But what if it has to do with him? What if this is something to do with Lochlan O'Rourke being here at my father's offices running the show? Is that why they're targeting us now? They think Da is dirty because he's friends with an O'Rourke, but my father isn't a criminal.

And I'm not a pushover. I'm going to march my ass right down there and tell them to get lost. My father is a good man, and he's not crooked, and neither is anything about this labor union. If they think they can push me around, they're wrong. I'm not going to be intimidated at all.

I stand, putting my phone on my desk, and walk out the door. I take the first elevator down to the lobby and strut past the workstations to the warehouse. It's dark, and I don't bother turning the light on. I pass through it and into the open air outside the back door, where a man with dark wavy hair, dark sunglasses, and a tailored black suit stands waiting with his hands crossed in front of himself, clutching one wrist.

"Who are you?" I demand, conjuring all my boldness and attitude. It's how I should've behaved on Friday night when Lochlan yanked me off the dance floor. Instead, I draped myself over him and almost threw myself at him. But it feels good to puff my chest out, square my shoulders, and speak to this asshole like he's the annoying gnat of a human that he is.

He chuckles a warm, buttery tone, and I stiffen at the sound. It's almost not human the sound that vibrates up out of him, almost mimicking a predator's growl.

"Well, you're a bit feistier than I thought you'd be." The man peels off his sunglasses and glances up at the camera over the door, broken and dangling from the wire. It

hasn't worked in months, but maybe he already knows it. It's why he asked me to come down here. "I figured Draco's kid would have a nasty attitude like him."

"What are you talking about?" I cross my arms under my tits and take a hesitant step backward. "And why are you here? What do you want from us?" I try not to take this too personally, remembering I am new to this job. Maybe Jasper is right and this shit happens all the time, but it doesn't happen to me all the time. It never happens to me. I'm not going to stand back and let someone annoy or threaten me.

"Oh, honey, it's you I want." He folds the sunglasses casually, slides one earpiece down the front of his white button-down shirt that hangs open in front a bit. Chest hair peeks up out of the gap, and I wonder how old he is. He can't be that much older than Jasper, maybe not even Lochlan's age, but he has a thick mop of hair, dark stubble shading his jawline. "You see, while your father is out trying to keep the peace, I'm here to stir up some trouble. You understand..." His fingers reach out and curl around my cheek, touching me lightly. "Cat's away, mice play... that sort of thing."

I slap his hand away and glare at him, keeping one foot ready to dart back through the open door into the warehouse. He makes my blood boil, but he also scares me. I feel stupid for coming down here alone. Maybe Lochlan is right and I take risks. This was stupid.

"What do you want?" I try to make my voice sound bold, but I'm trembling. He has to see that.

"I want you to give me information. Whatever it is I request of you. And I want it in a timely manner. Do you understand?" I want to back away, but he snatches a handful of hair and locks his fist around it. As I take a step, my head cranes backward, neck arching at a stiff angle that makes me gag.

"Let go of me!" I gasp, turning hard to smack him, but he yanks my head backward harder and brings his hand up.

I think he's going to strike me with his other hand, but he doesn't. Instead he holds his phone up, screen lit up, and on it I see a banking statement. It's got Da's union letterhead, the company account number and several transactions circled, though I can't make them out with my eyes going cross eyed in this position.

"See this, sweetheart? Your Da is a money launderer. I bet ye didn't know that, did ye?" When he gets hostile, his voice starts to crack, his accent coming out thicker. "And he's been doin' it a while. And I think you don't want this to get out. Poor Da will end up in the slammer if it does. Wouldn't want that, would we? Who'll take care of Mum?"

I blink hard against the pain and reach up to where he's grabbing my hair and pry his fingers off. "Feck you!" I hiss, trying to straighten my hair a bit, but he smacks me hard and it makes me stumble backward into the wall.

"Now listen to me, Evie-bug..." My blood runs cold. No one uses that name for me except Da, and only inside our home. How would this man know that? "I have more than enough proof to give to the public prosecutor and see that your father never comes home again."

I hold my cheek, squinting into the sunlight, trying not to let the tears burning my eyes fall. "You're a liar. None of that's true." I'm trembling, wondering if I've been so naive to have missed something. Da is friends with O'Rourkes, but that doesn't mean he's crooked, does it? This man couldn't possibly be telling the truth.

"Look into it, sweetheart. You'll see I'm not lying. And when I contact you again, if you even think of calling Jasper, I'll end you on the spot, and I'll pin it on your father. Now do as I say and take this." He thrusts a phone into my hand from his pocket. "It's

how I'll contact you. And when I do, don't be a second late. You won't like me when I get angry."

The man turns to go and I shout at him, "Arsehole!"

"That's Darren, honey. Darren Connelly is what you can call me. But don't call me. Until I call you."

Darren walks calmly to a car and slides into the back seat as I scramble back inside the building. My hands are shaking, hair still fucked up. I'm about to piss myself in fear because no matter what Jasper says, this is most definitely not normal for anyone. And when the lights in the warehouse come on and I see Lochlan looming in the doorway on the opposite side of the building, I feel relief flood my system.

Part of me wants to run to his arms and tell him everything, but the threat that man made makes me freeze. If he threatened to kill me and pin it on my father just for telling Jasper, what will he do if I tell Lochlan?

Holy fuck, what is going on?

### LOCHLAN

After calling Evie's name several times to no reply, I stand and walk to my office door and peer out. She's not at her desk, nowhere in sight, and three of the staff look up at me.

"Have you seen Evie?" I grunt in frustration, but they shake their heads like fools. Of course they're not paying attention. They're not paid to keep tabs on Draco's daughter. They're here to do their jobs.

Sighing in annoyance, I stand in that doorway for a few seconds wondering if she's just using the toilet or if she ducked out of the building. Draco told me to keep my eye on her and make sure she was safe and staying out of our business affairs, but how am I supposed to do that if she vanishes? There isn't much around here that could put her in danger, but her discovering the shit that goes down in the warehouse can't happen.

"Feck's sake," I grumble, deciding I have to go find her. I massage my temples as I walk to the outer office door, past the plastic Ficus and toward the elevator. She's not in the hallway. No sounds are coming from the ladies' bathroom. If she walked out of the office and left without telling me, we're going to have a problem.

I'm always high-strung, but in moments like this, where the person I'm supposed to be in charge of isn't where they're supposed to be, I find myself a bit more tense. Like at the club over the weekend. She has no idea the trouble she was tempting into her life

and she has no clue what I saved her from. Now this? Disappearing during work hours?

The elevator doors slide open on the first floor and I scan the area. I'm not sure what she does for her job entirely, but perhaps she has to come down here for some reason. Still, I see no trace of her. The men and women seated at their desks here in recruitment are working hard. A few of them poke their heads up and nod at me. They've seen me around.

When I see the door to the warehouse in back is open a crack, my temper flares. I try not to let it get out of control immediately, but it's hard not to be angry and blame myself for this. Evie is naive. She has no clue the danger she'll put herself in if she gains knowledge of Draco's real business here. She's soft and vulnerable, and bad men in this city hoping to get at her father would use her as leverage faster than she could blink.

My hand presses on the cold metal door, pushing it open, and before I can even utter a syllable, Evie is there, eyes wide, hands shaking, shoulders hunched. Her skin is pale, pupils so tiny you'd think she was stoned, but it's fear. Of me.

"What the feck?" I growl, feeling all the rage of a million angry bulls in my chest. I rein it in as much as I can but it still bursts out of me. My shoulders tense. my hands clench into fists, and my body is on alert, poised to strike if need be. I hate that reaction—it comes on me instantly even in situations like this, where the risk is low, the danger minimal. I want it to stop, but the best I can do is grit my teeth and try to remind myself that I'm speaking to a woman, not attacking a band of insurgents.

"Move," she hisses. Her voice breaks, her tone full of emotion. She shoots her hand out into my chest and pushes me backward, and I allow it. If I wanted to stop her, I could, but she seems terrified. I don't like that I scare her so much and I know it's probably because she understands who I am and who my family is. I follow her

toward the elevator and hear her sniffing, and the red mark on her cheek doesn't escape me, either.

We step into the elevator cage and the doors shut, but when she goes to press the button for level two, I put my hand in the way. "Why were you in the warehouse?" I ask, and she glares at me.

"I went out back to get something from my car." She flashes a phone around and then runs her hand under her eye, wiping away a tear. I realize maybe it's my tone that is upsetting her and feel like a dolt for being so obtuse.

Backing away, I lower my hand and she pushes the button. We're not going to have a good working relationship, and I'm going to have a very difficult time protecting Draco's secrets and Evie's life if she's constantly afraid of me.

"I came looking for you because I need help. Would you come to my office to show me some things?" Stepping back, I fold my hands over my belt buckle and try to use as calm of a tone as possible.

"You mean my father's office? And yes," she says meekly, some of the fear starting to relax out of her shoulders.

The doors slide open. Half the room watches her follow me to Draco's office where Evelyn passes by me and I shut the door. None of the other staff members have said a word about my taking his place, but to Evie this must seem like an intrusion. There are so many reasons for her to be upset with me and fear me. If I can reduce some of them by sitting her down and having a talk, I will. Maybe this is why Ronan forced me to do this task that's beneath me. He knows I have to go soft to deal with all of this.

"Evelyn," I start, which sparks a bit of fire in her eyes. She hates her full name, but

this is serious and I want her to understand by context how serious I am. I stroll over to my seat and sit down comfortably. She hovers at the end of my desk chewing on her lip, fiddling with the phone in her hand. "I am not your enemy, okay? I don't want to be here any more than you want me here, but your Da asked me to do this favor for him. I just want to do a good job, and I'm sorry if I frighten you. I don't mean to."

Her shoulders relax a little and she wipes her face clean. Mascara rings under her eyes are the only sign that she was crying, though her nose is a bit red. She nods and shoves the phone in her pocket, but I still can't get over the red mark on her face.

"I want to ask what you were really doing out there..." I shake my head. "Your cheek looks like someone struck you." I nod at it, gesturing with my hand. I'm not good at picking up on subtle clues, but there is nothing subtle about that welt.

"The wind caught my car door and it smacked my face." She holds her hand over her cheek. "Is it that bad?" Her hand shakes a little. I get the sense she's hiding something, but I'm not her father. She's in this building safe, and so far, there is no sign that she's uncovered any of Draco's secrets.

"It's pretty red..." My wheels are still turning. "Why go through the warehouse instead of the side door like normal?" There isn't much in the warehouse that could get her into trouble right now. The gun shipments went out last week, but we do have a crate of drugs out there waiting for tomorrow's boat. Maybe that's why she's upset? She saw that?

"Are we playing twenty questions?" she snips, and I chuckle at her fire. She reminds me of Maelyn a lot, wanting to be independent and hating authority.

"Alright, fine... Let's call a truce. I don't want you to be upset with me like I'm a bad guy. I'm here to help Draco do his job and hold down the fort here." I avoid telling



her that he asked me to protect her. She'll hate that insinuation that she's weak. "So if you do your job and you're here when I need you, I'll do mine and we can stay out of each other's hair."

My frustration is starting to simmer down now, mellowing into a warm attraction I feel every time she's around.

"Fine," she says calmly. "But I don't need a babysitter. I just went out to my car. Is that a crime?"

The air is still tense, more so than I want it to be, but we've agreed to this truce and I want to switch gears. I turn toward my computer and angle the screen toward her more.

"I have to know where to find shipping schedules. Draco gave me a tour of the building but didn't show me the software. Mind helping me out?" I look up at her, and she's already moving, walking toward me. She leans over me. Her tits brush my shoulder and I smell the hint of peppermint on her breath, the scent of lilac perfume or shampoo. It curls around me and I relax into its feminine touch.

"Here." Evelyn reaches for the mouse and moves it around, pointing it at the file navigator. I watch how she expertly draws up the shipping scheduler and opens the files. "The manifests are linked here," she says, directing the mouse icon to the linked blue words, "and here." The longer she stays hovering over me, the more I am drawn to her.

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I can't shake the similarity between her and Maelyn. She has the same body type Maelyn had, the same slender fingers. Hell, they even smell the same, or maybe that's my mind playing tricks on me. It makes all sorts of memories bubble up that I have to push down. Evelyn isn't in danger. I don't have to feel this way, but I do. I feel like putting a protective arm around her, pushing her behind my back, ready to fight anyone or anything that might harm her.

"And that's that..." she says, and I realize I've been lost in thought not paying attention to her. I'll have to ask more questions which she will think are dumb questions, but it means more time close to her. I like the thought of that. Being near her makes me feel in control and at peace.

"Lochlan," she says. then she turns to lean on the edge of my desk. I look up at her wondering what she's going to ask as she continues. "Do you think Da is a criminal?" Evelyn winces and looks down, saying, "I mean... I'm not trying to accuse you of anything, but I know your reputation." Her eyes track back up my body to meet my gaze. "Do you think he's like you?"

The question comes out of left field and I wonder if it has to do with anything she may or may not have seen in the warehouse, but I answer cautiously. "Your father is a good man, Evie." I want to touch her arm or leg, show her my compassionate side, but I don't want her to think it's inappropriate. "I don't think you need to worry about it. He has a good heart, and he loves you."

"But do you think he's in danger?" I see the very real fear in her eyes, the same fear I saw in Maelyn's eyes before she walked into that building. I should've gone first. I should've protected her.

"No, Evie. I think he knows what he's doing. Family watches out for each other, you know? So he's protected." My slip-up doesn't even faze her. She's staring off at the wall where one of Draco's many bulletin boards hangs. She nods and stands, smoothing her hand across her skirt, then turns to me.

"What did you mean by—" Her phone rings, making her jump. I watch her blanch and reach for it, and she mutters, "I have to take this," before rushing out. I'm left wondering what she could possibly have heard or seen to make her suspicious of Draco, but now I know I have to turn up the heat on my observation.

If Evie is starting to suspect something, I have to know what she suspects and I have to stop her from getting any confirmation of those suspicions. It's why I'm here. I may have failed Maelyn, but I won't fail at this. I can't.

Draco is depending on me.

7

EVIE

Mum's meal is delicious but I'm not that hungry. Since the moment Lochlan walked through the front door and joined us at our dining table, I've been distracted. Da has been so busy handling things at the picket line that he hasn't stopped by the office, so this family dinner has turned into business talk.

"But the shipments have gone out on time?" Da asks, eyes flicking up at me, then Lochlan. Jasper's head is buried, phone in hand as he shovels food into his mouth. He seems entirely disinterested in talking shop, but with everything going on I feel even more alert to it. That call the other day was a warning for me not to talk to anyone about what that man Darren said.

He threatened me again, said he'd harm my father or turn in evidence to the public prosecutors or garda that exposes my father's supposed illegal business. But I tore through our computer system and I've found no trace of any wrongdoing. Everything looks above board, just like Jasper said, just like Lochlan encouraged. My da is a good man.

"Yes, sir," Loch replies, and I notice him steal a glance at me too. Every time he does, I think of how his temperament changed on a dime the other day. I was so freaked out by that asshole in the parking lot that I came across as scared of Lochlan, and he pulled me into Da's office to help me calm down. My own father would've told me to perk up and left me at my desk. I thought it was sweet, though he was a bit demanding.

"Things are going well, Da." I put a bite of savory meat into my mouth and chew thoughtfully, studying his facial expression. He cares about the union so much that he's willing to go out and picket right alongside our members, and that just shows his heart. But he worries too much. Lochlan and I are handling things around the office while he's doing the more important work of ensuring our members get what they pay for. Those union dues aren't cheap for them, so to see their leader out on the picket line means something. "We're handling things."

Da grunts and nods and Lochlan chimes in. "She's phenomenal, Draco." He nods at me as he puts a bite of dinner into his mouth, talking as he chews it. "You've really got something. Evie is smart as a whip. When this is all over and she's finished her degree, you need to give her a raise."

I'm not sure where the high praise is coming from, seeing as I am only doing my job, but I'm flattered. My cheeks warm, and I avoid looking at him because I know if I do, he'll see the way I really feel. I'm attracted to every word he says. I hang on them and find myself so mesmerized that I'm staring.

"Well, I'm glad things are going well," Da says. He wipes his mouth and his phone begins to buzz. "Pardon me. I have to take this." He stands, bringing the phone to his ear, and for the first time all night, Jasper looks up from his phone. Even Lochlan traces Da's movements toward the door he walks through.

"I'll be back," Jasper grumbles, and he, too, gets up and walks out, leaving Lochlan sitting awkwardly at the table across from me.

"How is it?" Mum asks us both, probably to make conversation since my father just rudely walked out on his guest, and I moan my enjoyment as I chew.

"It's very good, Miriam." Lochlan smiles at her, and I'm smitten. He is so handsome, so self-assured. His black dress shirt gives his skin a very warm tone. His hair falls in his eyes slightly, and I imagine those thick biceps pinning me in, arms wrapped around me. It's a dumb fantasy, but that doesn't stop me from thinking it.

Kelly tells me all the time to "live a little" because she knows when my mum and da have their way, my life is over. The things a normal twenty-something would be allowed to do will be off limits to me, and I'll be married to a man I've never really gotten to know. It's the way of things in my family and I've always known it would be my fate. It doesn't mean I like it, but I understand.

"Let me clear these plates," Mum says absently as she stands to pick up Jasper's and my father's plates. Lochlan smiles at her again, and when she leaves, he focuses on me.

It's unnerving when he turns the full force of that grin on me. It's not even a full spread where the smile reaches his eyes—just a little half-grin. But he's charming and funny. I've sat here as he spoke with my father kindly, talked about the meal and the family and then work. Now as he watches me finish my last bite and wipe my mouth, I feel the need to excuse myself. I start to stand up, and Da struts back in.

"I have to run. There's trouble at the line again." He's scowling as he looks at me. "What are you doing?" he asks, and I feel put on the spot. It's rude for me to leave Lochlan sitting here alone, but that is exactly what I was just about to do.

"I'll go with you," I tell him, fumbling with my words, desperate to not be alone in the same room with Mr. O'Rourke. He makes me nervous but not in an "I'm scared" sort of way. More so, I'm nervous of what stupid thing I may say to make myself look foolish or immature.

"No, you stay here." Da turns to Lochlan. "I'll be back shortly. Make yourself at home. Have a drink. Evelyn can help you settle in."

"Of course," Lochlan says smoothly. He stands too, and now I feel stuck.

"But Da, if I'm going to learn the whole business, don't you think I should?—"

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"You heard me, Evelyn."

"Da, Jasper can stay and keep Mr. O'Rourke company. I want to?—"

"Evelyn." Da's eyes narrow on me, cutting my words short. It's the same expression he has when I've done something wrong and he has to chastise me.

I nod, pressing my lips into a thin line, and watch him walk out, saying something to Jasper down the hall before the front door shuts behind them. Lochlan stands on the other side of the table staring at me, and I look down and away as I round the end of the table.

"Come on, I'll show you the liquor cabinet," I say in a low tone. If Da knew what was going through my mind, he'd never have left me alone with this man. I'd be put on a leash or locked in my room to preserve my innocence. I'm not that innocent, but that's what my father would think.

Lochlan follows me up the hallway. I'm still on edge, feeling very self-conscious. Everything about this charming, good-looking man makes my knees weak. I find it hard to form coherent thoughts that don't revolve around very dirty things, and my body ends up all worked up. It's hard to concentrate at work, but here at home, it's impossible to do anything.

"Why do you hate me?" he asks, and I stop a few strides from the liquor cabinet. Confused, I turn around and see him standing by the salmon-colored armchair. His hand rests on the back, chest puffed out so his buttons bulge, shirt stretching wide. I feel flustered. I blink at him a few times and shake my head.

"Why do you think I hate you?" My palms are sweaty and my tongue clings to the roof of my mouth. The thermostat must be stuck wide open in this room. I'm sweating.

"That or you're terrified of me. Is it because of my last name?" He inches forward, hand falling from the chair as he walks. Suddenly, he feels larger than normal, like he grew a few inches and his shoulders became broader.

"Mr. O'Rourke, I'm not afraid of you at all." I take a step back because I'm afraid of myself—of what his speaking to me is doing to my body. The attraction I feel is ridiculous. I felt it in his office the day I showed him the shipping schedules too. I leaned over his shoulder and my chest brushed on it. He smelled so good. I bet he smells good now.

"Then why do you try to run out of the room every time I enter? Why are your hands shaking?"

Da will kill me. It's all I can think about—how angry my parents would be if they knew how badly this man makes my pussy ache. He's so sexy, and I'm sure half of it is the fact that he's a bad boy. He's a criminal and probably has done very bad things. They want me to marry Elvin Murphy, though, have a better life. Technically, I'm betrothed, and I shouldn't even be thinking these ungodly things, by my God, do I want Lochlan to touch me.

"I don't run away." Taking another step backward, I feel the firm wood of the liquor cabinet at my hip. I can't back away more. "Why do you think I'm running away?" I lick my lips and blink hard. My core is drenched. I can feel the moisture in my panties soaking my thighs, and it pulses, begging to be sated.

"You're doing it now. Your father told you to keep me company, help me settle in, and you're ready to run off again. I'm not a scary person, Evelyn."



"Evie," I correct him and I sigh. "I know you're not scary. You come across as some badass, but you're really a sweet man." The way he helped calm me after that lunatic in the parking lot says a lot about his true nature. He doesn't let people see that side of him, but I do. And after he dragged me away from that man on the dance floor—someone I realize now I should never have even looked at—I know Lochlan is loyal too.

"Sweet?" Lochlan chuckles, and I let my shoulders relax a bit. "That's not something I've been accused of before."

My mind goes back to that day, when I was shaking like a leaf, when Lochlan asked me to come into Da's office to show him shipping schedules. I walked in a mess, and just being in his presence calmed me. Part of me wonders how he'd react to find out this Darren guy is blackmailing me. If Lochlan would think I'm weak or fragile. If he'd ask Da to remove me from the offices.

Mum would force me to marry Elvin immediately, which I don't want. I'm okay with marrying the guy. I made peace with that a long time ago, but I want to experience life first. But I know if it got out that Darren is blackmailing me, Da really would lock me up at home. I'd be dragged down the aisle, away from men like Lochlan O'Rourke—who gives my heart this racy feeling—and that would be that.

"Yes, sweet. You think being a total asshole is going to keep people away from you, from getting close, but I see the kindness in your eyes." The heels of my hands plant on the edge of the cabinet behind me. He's close, but not close enough to touch me, and I'm starting to calm down and let the feeling of arousal settle in.

Lochlan is smart and coy. There's no way he can look at me for this long and not see the obvious attraction I have. My cheeks are blazing, so they've got to be bright red, and if I feel the moisture in my panties like this, it means my pupils are probably dilated and my lips flushed with blood. His eyes keep dropping to them, then rising to

meet my gaze again.

"Men like me... we can be scary beasts." He takes another step forward, hands clasped together in front of himself. It makes his shoulders broaden further and it makes my core tighten.

"Yeah? Are you telling me you prey on my fear? You want me to cower? Because I'm not afraid of you..." I neglect to finish the sentence, but I want to tell him what I really feel.

"I'm just saying, if there's another reason you get so uncomfortable around me that you feel the need to rush out of the room to avoid being alone with me, I'm going to find out." Another step closer, and his scent wafts toward me.

"If you are so sure I'm cowering and running away, then why care? Isn't that what men like you do? You make your prey cower? Isn't that what you like?" I'm toying with him now, watching every inflection of the muscles on his face. He smirks, eyes narrowing. He's eating this up, and the air between us feels thick with chemistry.

"Men like me?" he asks, finally stepping close enough to rest a hand on the cabinet behind me. He leans over me, close enough that I could raise up and press my lips to his if I wanted. "You mean scary criminals? Or do you mean something else? Something a woman like you shouldn't be thinking?"

I swallow against the way my throat constricts. His body brushes against mine, and I stop myself from touching him. It's obvious he's coming on to me, though that only became apparent to me in the last few seconds. The line between seduction and intimidation is very thin, but this is not intimidating me. It's pushing my buttons, making my core throb.

"I guess if you want to know how I really feel about you, you'll have to stop by my

apartment." I sidestep him. There's no fucking way I'm going to put the moves on him here in my parents' house when my mum could walk in any second. "You'll find the door unlocked. It's round back, past the pool."

Speaking over my shoulder as I walk, I feel nervous energy start in my middle and shoot outward to my limbs. My feet feel heavy and awkward. I think I may trip over them as I walk, but I manage to carry myself gracefully out of the room and through the dining room where the table is almost cleared.

Mum doesn't say a word as I slip through the kitchen and out the back, and the crisp evening air outside cools my blazing face. I am not sure what the fuck I've just started, but if he comes to my apartment door, I can't back down.

Kelly tells me to live a little all the time. If this isn't "living a little", I don't know what is.

### LOCHLAN

Evie breezes out of the room in an air of confidence that consumes me. My dick is pulsing, bulging in my pants in a way I hope isn't overly obvious. I turn to watch her hips sway, and she doesn't even look back. She hasn't been terrified of me. She's been so flustered she can barely control herself, and I'm not sure how I missed the signs. Probably because I've been so attracted to her too that I've overlooked things.

"Where did that girl go?" Miriam scowls as she walks into the room with a tin of cookies. She shakes her head as she looks up at me. "I'm so sorry, Lochlan. Evelyn has no manners. She shouldn't have left you alone. I don't mind sharing some time with you while we wait for Draco."

Always hospitable, Miriam sets the tin of cookies on the coffee table and sits down. Her pastel skirt drapes down over her legs and she smooths it out. When her eyes rise to look at me, I'm not sure how to respond. Evie left me in such a whirlwind of thoughts, I'm not sure which way is up right now.

"I'm quite full from dinner. Draco will probably be out for a while. I think I might just go home." The liquor behind me calls my name, coaxing me to pour a drink and stay, think about what Evie meant by "what she really thinks of me". There isn't a cell in my body that doesn't want to follow her back to her apartment and see what she's talking about, but Draco would kill me. I know full well that she's been promised to a different man. It's the way this family works. It doesn't, however, stop me from wishing I could take a dip in her well.

"Oh, it's such a shame. I baked these earlier today thinking you men would enjoy them." Miriam smiles, though her tone has hints of disappointment. "You go on, then. I don't want to keep you from business."

"I appreciate the offer, and thank you for making them. Maybe next time." I'm already moving toward the door, willing one foot to fall after the other to carry me to my car and get me off this property before I do something foolish. "Have Draco give me a call when he has a chance." I speak over my shoulder, but I'm on a trajectory toward the front door.

"Of course," Miriam calls. "Goodnight, Lochlan."

The chill of the evening breeze off the ocean does nothing to cool my heated body. Evelyn was playing with me, teasing, flirting. I saw the look in her eye, the hue of her lips as blood flushed them. I only imagine her pussy dripped with moisture as her lips down there flushed the same shade of red. And thinking about that made me so hard my cock hurts.

Stopping by my car, I almost make it. I almost have the willpower to turn and open the door, but my glaze flicks toward the rear of the property, behind the pool, beyond the pergola where the lights from the mother-in-law suite cast a faint glow. Almost.

Before I can stop myself, I'm moving, wincing with instant regret but not turning back. Her door beckons me, light reaching out across the back yard to grip my desire and suck me in. I steal a quick look at the back of the house where Miriam is plainly visible doing dishes with the maid, and I know they can't see me out here where it's dark. Then I focus on the tiny apartment and weave past the lounge chairs, past the pool, under the pergola, and my hand rests on the knob of the apartment door.

For a second, I know I still have time to turn around and not do this. I know what Evie was insinuating. I know what she wants. I know what I want, and I know if

Draco hears about it, I'll never hear the end of it. It won't just be Evie's father, either. Jasper will want to kill me. Ronan will never let me out of his sight, and all hell will break loose for this family. Evie is off limits. She's too young, the daughter of Ro's underboss, and I am a stupid, stupid man.

But I turn that knob and walk in and see her wearing a skimpy nightgown draped over the foot of her bed like a slutty model in a men's magazine spread. Her face is flushed and her body looks rigid, but she's staring at me with doe eyes, and my dick is probably dripping.

She doesn't speak, doesn't get up or move. She just stares at me as I toe off my boots, then unbutton my shirt. I let the fabric slide down my arms and drape it over the sofa's arm. The curtains are drawn, door locked behind me, and I have at least an hour while Draco checks on the line. I stalk toward her, and my intention is clear when my hands go for my belt buckle, and still she doesn't flinch.

Twenty-one years old and this one is so bold, she has invited me to her room for a booty call, but she isn't even flirting with her eyes. She splays her hand on the comforter, watches my moves. Her eyes pause on my torso, rake over the tattoos on my chest and arm. She stiffens as I pull out my cock and stroke it. Her eyes grow wider. I watch her toes curl and then shove my pants down, and as I approach the bed, she sits up, draping her legs over the edge.

Her nightgown shifts, pressing against her body. I see her hardened nipples through the satin and cup both of her cheeks, forcing her to look up at me.

"This is what you think of me?" I ask her, but it's not really a question.

Evie's eyes are uncertain, blinking, searching my expression. She's not very experienced. I can tell by the way she grips my girth and strokes slowly. Her tongue flicks over her bottom lip, and she guides me to her mouth, making long, languid

licks down my shaft from balls to tip.

My hands frame her face and I watch her. She never lets her eyes move from mine, like she's waiting for approval or a sign of pleasure, and I decide right then and there to show her how to really do this.

"Baby girl, you need to do it like this," I tell her in a low growl, and when she lines my cockhead up to her mouth, I pull her head forward, thrusting my hips until my cock is deep in her throat. Her hands splay on my thighs, pushing me backward, and I feel her throat constrict around me as she gags once, then twice, and her eyes water.

I pull back, letting her suck me, and she claws at my thighs for more, so I thrust in again, plunging my whole length into her mouth until she's gagging again. For a few minutes, I enjoy the pleasure she wants to bring me, but this isn't why I came in here. She wants something too, and I won't waste a drop of my energy if she's not going to be satisfied.

"Feck," she hisses when I pull out of her mouth. Loosing her head, I let her wipe her mouth as my cock slaps against my lower belly. Evie stares up at me looking timid, and I eat that shit up.

"Lie down," I order her, and before she obeys, she tugs her nightgown up over her head. Her body is pure, undefiled by tattoos or scars. Her tits are perfectly proportioned to her body, nipples pebbled in arousal.

"Yes, okay," she mutters, scooting backward on the bed. It's like she expects me to fuck her missionary or something, like she's never done this. I stroke myself as she watches. She doesn't even touch herself, again showing her inexperience.

"Touch your clit," I order and watch her as she hesitantly puts a few fingers on her pussy and lightly rubs. "No, I mean, fuck yourself now. Really touch yourself." I

stroke and ogle her as she tries to please me, so innocent and naive. "You've never done this?" I ask.

"No, I have, I swear." Her lip trembles, but it's not my aim to scare her. Her fingers rub harder, dipping into her entrance, and then she brings them to her lips to suck them clean. Maybe not a virgin, but holy fucking shit is she hot. I watch her pussy clench and loosen, and the way her ass puckers drives me wild.

"Harder," I growl, and she does as she's told.

I kneel on the bed and grab her ankles, spreading her easily. Lifting one hand, I spit on it and reach for her pussy, giving her a light tap on the clit. She gasps and arches into it, begging for more. "Now, tell me why you brought me in here." She shudders and rubs her clit harder.

"I want you," she pants out, and I believe her. No way she makes that much moisture if she doesn't want me.



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I reach up and grip her hips from underneath and pull her to the edge of the bed. She gasps when I bite her inner thigh delicately and hisses as those bites grow closer and closer to her core.

"Mmm, why did you suck my cock?" I ask as I press one finger inside her and her toes curl. She's tight. I like it. I want to feel that pussy wrapped around my dick soon.

"Because... you wanted it?" she whimpers, and it's so adorable. I slide an additional finger in her, scissoring them apart. She moans and then bites her lip. "Loch," she begs me. "Please..."

"No begging, Evie," I growl slowly and remove my fingers. She whimpers again, but when my tongue traces her lines, finding the slit and working my way up to her clit, she claws at my head. I suck and lick, letting my teeth rake over her entrance and moist skin until she's coming undone, jolting and shaking. Her hips thrash wildly upward. It took no time at all for her to snap, which is only further proof of how badly she wanted me. And now I can really enjoy her.

"And what do you want?" I ask her when she's calm, slowly licking up the fresh moisture. She twitches every time my tongue crosses her clit. This is too easy. I'm going to have to do something about that next time.

"I want... you inside me." Her fingers claw at my scalp, so I slowly rise and lean over her, capturing her lips with mine. My cock rubs on her core, and she strokes me. I know she tastes herself on my lips, but she doesn't shy away. Again, it's a turn-on.

"Tell me exactly what part of me you want inside you Evie," I growl, and she moans

into my mouth.

"Your cock," she near whispers, her voice shaking. She's so timid, so not like the woman I just watched walk out of that living room, and somehow, it's an even bigger turn-on. I line myself up against her wet entrance and push in millimeter by millimeter. Her flesh gives way to accept me, and when I'm all the way in, she moans, her eyes rolling back into her head as she arches her back. "Yes." Her pussy clenches, hands clawing my sides as she undulates against me.

I stay still for a moment, letting her become used to my girth and then she's the one rocking into me, pulling me deeper with each stroke. "Harder," she growls between panted breaths, and I want to remind her of who's in control here, but right now, it doesn't matter because every bounce of her hips feels so good.

For a moment, I savor the union, stealing kisses and biting her lip. When her pussy tightens around me, I know she's getting close, and I pull out, much to her disdain. She whines, reaching for me, but I flip her over and give her ass a hard smack, after which she yelps and tries crawling away.

But I'm on the bed pinning her down, sliding my dick into her from behind before she can get away. "You want this, Evie. You teased me, invited me here, and now you're going to know what getting fucked by a real man feels like."

"Oh, shit... God, Loch," she mumbles, her voice muffled by the pillows. "Shit, you're huge."

"And you want it. Say you want it," I order her. My entire weight is on her body, hips thrusting into her. She whimpers and claws at the comforter, and I squeeze a hand under her body to find her core soaking wet.

"God, I fucking want it. Yes..." Her hips lift upward, and I rub her clit. I go harder,

pushing as deep as I can, until her inner walls restrict me from going any farther. She's so wet, and I can feel her pussy milking my cock as we grind together. The bed creaks under our weight, and the headboard bumps against the wall. Every thrust pushes us both closer to the brink.

"Ungh" she grunts, and I know she's close again. Tiny spasms of her climax approaching push me past the point of no return. Her nails dig into the sheets as she shudders, hips bucking wildly against me, lost in ecstasy. I don't let up until she's limp beneath me, panting like a deflowered virgin, and I finally let go. Sinking my teeth into her shoulder, I pour every drop of my seed inside her aching body as her walls clench around me in spasm after spasm.

I'm heaving for breath, heart pounding, and she's as limp as a rag doll. When I pull out and back away, I see the way her pussy clenches and pulses still, my cum draining out of her onto her comforter. She turns her head to the side, face obscured by a mess of tangled hair, and I smack her ass hard, leaving another red handprint.

Evie snickers and rolls to the side, thrusting her hair off her face as I pick up my boxers and jeans and dress. She watches me with the same curious silence she had when I walked in. Only now, she seems much more at ease with me as she props herself up on one elbow and sighs a deep sigh, the kind that reveals relaxation.

"Why did you come back here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I ask, reaching for my shirt. Her eyes trace my movement as I slip it on, button it up. "If you're going to talk to me the way you did just now, in your father's house... You'd better bring your A-game in bed."

A hint of embarrassment washes over her expression, which is in itself a massive turn-on. Maybe next time, I'll humiliate her by making her come so hard she pisses herself. It makes me smirk just thinking about it, and I tuck my shirt in before

buckling my belt.

"And don't kiss and tell." I fold my collar down, reach for my boots, and step into them. "I'll deny anything, and you'll look like a fool." If she says a word, I'm as good as dead.

"I'm inexperienced, not stupid." Evie sits up and slides to the edge of the bed. She's not shy anymore. That's good. Hopefully, this will stay between us.

"Next time, try to put up a fight. The submissive act is cute, but I mean it. Bring your A-game if you want to keep me interested." I reach for the door as she scoffs, and I grin to myself the whole walk back across the lawn.

She was eating out of my hand, and no doubt, as feisty as she is, with so much to prove, if there is a next time, I'll see the real Evie O'Leary in bed. My God, do I hope there's a next time.

9

EVIE

I can't believe Lochlan said that. I rush across the room, intending to thrust the door open and shout at him, but I think better of it. Mum could hear, or Da could be in the driveway and see me naked. So instead, I stand at the window watching him walk through the glow of light streaming out of the back of the house toward his car. All I can do is eat the insult and grin at how incredible he made me feel.

I don't even bother putting clothes back on. I stroll to my fridge and pour a glass of wine from the half-empty bottle after Kelly's visit a few days ago, then climb into bed and curl up with a good book. The murder mystery has held my attention for a few days, but as I sip the wine and try to focus on the words, I find myself turning pages

without knowing what's happening.

Lochlan ruined my ability to concentrate. His touch, the way he just took control of me—it's all I can think about. And he said "next time" like he intends to do it again. With me? But when?

I'm giddy at the idea that he might want to have sex with me again, not only because it was incredible, but also because of how badly I want him. Two orgasms aren't enough. My core is still pulsing with desire. If he had stayed, I'd be screwing him again and again, and the only reason I can come up with is that he represents freedom and excitement.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

I hardly see myself being this worked up to have sex with Elvin once I'm married. I could be wrong. He could be incredible in bed too, but something tells me his laid-back demeanor indicates a very passive man. He probably doesn't even know where to touch me to make me squirm, but Lochlan does that with his eyes.

I know it's wrong. I know how horrible he is, the things he's probably guilty of. His family is notorious in this city, and fucking with him is probably a very bad idea, but the fire he ignites inside me is unmistakable. And holy fuck, the way his mouth felt roaming over my nether region.

Yes, I will definitely be doing that again if he wants it. I just have to be careful to guard my reputation—and probably use protection next time so we don't have a whoopsie. Elvin will never agree to marry me if I'm knocked up with another man's baby.

Which is exactly what I start dwelling on as my mind drifts off to a peaceful sleep. I dream a few steamy sex dreams where I sit on Lochlan's face, fuck him while he's driving his car, and one where Da interrupts us and throws him out. And right before waking up, I dream I am pregnant with his baby and Elvin kills him, which makes my heart beat wildly out of control. It's enough to propel me to the shower where I wash the sex off me and prepare for work.

My morning routine is normal—shower, breakfast, hair and makeup, dress, and grab a coffee on the way to the office. But arriving at work is anything but average. I see Darren's car before I even get mine parked, and for a second, I consider not stopping, just driving back out of the parking lot and heading straight to the picket lines where Da and Jasper are probably helping set up for the day.

Then I think of Lochlan, how he ordered me to bring my A-game, and I wonder if this is what I'm like. I get myself into situations where I am supposed to be bold and tough, and then I cower and fold like a cheap suit. Darren Connelly might think he can push me around, but I'm not a pushover.

When I pursued my business degree, my parents abhorred the idea. They fought me tooth and nail, but as an adult, I legally had the right to do as I pleased. Eventually, they gave in when I told Da I planned to work for him using my degree. Mum was resistant, but we compromised. As long as I promised to wed Elvin when it was time, they would accept that I wanted more from my life than to be a stay-at-home mom raising Elvin's wealthy, spoiled children.

That backbone is what drives me to park my car and head toward the building without fearing what Connelly wants. He is here to intimidate me more. I'm sure of it. But I'm not going to let him get to me. I'm going to square my shoulders and pour every ounce of boldness into this moment that I can.

But when he cuts me off, standing between me and the door, holding his phone out in my direction, anxiety starts to fuck with me.

"What do you want?" I snip, trying to walk around him, but I recognize the voice on the video in front of me. It makes me pause and look down at his phone.

"Just watch, sweetheart." Connelly has some nerve showing up here again. I've ignored his calls and texts. I should've thrown the damn phone out when he swore Da is a money launderer, but I kept it. Some sick morbid curiosity I have.

My eyes fall to the video even though I don't want to, and I notice it's TD Scott, and he's saying something about my father. I narrow my eyes and listen.

"Mr. O'Leary promised me the favor of two million in exchange for my silence. I am

saying this of my own free will, and I admit that I have made mistakes..."

The video pauses and he smirks at me as he says, "Paying off the deputy of the Dáil is a very severe offense, Ms. O'Leary..." Connelly's eyes focus on me as he slides his phone into his pocket and steps closer. "Believe me now? TD Scott is on record confessing to accepting a bribe from your father, which will land both of them in prison. Now." He sucks in a breath and looks around the parking lot, then back to me. "You either give me what I want, or your Da goes to prison for a very long time. Who will run his precious union when he's locked up?"

"Feck you," I hiss, walking around him. My breakfast is knocking at the door, attempting to loose itself, and I rush to the side door of the building, but Darren catches my arm and spins me around. He has a knife, which catches the hem of my blouse and slices through it. Then he presses it against my throat as he curls his arm around me, pinning me backward against his chest.

"That's no way to speak to me, sweetheart. Daddy dearest won't be so happy to hear his little girl is willing to let him rot in jail." The knife blade is sharp but it hasn't drawn blood yet. I swallow against the pressure and try to keep myself calm.

"What do you want?" The only way I'm getting out of this is to comply, give him what he's asking for. Then he'll go away, and I can go back to my normal life.

"I want you to ship a few crates for me. I need to know when you can send them from here to Antwerp, and then on to Brussels." His knife doesn't falter. His hand is steady. But my ragged breathing scares me. If he doesn't press down, I'll be fine, so long as I don't pass out and fall on the fucking blade.

"I don't know that information," I lie. I can look it up any time I want.

"Well, find out. The crate will be here in three hours and if it's not on the next ship, I



send this video to the director of public prosecution." Darren gives me a shove, and I stumble toward the door, not even looking back as I yank it open and dive in.

My hands tremble as I stagger to the elevator and push the button. My first thought is to go straight to Lochlan and tell him everything, to let him know what's going on because I don't think my A-game is good enough for this mess. But he's not in Da's office, and a few of my coworkers stare at me like I'm a child because tears stream down my cheeks.

I feel panicked and hysterical, especially when I get a text message with a warning not to say a word to anyone or he will turn the recording over for that offense too. And now I'm petrified. If Da really is guilty of what Darren said, I can't let him go to prison. I wonder what a man like Lochlan would do in this instance, how he would handle it? They commit crimes all the time and don't get caught, so how can I allow my da to go down for this? I have to do what he's asking. And I have to keep it a secret too. Otherwise, I'll lose my father forever. I can't let that happen.

10

## LOCHLAN

As I pull into the parking lot, I see a strange man. His figure moves across the lot, walking with an odd urgency that immediately catches my eye. He's wearing a heavy, dark jacket that looks out of place for the weather—it's not cold enough for something that thick. It's too... obvious. His posture is tense, shoulders slightly hunched, like he's trying to make himself smaller, but at the same time, he's glancing over his shoulder every few seconds, as if expecting someone to be following him.

There's something about the way he moves that sets off a warning bell in the back of my head. He's either in a hurry or trying to make himself invisible—both of which I don't trust. And since Draco is away and this is my turf to defend, I immediately feel

protective.

I watch him for a few beats, my grip on the steering wheel tightening slightly. He doesn't glance at me as he slides into a car and it pulls out of the lot, tires screeching slightly as they speed off. He has a driver, so he's affluent enough for that sort of thing, but it's not a ritzy car, so perhaps not as well-off as he could be. My suspicions are raised and my mind chews on this information.

I can't shake the feeling that I've just witnessed something... off. I haven't seen him around before, and that only deepens my suspicion. This isn't the kind of person you just ignore. I consider following, but my duty is here. Whoever he is, he's definitely up to something. But what? The lack of answers gnaws at me as I push the thought to the back of my mind for now.

The moment my boots hit the second floor, I'm greeted by the hum of the office around me. The sound of chatter, the quiet clinking of coffee mugs, and the steady buzz of the air conditioning give the place a false sense of calm. It's almost too normal. But then my phone rings, jolting me out of my thoughts. I stand in the entryway next to the restroom entrance to answer it.

I glance at the screen. There is no caller ID, which typically means someone I don't know or someone who is trying to mask their identity. I'm already on edge, but this makes it worse.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

“Lochlan...” Cormac Doyle’s voice is unmistakable. It crackles through the phone, lower than usual, tight with malice. “Tell your damn union to back off the picket line. More men are gonna die if you don’t.”

A chill crawls down my back, sharp and cold. The implication behind his words is clear. Cormac doesn’t just mean physical threats on the line. He’s talking about something deeper, something more personal. My gut twists as I peek through the narrow window into the office space where staff members are working. I’ve seen the Doyles play dirty, and I can’t help but feel like this time, they’re about to cross a line they haven’t yet. They’ve been pouncing on picketers for weeks now.

“What do you mean by that?” I force the words out through a tight jaw. I don’t want to know, but I need to. If he’s already been breathing down Draco and Jasper’s necks, there’s no reason for him to come at me here.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Cormac sneers. “You think the picket line’s a problem? That’s nothing compared to what we’ve got in mind. Tell Draco to pull his members back. It’s such a shame innocent men will be buried. Think of their wives and children. And those ladies with their cute pencil skirts sitting around their desks typing. Such a shame, indeed.”

I feel my muscles stiffen, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up as his words hit like a punch to the gut. What’s he got in mind? He means inside the walls of this office—going after the people here. People Draco asked me to watch out for.

A sharp breath slips through my teeth. “Don’t make threats you can’t back up, Doyle,” I growl, though the words feel hollow even to me. I know he’s not bluffing.

“What the hell are you really planning?”

There’s a long pause on the other end of the line. “You’ll see soon enough,” he says finally, and the line goes dead before I can respond. The sound of the dial tone echoes in my ear, leaving me in a bitter silence.

I stand there, unmoving, in the middle of the entryway. My mind is already spiraling. I think of the people in this building—the men and women working behind their desks, the ones who come to work every day thinking it's safe.

My thoughts inevitably flick to Evie. The way she’s been acting lately, her wariness, the frightened look in her eyes when I’d caught her the other day—there’s something more to this. She’s involved somehow, and I can’t figure out how or why, but I know it’s not a coincidence. This is more than just a union dispute. It always has been, and maybe Cormac is trying to make this personal to Draco. Something I don’t think anyone has thought about.

Shaking off the unease, I make my way to the office, pushing through the door and stepping into the main room. My gaze sweeps it quickly, a habit I’ve honed over years of working in this business. My eyes settle on her almost immediately.

Evie’s sitting at her desk, bent over papers, her brow furrowed, looking more tense than usual. She’s chewing at the inside of her lip, an unconscious habit I’ve noticed she does when something’s eating at her.

Her face is pale—too pale—and when she catches sight of me, she jumps, startled. Her shoulders hunch instinctively, like she’s bracing for something. Her hands freeze mid-motion as if she wasn’t expecting anyone to be standing behind her.

“Evie,” I call, my voice sharp and commanding as I step closer. “In my office. Now.”

She stands quickly, but there's no spark in her movement like usual. No lightness. No energy. She seems more like she's going through the motions than anything else, like she's carrying something heavy. Her shoulders slump, and I can see a flicker of something in her eyes—anxiety? Fear? The two emotions mingle together, and it makes my chest tighten.

I watch her follow me into my office, my gaze trailing over the way her hands tremble slightly as she closes the door behind her. She stands across from me with a defensive posture. Her arms cross tightly over her chest. It's subtle, but it's there—she's guarding herself.

“What's going on?” I ask casually, hoping not to spook her. I'm late getting in today, so she may assume this is a check-in on my part. I had a few things to manage, but now I'm regretting that decision. If Cormac is ready to target the home office and not just the picket line, it means anyone here is unsafe—including Evie. And I gave Draco my word that I'd protect her as much as his business.

Her eyes dart away from mine for a moment, but when she meets my gaze again, she forces a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. “Nothing. It's just... busy. You know how it is.”

I don't buy it. The tension in her body, the way she's avoiding my gaze—something's not right. But I don't press her yet. I need more from her, and I'm not about to push her into a corner just to get answers. It would only make her ask more questions like the one she threw at me the other day about her da being dirty.

“Anything strange happening? Any odd emails? Visitors? Anything out of the ordinary?” I ask, and she flinches slightly like she wasn't expecting the question, but she holds her ground.

“No,” she says, a little too quickly. “Nothing. Just the usual stuff.” Her head shakes,

hair tousled around her face. It's sort of sexy, but with her panicked expression, I'm not able to allow myself to indulge.

The words feel like they're sitting between us, heavy and insincere. I'm not convinced, but I can't force her to tell me something she's not ready to cough up. If she's scared enough, she'll come to me. For now, maybe my best option is just to take control where I can, ensure she's safe even if she won't make herself vulnerable. Something tells me that man earlier in the parking lot has something to do with this.

"Alright," I reply after a beat, making the decision in my mind. "From now on, I'm giving you a ride to and from work. For safety. Things are escalating at the picket lines, and I'm not going to risk something happening to you here. Your da would kill me."

Her eyes widen slightly, surprise flashing across her features before she quickly masks it. She opens her mouth to protest, but I cut her off. "No arguments. This isn't up for discussion."

She doesn't argue. The tension in the room eases ever so slightly, though I can tell she's not entirely happy with my decision. She's strong-willed, but I won't back down on this. Not after the threat I just received. Not when I know what the DoYLES are capable of.

She nods silently and walks toward the door more slowly than usual, her body language saying more than her words ever could. As soon as the door clicks shut behind her, I reach for my phone again, dialing Ronan's number. He picks up on the second ring, and before he can even speak, I unload.

"Ronan," I snip urgently. "I spotted a man outside the office earlier. Didn't recognize him, but something about him felt off. We need to be on alert. I don't trust this. Something's happening."

Ronan's response is quick and sharp. "Alright, keep a close eye on everything. The office is too valuable to lose. Our shipments don't go out if the union takes a hit. Draco has worked too hard to keep things up and running for us. We can't afford a slip-up."

I nod, though he can't see me. "Got it. I'll tighten things up here."

There's a pause, and I can hear the shift in Ronan's tone. "What else? You didn't call me this worked up over some guy in the parking lot."

I run a hand through my hair, trying to keep my voice steady. "Cormac called me. Told me to pull the picket line back or more men will die."

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

Ronan's tone turns colder, but he's always so collected. "What else did he say?"

"He threatened more violence. Not just the pickets—something bigger. I don't know what he means yet, but I get the feeling he means the offices."

"I'm not surprised." Ro's voice is almost a growl now. He knows as well as I do that if Cormac wants to, he can drop a nuke in our supply chain simply by taking out this office. The little pushes at our boundary line are meant as an intimidation tactic. He wants the O'Rourkes out of play on the docks and he wants his own supply line to take precedence. If he moves on the office, it means war.

"I'll talk to Draco. You just make sure you keep things running. And for Christ's sake, make sure his daughter is safe. Damn fool should never have let her work for him." I picture Ronan's angry expression as he thinks of his own child and I know how he feels.

"I'm on it, Ro." I hang up the phone, but my mind goes to the odd way Evie is acting. I'm not just watching over this office anymore. My job is now to protect this place from Cormac's attacks and keep these innocent workers as naive to Draco's real business as possible while protecting their lives as well.

Starting with his daughter.



I don't want to get in Lochlan's car. I'm perfectly capable of driving myself home, but here I am, standing by the passenger door with my arms crossed, glaring at him.

"I'm fine," I snap, my voice tight. "I can drive myself."

Lochlan doesn't flinch. He doesn't even look upset—just that determined look in his eyes. "No. I'm not letting you drive. Not today."

My blood boils at how easily he dismisses me. "You're being ridiculous."

He shrugs, unfazed. "I'm not taking any chances. Get in the car."

I roll my eyes but do what he says. There's no point arguing with the way things are. I feel exposed, out of control. I can't explain why, but this is how it is. The threat feels real, and part of me wants to feel safe, even if it means being pissed off at Lochlan.

The car engine roars to life, and we sit in silence for a few moments. The day presses down on me—everything's happened so fast, so much to process. I'm still trying to wrap my head around what happened earlier. The video, the threats, my father... I don't know what I'm dealing with, but I know I can't back away. Not now.

Lochlan glances at me as he pulls into traffic, his jaw tight. "You okay? You were acting weird this morning."

I stiffen, caught off guard. "I'm fine. Just... tired," I lie, keeping my voice steady.

His gaze sharpens, but he doesn't say anything else. The tension in the car thickens, and I feel like I'm suffocating. I want to tell him the truth, but I can't. If he finds out about the threats against my father, he'll pull me out of the office, and I can't let that happen. I need to find out how deep my father's ties go.

He lied to me the other day, told me what I wanted to hear. But my father is tied up in this thing somehow, even if it's Lochlan and his family who put him in the middle of the situation. That video only proves it, and now I'm stuck in a situation I didn't ask for, having to protect my own father from something he won't ever see coming. I have to dig in deeper and find out how far it goes to see if there is a way I can save him.

"Well, you can tell me if you want. I'm not going to freak out or think you're weak." He steals glances at me as he drives, and my eyes track over to him curiously. Why would he say something like that unless he already knows what's happening? But if he knew what was happening he'd have stopped it by now, stepped in and nailed Darren Connelly to the wall.

"I'm fine," I say, letting my tone soften. It's not Lochlan's fault this is happening, and I have to be honest with myself. I feel safer with him in his car than being cut off by that creepy man. Maybe if he sees that Lochlan is with me every second of the day, he'll get the point. He has to know who Lochlan O'Rourke is.

"It's because we had sex?" He's so blunt, stopping at a red light and staring at me. His eyes bore into my skin, making me nervous and a bit flustered. With everything that happened at work, sex was the last thing I had on my mind. But now that he's brought it up, I find myself feeling warmer, kind of aroused.

I swallow away the tension of being forced to do something I wasn't pleased with and let his question sink in. When he left my apartment last week, he said I needed to bring my A-game next time. He obviously knows what he wants, but I don't, so it makes me curious to hear his thoughts. I muster a bit of boldness and say, "Yes, the sex..." It's a lame excuse, but he buys it and smirks at me, which embarrasses me a little.

"What did you mean by bringing my A-game?" This time, it's my turn to stare at him

as he pulls away from the intersection and turns toward my father's house.

"I mean, you went from a prowling vixen in your da's living room to a puppy on a leash. If you want to please me, you'll have to be a bit wild. I like the feisty ones. Why do you think I followed you back to your suite?" A smirk plays at his lips. I get the feeling he's asking for something, and if he wants the vixen, then I have to pull her out and pretend I know what I'm doing.

My core tightens. I'm sure my body is making loads of moisture as I angle my shoulders toward him. He's focused on driving, and I feel like the mood in this car just shifted. So he's being a bit overprotective by driving me around. At least I can have some fun with it. So I unhook my safety belt and lean over him, rubbing his groin. Surprisingly, I find a slight bulge that hardens under my touch.

"A vixen?" I purr, conjuring images of a woman clad in black leather with a whip and a man tied to a bed. I'm sure it's not what he's meaning, but it's all I can think. "You want to be dominated?" I whisper in his ear, and he chuckles.

"I want you to fight me a little. Make it interesting."

Lochlan speaks so confidently, I'm not sure what to think. "Fight you?" I ask, finding that my hand has stopped massaging his swelling dick as he pulls into the driveway and rounds the house to park by my apartment.

"Yeah," he says as he slides the car in park. He grabs my wrist and tightens his grip hard around it, then presses a kiss to the inside of my palm. "Fight me."

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*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

"You want to rape me?" I swallow hard, sensing my eyebrows rising. What the hell am I getting myself into?

"Do you want to be raped?" The way his words rumble in this throat makes me shudder. He's getting off on this, and it's pushing buttons for me too.

"Of course not..." I can barely breathe. He turns me on so much, but it sounds to me like he wants things I have no clue how to give him or whether I even want them.

"Can I show you?" he asks, and I get the feeling I don't have a choice.

I nod, backing away. My hand fumbles for the door handle behind me as he climbs out and rounds the car. Before I'm even on my feet, he is there, hefting me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

His grip is tight, unforgiving as he knees open the door to my apartment. He kicks it shut behind us and growls, "This is your safe word." And he drops the keys from his car into my hand. "If you want me to stop, you use it, understand?"

"Yes... keys..." I nod, finally finding my voice as he sets me down on the couch in my living room. "I understand," I pant out, still shaking like a leaf in his presence. This Lochlan is nothing like the man I've been with the past few days. He's predatory, primal, and I like it more than I should.

Then, before I can process what's happening, my wrists are tethered above my head by his tie. Lochlan's dark gaze meets mine, sending a spike of fear slashing through me. I tense, trying to draw my knees up, but his body presses me down, his hand

reaching up the front of my shirt. This feels very much like a man having his way and not making love, and I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel. But I'm sure it's not fear.

"Relax," he growls, though there's a calming underlying current in his voice. "I won't hurt you. If you want me to stop, you say 'keys'. Got it?" His teeth sink into my neck, and I whimper as a flood of endorphins shoots through my body to my core. It makes my knees fall apart for him, my body arch into his.

The mixture of fear and arousal is like nothing I've ever experienced, and the hairs on my arms stand on end. The sexual tension thickens as he reaches for my shirt, yanking it open roughly and exposing my bra which he rips off without a second thought. His hands are everywhere, fondling, squeezing, prodding, and I find myself arching into his touches. My moans are low and needy, my back digging into the couch as he straddles me.

"Lochlan," I moan out, unsure whether it's consent or a plea for him to stop. Maybe a bit of both.

When he backs away and jerks my slacks off me without even unbuttoning them, I hear the fabric tear and gasp. My feet lash out and kick at him unintentionally, and he grabs me by the ankles and pins them to the bed with one knee.

"That's it. Like that," he purrs as he carefully unbuttons his shirt.

"Feck," I hiss breathlessly. He wants me to kick him? I don't know what's happening.

When he's shirtless, I find myself staring at the perfect six-pack he's carved for himself and for a moment, I'm speechless. Before I can gather my thoughts, Lochlan has loosened his pants enough to free his hard length. My eyes widen when he grips

himself, stroking once... twice... and a third time before he shoves his pants down and kicks them off.

“Stay off me,” I whimper, sounding more timid and afraid than anything else. He eats it up.

“And if I don’t?” he asks as he crawls across the bed, wrestling my squirming legs to the mattress. He spreads my knees wide, pressing them to the bed on either side of me, exposing my core to his hot breath.

“I... I’ll...” I’m supposed to fight this? But fuck, I want it. That mouth on my core. I want him.

“You’ll what? Say it.” Lochlan leans down and bites my clit. Literally bites it until I’m hissing and yelping. My hips buck upward and I writhe.

“Fecking stop it!” I groan, not at all meaning it, but the more I fight him, the better it gets. I jerk at the restraints, try to unpin my knees, but he’s so strong. “Don’t do that. Stop!” My shout makes him chuckle.

“Precious,” he says, blowing a steady stream of breath over my moisture, which makes me shiver.

“Mother of God, get off me.” This time, when I jerk my hips upward, my pelvis knocks into his face and he smirks, wiping my juices off his chin. His hand comes down in a hard slap to my core. It stings and then burns, and I gasp and suck in a breath.

“Cuss at me,” he says, crawling closer, stroking himself.

“Feck you,” I hiss, playing his vixen. “I hate you and your damn dick. Let me go,

Lochlan. Feck off.”

“That’s more like it.” He grins, positioning the head of his dick against my slick entrance. “Now, let’s try this again.”

“No,” I start to say, bucking my hips from side to side. I writhe so violently that he has to stop stroking himself to hold me down. It’s hot, and it makes the way he glides through my moisture even more arousing. I’m so turned on, I could explode as soon as he’s in me.

“Yes” he growls, sliding in just the crown and then retreating. My entire body stiffens, arches upward to meet him. “You want more, don’t you? Admit it. Or do I have to prove it to you?”

“Get the feck off me,” I pant out, shaking with desire and a need I don’t understand. He smirks knowingly as he shoves his length deep inside, balls to cunt in one powerful thrust, and I scream from the sudden invasion.

“Christ,” I moan, tugging on the restraints again before giving up and allowing him to set the pace. His hand comes down on the side of my ass, and I whimper, almost blurting out my safe word, but not quite ready to end the pleasure. I teeter on an edge I never thought I’d see between blinding pleasure and terror, and when his hand wraps around my neck, my eyes shoot wide open.

“That’s a good girl,” Lochlan says, rewarding me with a smack to my behind that sends bolts of electricity straight to my core. “Say something really nasty to me.”

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

His fingers tighten. My eyes flutter shut. I grunt out, "You're an animal. Filthy dog." The heat starts low in my core, swirling and pulsing until it detonates. My body explodes in waves of pleasure. His grip loosens on my neck, and his hand slaps my ass again, so hard that this time, I see stars.

The orgasm rolls over me like a tidal wave, and I'm screaming into the couch pillow, arching debauchedly against him when he releases with a guttural groan of his own. His hips pump more slowly. His heart pounds in his chest. I can barely breathe as he kisses me softly, then slides his hand up my arms.

I lie there panting, sweat coated, and spent while Lochlan gently unties me from the headboard. When he pulls out, I feel his sex drain onto the mattress, but I'm so spent I can't move. He backs away, dresses slowly, stares at my sex—still spread open to his view.

"If we're doing this, you're mine. Do you understand? I don't share." He slides his arms into his shirt, does the buttons up, and drapes his tie around his neck.

Whatever "this" is, I like it. Even if his kink is dominating a woman to the brink of insanity, pushing me to the point of fear and terror then sucking me into his pleasure... I can take it. I enjoy it, and it's way more exciting than Elvin Murphy. I nod, but I don't tell him that I'm betrothed. I think he knows it, but I'm not sure what he'll think of it when I tell him I have to stop fucking him to get married. If he won't share me, I don't see it lasting after my nuptials.

"Fine," I say curtly, hoping it's the right response.



Lochlan stiffens, squares his shoulders, and narrows his eyes, then nods. If he wants a vixen, it's what I'll be. "And tell no one."

"Of course. Do I look stupid?" I roll to my side, closing my sex off to his view. He smirks.

"You're too innocent to be a bitch, Evie. I like you the way you are. Just remember how to please me in bed, and we'll do fine." I'm surprised when he leans over the bed and offers a lingering kiss. I don't push it away. I'm smitten by him. Something about him, even with his domineering nature, is so captivating.

"Stay," I whisper, hoping to entice him to more pleasure. Maybe good conversation.

"Tomorrow," he says, and he walks away.

I'm frustrated, but there's nothing to be done with a man like that. He'll do what he wants when he wants, and all I can hope is that at some point, he wants me.

When the sound of his car engine fades into the distance, I fish my purse off the floor where it dropped when Lochlan threw me on the bed and I take out that burner phone. I send the message that the cargo was shipped, and I'm glad it's over.

I'm not sure what else that man is going to require from me, but he surely can't expect me to keep this charade up with Lochlan breathing down my neck. I just want to find out why Darren thinks my father is a criminal and make him stop threatening my family. And I want my da to be safe and not in prison. It's just a matter of how deep the rabbit hole goes.

I leave Evie's apartment with my body still humming with the feel of her skin under mine, the heat of the moment still clinging to me. I don't let myself linger in the aftermath, though. There's no time to be swept up in pointless emotions. I know how it throws me off and I can't afford to not be on my game now. It cost me so much with Maelyn.

The drive to the picket line is tense. I'm not sure if it's the weight of what's happening or the fact that I can still taste Evie on my lips, but I can't shake the feeling that something's about to snap.

When I arrive, the scene is already chaos. News crews are everywhere, filming the protestors, microphones shoved in faces, cameras capturing the tension. The workers shout and chant, but the anger in their voices is different now. It's sharper, more aggressive.

Some of them are genuine, fighting for better wages, better working conditions. But others have slipped into the ranks, pushing the limits of what they can get away with. They're only here to stir up trouble, probably sent by Cormac himself.

I dodge a few cameras, not wanting to be caught in the crossfire of the media frenzy, and make my way through the crowd to find Draco and Jasper on the edge of the protest, standing apart from the noise. Jasper's face is bruised, a black eye swollen under his left eye. He looks like he's been in a fight—hell, he probably has. But the expression on his face is focused, businesslike. Draco stands beside him, scanning the crowd with his usual calculating look.

“What's the situation?” I ask, moving closer. I'm not supposed to be here, but it's where the action is, and it's where Draco is. We have to talk.

Draco looks me over quickly before turning his gaze back to the crowd. “Same as before. Some of these guys are just here to cause chaos, make things harder. Doyle's

men are stirring the pot, trying to make it look like the striking workers can't get their shit together." He scowls and rubs a hand over his face. His frustration is palpable.

I feel the tension spike in my chest. Cormac's moves are always calculated. He never does anything that doesn't have a purpose. He's pushing, testing the boundaries. "How many?" He's here to distract us from something bigger.

"Enough to make things ugly," Draco mutters. "A few of them have been causing real trouble, getting people riled up. We're trying to keep the strikers focused, but it's only a matter of time before this turns into something worse."

I look over at Jasper, who's still nursing his black eye. "You okay?"

He grins, wincing slightly. "I'm fine. Just got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. You know how it goes." Unfortunately, I do know how it goes. I've been in his place and his father is right. It's going to turn into something far worse before it gets better.

I glance over at Draco, trying to ignore the noise around us. But I can't shake what's been eating at me all day—the call with Cormac. Ronan may or may not have said anything, but I know I have to. This is Draco's baby. He built this from his blood, sweat, and tears.

"I got a call from Cormac this morning," I tell him, and he narrows his eyes at me. "He's pushing us. Told me to pull back the picket line or more men are going to die."

Draco's eyes flash and he grits his teeth. He doesn't say anything right away, but I can see the wheels turning in his head. His eyes glass over, drift toward the chaos. "What else did he say?"

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

“He made it clear—he’s not just talking about the picket lines. He said they’d hit us where we least expect it. He’s going after us harder than we thought. And he won’t stop at the workers. I’m thinking it’ll be an attack at the office.”

Draco looks over at me, his eyes narrowing slightly. “You’re not wrong. He’s always been a bastard. He won’t stop with just a few fists on the line. If he’s really pushing, it’s not just about muscle and territory anymore. He’ll go after the heart of things.” The crevices in his forehead deepen. He understands what that means.

I let out a slow breath. “That’s what I’m worried about. He’s already got people slipping in among the protestors, stoking the fire. If we don’t get ahead of this, it could blow up in a way we can’t control.”

Draco nods, his expression grim. “So, what’s your plan?”

“I’m upping the security around the office,” I reply, my mind already working through the steps. “We need to make sure nobody slips through, especially with the DoYLES stirring things up from the inside.”

Draco’s gaze hardens, and for a moment, he’s not just the guy who runs the union—he’s the father figure, the protector. “Listen, Lochlan... I need you to promise me something.”

My stomach tightens. “What’s that?”

Draco steps closer, his voice low but urgent. “You protect Evie with your life. She’s my precious treasure, and I can’t even bear to think about what would happen if

something happened to her. Do you understand?"

I nod without hesitation. "You have my word."

I briefly consider telling him what's been happening between me and Evie. The pull between us, the tension that's been building. But with Cormac pushing us, it isn't the time, not with the threat to the office hanging over us. I keep my mouth shut.

Just as the moment hangs between us, a shout breaks through the tension, followed by the unmistakable sound of fists hitting flesh. I turn quickly, spotting a brawl breaking out in the middle of the protest. People are yelling, bodies shoving against each other.

"Shit," I mutter, already heading for the chaos. Draco's right beside me, and together, we move through the crowd, stepping in to break up the fight.

The brawl intensifies as bodies slam into each other. One guy swings a punch, landing it square on another's jaw. The crowd around them erupts, shouting, pushing, shoving. I move quickly, shoving people aside as I grab one of the men by the collar, dragging him away from the chaos. His eyebrow droops, blood draining from his nose.

"Enough!" I bark, my voice cutting through the noise. "This isn't why we're here!" The rage simmers just below the surface.

I shove him toward the back of the crowd, but he snarls and lunges back at the other protestor. Before I can react, Draco's already in the middle of it, grabbing the guy by the arm and twisting it behind his back. He's got this under control—he always does.

"You're not helping," Draco growls, his grip tight on the man's wrist. "Get your shit together before I do it for you." He must know this man is a loose cannon.

The guy struggles but finally calms down, the fight slowly draining from him. I glance back to see the scene starting to settle, but my blood's still pumping with adrenaline. This—this is what we're dealing with. Chaos. It's not just about the protest anymore. It's a ticking time bomb.

I feel my phone buzz in my pocket, but I don't check it. I have a bad feeling about the direction this is all going. My eyes scan the crowd again, but this time, they're not just looking for troublemakers. I'm looking for the reason this average strike has turned into a warzone.

I don't know how, but I can't shake the feeling that if I don't get Evie to open up, she's going to get caught in something bigger. Cormac is already playing games with us, and the longer I let her stew on whatever she's hiding, the harder it's going to be to protect her. She doesn't understand what this is yet, but I do.

And if I don't step in, she's going to be hurt. Badly.

13

EVIE

Is it in the passenger seat of Jasper's car with my thoughts still tangled from yesterday. Lochlan insisted on driving me home last night, and this morning, he insisted that I shouldn't drive myself to work. I can't help but feel like his moodiness is getting heavier, though he keeps saying he's trying to protect me. He hasn't come right out and said it, but I know the strikes are behind it—the constant tension, the threat of violence hanging over us. If he only knew what I'm dealing with.

Jasper talks my ear off as we drive, oblivious to the knot twisting in my chest. He's excited, all smiles as he talks about the factory negotiations. "Evie, can you believe they're finally ready to talk? The workers have been waiting for this."

I nod, trying to keep the smile in place, though my thoughts keep drifting. "Yeah, that's great," I say, but my voice is a little too quiet. I can barely focus on his words, not with everything else clouding my mind.

I think back to the call from Darren, the threats, the blackmail. His words still echo in my mind. "Your father's reputation is on the line. Do as I say, or I'll make sure everyone knows the truth."

I don't want to know what my father might be hiding, but now it's all I can think about. What if my father really is involved in something illegal? What if I've been blind to it all these years? I need to know the truth. Darren's video of that parliament member incriminating my father could be a fake, but something tells me it's real and I've been too naive to see it. He does have Lochlan O'Rourke working for him.

"You okay?" he asks, and I could ask the same to him. His eye is still swollen and purple. Must've really hurt when he got hit.

"Just grumpy that I can't drive myself." I cross my arms over my chest and stare out the window, sulking.

"You know Da and Loch just want you safe, Evie. Those protest attacks weren't a joke." He points at his own eye as he turns into the parking lot at work. "Da just wants to make sure you're protected in case the bastards come here."

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The confession about Darren Connelly is on the tip of my tongue ready to come out, but if I tell Jasper, he will tell Da. I'll end up locked in my apartment and it will keep me from snooping in the work files. I have to know. I can't just sit back and pretend I didn't see that video.

"Just walk me to my desk, Mr. Bodyguard," I say, and he chuckles as if it's a joke. I guess I need to practice my sarcasm.

The office is teeming with excitement over the potential contract talks. Da is here, flitting around legal, talking to the internal team and union reps. Jasper walks me up to the second floor to my desk where he parks me without a babysitter. I don't know where Lochlan is right now, but I'm glad the office up here is mostly empty, especially when I get a text on the burner phone in my desk. I'm not even sure why I still have it, other than it is a link to something I fear is true. Maybe it's morbid curiosity that Darren Connelly knows more about my father than I do. Things I want to find out.

I pull the phone out and read the message, another threatening quip about my da going to prison if I don't do what he says. Then another comes in, demanding shipping schedules and member information. It's a total breach of privacy to give out our members' private information, but I'm not sure I have a choice.

Jasper walks back in, and I tuck the phone into my desk drawer, silencing it first so he doesn't see me with it. If I want this to go away, I have to play along, but I also want some answers. Maybe Connelly will cough up more details about the things he thinks my father does. If not, maybe I won't play his game anymore.



My hands tremble as I pull up the requested files. There isn't any easy way to transfer them considering I have men watching my every move now. If I print anything, I have to walk across the room to the printer, and Jasper will watch me. Or God forbid, he will pick the papers up and bring them to me then question what I'm doing with the information.

So instead, I slide a thumb drive out of my desk drawer, the kind our marketing team uses to transfer large files to the print shop downtown for our regular mailers and newsletters. There's always one lying around and I happen to have a few in my drawer.

When Jasper slips away to the coffee pot in the corner of the room, I push it into my computer and quickly transfer the files, then eject it and slide it into my pocket. I'm determined to get to the bottom of things.

Connelly wants more than just information about the union—that much is clear. I just can't tell what he wants. He's starting small, making sure I'm giving him legitimate files, but he's working up to something more. If I can find out what Da might be guilty of and what Connelly thinks he wants, maybe I can offer some sort of compromise.

The phone in Da's office rings and Jasper perks up, looking over his shoulder. "Loch isn't here?" he asks, and I shrug.

"I've not seen him," I reply, and I suck in a breath. When he goes in there, I have to make my move. I'll text Darren and tell him where to meet me, and I'll slip out when no one is watching. It might be my only chance to get this man off my back and find out what I need to know at the same time.

Jasper huffs and scowls, then stands and walks into Da's office, and I snatch the burner phone from my drawer and my spare set of car keys, darting out the door and

into the elevator before Jasper can see where I've gone.

I slip out of the building, keeping my head low and my heart pounding in my chest. The elevator ride feels like a lifetime. I check over my shoulder once more before stepping out into the parking lot, keeping my pace steady but quick, and heading straight for my car, sending Darren a text that I'm going to meet him at a bake shop on the corner of Main and Montgomery.

Once I'm in, I start the engine and drive. My mind races with what I'm about to do. This feels like one of the stupidest things I've ever done, but I'm too deep to back out now. The burner phone buzzes in my pocket, and I don't have to look to know it's Darren. My fingers tremble as I pull the phone out and read the message.

Here now... I'm waiting.

I type a quick reply, telling him I'll be there in fifteen minutes. My foot presses harder on the gas pedal, and the car zooms through a red light. I can't keep pretending like everything's okay when I'm sinking deeper into this mess with every step.

When I pull up to the location I told him to meet me, I see his car parked by the curb. I park next to it, my hands still shaking as I grab my keys and the burner phone, sliding it back into my pocket with the thumb drive. I take a deep breath and swallow the anxiety before stepping out of the car and walking toward him.

Darren's leaning against his car, his arms crossed, watching me approach. As soon as he sees me, his lips curl into a smile that feels all wrong. The expensive suit makes him seem professional, but he's a sleazeball.

"About time," he says, opening the passenger door. "Get in. We've got things to discuss."

I hesitate for a moment, my heart hammering in my chest. There's no turning back now. I get in without a word, and the door clicks shut behind me. The car smells like leather and a faint trace of cologne that makes my stomach churn. I don't speak at first, just sit there, trying to steady my breathing.

Darren slides in the opposite side and seems larger than he was. His presence fills the entire car. "Where are the files?" he says, his voice cold, clipped.

I glance over at him as the pit of my stomach roils. "What exactly are you going to do with them?" My voice is shaky but louder than I expect.

He laughs a sound that makes my skin crawl. "What I do with them is none of your concern anymore, sweetheart. What matters is you keep your end of the deal." He glances over at me briefly, then sighs and holds out his hand. "The files for your father's future."

I shiver and the words slice through me like a cold wind. "I won't keep doing this. I won't keep helping you hurt my family."

Darren smirks a dark, mocking expression. "You think you have a choice? You don't. You'll do what I ask, or your precious father ends up in prison."

His words sting, making my throat tighten with anger. I want to scream at him, tell him I'm done, but I feel small, powerless in the seat next to him. "I want it all. I want the proof of what you have on my dad, and I want it gone. Destroyed."

Darren laughs again, louder this time, cruel. "You must think I'm stupid. That's not how this works, sweetheart."

My hands ball into fists in my lap, and my pulse races. "I'm not doing this anymore," I whisper, but even to my ears, it sounds weak. I slide my hand into my pocket and

pull out the drive and place it on his open palm. I'm not the prowling vixen Lochlan thinks I am. I'm weak, and I'm helpless, and I'm a fool for thinking I can control anything.

Darren doesn't say anything. He just watches me, his expression hardening as I leave his car. My body feels heavy, and my head spins as I walk back to my car. I don't want to go back to work. I can't handle being there, pretending like everything's okay.

I get in my car and start the engine, driving home instead of back to the office. I don't want anyone to know where I've been. I don't want to tell anyone the truth, not when it feels like I'm unraveling. And the nausea churning my stomach only gets worse as I realize what I've done. I handed over that information without a protest and I didn't even get what I wanted.

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When I get home, Mum is there, sitting on the couch, looking up as I walk in. “Evie,” she says, her voice soft, full of concern. “You look pale. Are you feeling okay?”

I try to smile, but it feels strained. “I’m fine, Mum. Just tired. I think I’m getting sick or something.”

She stands up and walks over to me, placing a hand on my forehead. “You don’t feel warm. Are you sure you’re alright?”

I nod, my throat tight. “Yeah. I’ll be fine. Just need to rest.”

She gives me a look that says she’s not convinced, but she doesn’t press. Instead, she wraps me in a hug, and for a moment, I let myself lean into her. It’s the only comfort I have left, even if it’s not enough to keep the fear from creeping into my mind.

Mom pulls back slightly, looking at me with that familiar, concerned expression. “You know, Evie, Elvin Murphy is a good man. Maybe if you didn’t have to work so hard, life wouldn’t feel so stressful. You could let him take care of you. You don’t have to do all this on your own. When you get married, you’ll see.”

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks, and her expectation presses down on me. I know she means well, but it’s the last thing I want to hear right now. I’m drowning in my own thoughts, my own fears, and I don’t want to talk about marriage to a man I don’t love. She’s right. He’d take care of me so I don’t have to work, but I want to work. I like my job. She doesn’t understand.

“Not today, Mom,” I say, my voice strained. “Please. I just need some space.”

She sighs, clearly disappointed, but nods before walking away. The door closes softly behind her, leaving me in the silence of my thoughts. I sink onto the couch and put the pillow over my face. I can't keep doing this.

14

LOCHLAN

I step into the office already irritated as hell. Draco's side hustle is getting reckless, and I'm the one left cleaning up his mess. It's not like we haven't smuggled drugs before, but fentanyl isn't some amateur shit you can casually throw into the mix and hope nobody notices. We run it hidden in plain sight, carefully packed alongside our legitimate prescription shipments—it's intentional, efficient, but dangerous as fuck.

Lately, though, the runners Draco's brought in are sloppy, greedy bastards who couldn't keep their mouths shut if their lives depended on it. And that puts all our necks on the line.

I roll my shoulders, trying to ease the tension as I scan the office. Evie isn't at her desk, and something in my chest tightens immediately. She should've been here by now. I glance at Jasper, hunched over his computer like I imagine is normal for him, and he doesn't seem bothered by it. He's reckless.

"You seen Evie?" My tone is sharper than I intend, betraying the nerves beneath.

He lifts his head slowly, blinking like I interrupted something important. "Nope," he says, leaning back lazily in his chair.

My jaw tightens. Jasper's attitude grates at my nerves, but I'm not his boss, nor am I his father. "You haven't noticed anything at all? She didn't say she was stepping out?"

"Sorry," he says dryly. "I was stuck on a call. Wasn't paying attention."

I bite back a curse and turn away, frustration gnawing at the back of my mind. Evie shouldn't just disappear without a word—not after everything that's been happening lately. The union attacks, threats coming in from every direction—it's too damn dangerous. I rub the back of my neck to disguise the worst of my frustration and turn.

Scowling, I cross the room, approaching two of our other guys standing near the coffee station, whispering like gossiping teenagers. Their conversation dies immediately when they see me coming. Clearly, they take my position here more seriously than Jasper.

"Where's Evie?" I ask, keeping my voice steady, though tension coils tighter in my chest with every passing second.

The taller one, Greg, glances sideways at his buddy before answering. "Uh, saw her earlier slipping out. She looked like she didn't want to be seen."

"Sneaking out?" I growl, irritation morphing quickly into anger. "Alone?"

Greg shrugs nervously. "Seen some guy out by the lot the other day, but this time I'm not sure."

"Some guy?" I ask, wondering if it's the same slick twat I saw messing around the other day.

"Yeah, Suit, fancy car. Looked like trouble." Greg jerks his chin up and lifts his coffee mug to sip from it.

My pulse spikes instantly, fury seeping into my veins. Evie meeting with some stranger behind my back? I'd told her explicitly—I don't share. This isn't how things

are supposed to work between us. A wave of protectiveness overtakes my anger, bringing with it old, buried fears. Memories of an explosion flash through my mind, a phantom heat on my skin. Maelyn's face is burned in my conscience.

I turn sharply, striding toward the stairs. My boots slam against each step, panic mingling with rage as I take the more active route instead of the elevator, fury building until my thoughts blur. By the time I hit the lobby, my hand is already reaching for my phone. I call her without thinking twice the very instant I see her car is missing.

She answers after two rings, her voice cautious, hesitant. "Lochlan?"

"Where the hell are you?" My words snap like gunfire, edged with barely controlled emotion.



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She hesitates, and my blood runs cold at noise in the background of wherever she's at.

"I'm at home." I hear the irritation in her voice, but it doesn't register until after I've spoken again.

"Who the fuck are you with, Evie?" I interrupt sharply, unable to keep the betrayal from creeping into my tone. "You can't disappear and expect me not to notice. Not with everything going on."

"You wouldn't understand," she says with a shaky voice, distant.

The words send a jolt of anger straight through me. "The hell I wouldn't," I bite out, each syllable cutting deeper. "You're being reckless. I'm trying to protect you—damn it, Evie."

"I came home because I'm sick, alright? Don't be an ass," she blurts out before ending the call.

In my anger, I think of calling her back. I pinch the bridge of my nose and growl loudly, then slam my fist against the brick exterior of the building. Between feeling betrayed and fearing that somehow, Doyle had gotten to her, my fight or flight is ready to kill someone. The reaction comes so fast and so sudden, now I can't stop it. My hands turn to fists and my blood boils.

I'd like to go by and check on her, but if she's really at home on O'Leary property, she's safe. Besides, she won't like the fact that I hover around her. She'd tell me she doesn't need a sitter, and she'd be right.

I turn to head back into the office, and something across the street piques my curiosity. A long, black sedan is parked there, a man leaning on it. I narrow my eyes and shield them from the sunlight reflecting off the windshield and recognize the man's face. Cormac Doyle stands with his arms crossed, staring at me.

My pulse immediately spikes, hostility pumping hot through my veins. Doyle's presence here isn't a coincidence. It can't be. He's always got an agenda, always making his moves three steps ahead.

I cross the street without hesitation, locked onto him like a missile, weaving between cars whose horns blare at me. Doyle doesn't flinch, doesn't even blink, just keeps watching with that coldly amused smirk on his face as I close the distance between us.

"What the hell are you doing here, Doyle?" My voice comes out in a growl, lower and rougher than I intend.

Cormac chuckles lightly, pushing off the sedan and straightening his jacket sleeves with calculated ease. "Enjoying the view, Lochlan. You seem a bit wound up."

"Don't fuck with me," I snap, stepping closer until barely a foot of space separates us. "Your threats don't impress anyone. Back off, or you'll regret it."

His dark eyes glitter sharply, something dangerous flickering beneath the polished veneer. "Threats? I don't make threats. You should know me better by now. When I say something, I mean every word of it."

Anger twists in my chest. Cold fear lurks just behind it. I fight to keep control of myself, knowing the street cameras are catching every move we make, every word we speak. He knows it too, the bastard. Doyle is playing me, waiting for me to slip up so he can make his next move.

"I warned you once already," I say, keeping my voice carefully even, though fury simmers just beneath the surface. "Keep pushing, and you'll find out exactly how serious I can be."

Cormac's smirk widens, cruel amusement playing openly across his face. "You and your boys seem nervous lately. Problems with your shipments? You know what happens to syndicates that get sloppy."

My fists clench at my sides, the muscles along my jaw tightening painfully. I hold myself back, though every fiber of my being screams at me to tear the smug look off his face. He's provoking me, baiting me into doing something reckless—something that could blow up the fragile balance of power we've been holding onto.

"You talk a big game, but you're all bark," I spit out. "Step over the line, and I'll show you how quickly things get messy."

Doyle leans forward slightly, lowering his voice, eyes hard and unforgiving. "Careful, Lochlan. It would be a shame if someone you cared about got hurt because you couldn't keep things under control. You've got enough blood on your hands already."

My vision tunnels, blood pounding deafeningly in my ears. Evie's face flashes through my mind, and every protective instinct inside me surges with violence. Doyle sees the reaction instantly. His eyes glint with satisfaction, the trap sprung exactly as he intended.

My fists tighten, muscles coiled like a spring ready to snap. "You don't want this fight, Doyle. Trust me on that."

He laughs softly, stepping backward and pulling open the car door. "I'm counting on it. We'll talk again soon."

He slides inside smoothly, shutting the door and leaving me standing in boiling rage. As the sedan pulls away, the restraint keeping me in check snaps, and I drive my fist into the side of the car as it passes, the pain in my knuckles nothing compared to the fury burning in my chest.

Cormac Doyle's car disappears around the corner, and I'm left on the sidewalk, my hand bloody, adrenaline pumping viciously through every nerve. Doyle has made his point clearly enough—he's coming, and everyone around me, especially Evie, is at risk.

The game just changed. And now, it's personal.

15

EVIE

Kelly sits cross-legged on my bed, a steaming cup of peppermint tea balanced carefully in her hands. She eyes me with concern, brows furrowed, as I tug at the frayed edges of my quilt. I haven't been in to work for two days, and the exhaustion clinging to me isn't making this conversation any easier.

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“I still can’t believe your parents,” Kelly mutters, shaking her head in disbelief. Her hands flick through an old magazine spread on the mattress between us. “It’s like they’re stuck a hundred years in the past. An arranged marriage? Really?”

I sigh, leaning back against the headboard, my head feeling too heavy on my shoulders. “They mean well, Kelly. It’s tradition. It’s expected. And honestly, Elvin Murphy isn’t exactly the worst person to end up with.” The room feels stuffy, no air moving in here today.

She gives me an incredulous look. “Evie, you talk about marrying him like you’re getting braces. Do you even want this?”

I pick at a loose thread on my sleeve, unable to meet her gaze. “It doesn’t matter what I want. It never has.” I know her silent judgment is out of concern. She’s my best friend, after all.

Kelly scoffs softly, clearly irritated. “It does matter. This is your life. You’re allowed to have a say.”

“Not if I want to stay part of this family.” My voice comes out smaller than I mean it to, but the truth stings just as much. “Elvin is stable, reliable, exactly what my parents want for me. I should want it too. But I just?—”

“You just don’t,” Kelly finishes for me with a gentle voice. She folds the magazine shut and turns to face me more directly.

“No, I don’t,” I whisper. “I think... I’m falling for someone else. Someone I

definitely shouldn't be."

Her eyes widen immediately, and she leans forward, curiosity flickering sharply behind her lashes. "Who?" The grin curling her cheeks makes me smile too.

Heat rushes to my cheeks as I think of Lochlan, the way his presence fills a room, the rough way he acts when we're alone together. He's aggressive. Everything about him is wrong for my carefully planned life. Dangerous, reckless, unpredictable—and undeniably thrilling.

"It's complicated," I mumble, staring at my lap. "He's not the kind of man my family would ever approve of."

Kelly grins mischievously. "Sounds like exactly the kind of man you need, Evie."

I offer a weak smile, even as my stomach twists anxiously. If Kelly only knew how complicated things truly were. I press a hand subtly to my belly, nausea rolling through me—not just from anxiety but from a suspicion that's gnawed at me now for days. Pregnant? The word circles relentlessly through my mind, but I push it down, unwilling to admit it aloud even to her.

"I don't think it's that simple," I finally say, forcing my voice to steady.

Kelly shrugs and sips her tea. "Maybe it should be." She leans forward eagerly, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "Okay, details. Is it the tattoos, or that whole brooding, mysterious vibe? Because Lochlan O'Rourke definitely has both."

My cheeks warm again, but this time, I can't stop the smile from spreading across my face. "It's both. And neither. I don't know, Kel—there's just something about him. He walks into a room, and everyone notices. It's like the air gets thicker, hotter."

She mock-swoons dramatically, clutching her chest and collapsing sideways onto the bed. I'm glad her tea mug is empty, and she snickers as she sets it on the floor. "Oh, so he's one of those guys. The 'I'll-ruin-your-life-but-you'll-love-it' type."

I laugh despite myself, lightly smacking her leg. "Seriously! And the worst part is, he knows exactly how irresistible he is."

"Ugh, those are the worst," Kelly agrees, sitting up again with a playful grin. "Dangerous and fully aware of it."

"You're not wrong," I sigh, still smiling. Then I frown and say, "He is dangerous. Like actually dangerous. A criminal, Kel."

She wrinkles her nose thoughtfully, leaning closer and lowering her voice conspiratorially. "Well, obviously. Good guys don't come with tattoos, smoldering eyes, and criminal records. That's like... part of the whole package."

I groan and cover my face with my hands, laughter slipping out between my fingers. "You're not helping, you know."

"Was I supposed to help?" She taps me gently with her fingertips as she sits up. "I thought I was here to convince you to make bad decisions. Besides, Elvin's idea of danger is probably eating cereal past ten p.m."

The laughter shakes my shoulders harder, and for just a moment, everything feels almost okay. "You're terrible, you know that?"

Kelly smirks triumphantly. "But you love me. And apparently, you also love yourself a good, old-fashioned bad boy."

I throw a pillow at her, but she just catches it, giggling. She isn't wrong—Lochlan is

trouble. And despite everything, he's exactly the trouble I want.

I bite my lip, debating internally. Maybe this is the perfect opening to finally tell Kelly everything—about Da's dealings, about the threats, about Darren and the blackmail. She'd listen, help me figure out what to do. But just as I take a shaky breath to speak, a gentle knock at the door interrupts us.

Mum peeks her head in, holding a tray of snacks and wearing her overly cheerful smile. "Thought you girls might need a little something," she says brightly, setting the tray on the bedside table. "How are you feeling, Evie?" She reaches to press her hand against my forehead, and I push her away.

"I'm fine, Mum," I answer quickly, trying to hide my irritation at her intrusion.

Mum turns her attention to Kelly, and her smile turns conspiratorial. "Maybe you can talk some sense into her. Elvin called again this morning. He really wants to take Evie to dinner somewhere nice. To talk about their future."



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I suppress a groan, casting Kelly a desperate glance, but my friend just smiles politely at Mum. "I'm sure Evie knows exactly what she wants," Kelly replies smoothly, taking a cracker from the tray.

Mum sighs, ignoring Kelly's gentle deflection. "I don't understand your hesitation, Evie. Elvin's a wonderful man. Stable job, good family—you won't have to worry about anything. You should meet him and discuss things properly."

"Thanks, Mum," I say through gritted teeth, "but I'm still not feeling great. Can we talk about this later?" I'm not denying that I'll do as she asks, but I haven't been feeling the greatest. Even she can appreciate that.

She gives me a pointed look, as if to remind me later means soon, then nods. "Alright, sweetheart. Just promise me you'll consider it."

"I will," I say softly, hoping it's enough to appease her.

When she finally leaves, shutting the door softly behind her, Kelly turns to me with a knowing smirk. "Well, Evie, sounds like you've got a romantic dinner to plan."

"Please don't start," I groan, tossing another pillow at her.

Kelly catches the pillow with a laugh, but the sound is cut short by the buzz of a phone on the nightstand. My heart leaps into my throat as I glance at the thing—the burner phone Darren made me take. Dread curls through my stomach when I see a notification.

Nausea hits me so hard, I have to grip the edge of the bed. My breath catches sharply.

"Evie?" Kelly's playful expression fades instantly. "You alright?"

"I'm—I'm fine," I stammer, trying to steady myself. "But I think you should probably head home now. I really don't feel good."

She hesitates, worry clear in her narrowed eyes. "You sure? You look pale."

"I'm sure," I insist, forcing a weak smile. "Just tired."

Reluctantly, Kelly nods, grabbing her purse from the chair. "Call if you need anything."

I bob my head silently, waiting until she's gone to bury my face in shaking hands.

My mind races, anxiety clawing its way up my throat. What could Darren possibly want now? I gave him everything he asked for—unless he's finally ready to destroy my family once and for all.

16

LOCHLAN

Fog hangs thick over the docks tonight, swirling around our ankles as we move between shipping crates stacked high like a steel maze. The damp chill cuts right through me, but I barely notice. Draco walks ahead, popping open a crate to reveal neatly packed weapons ready to move tomorrow morning.

Jasper steps up beside me, leaning forward to inspect the shipment. He whistles softly. "Quality stuff," he murmurs appreciatively. "Cormac's not gonna like our

expanding business under his nose.”

“He doesn’t have much choice,” Draco says, confidently folding his arms. “The factory strike’s settled. Doyle lost leverage there. He backed down, just like we expected.”

Jasper snorts, nudging my shoulder with his elbow. “Guess the Doyle boys got cold feet. Didn’t want a real fight after all.”

I give Jasper a sideways look, suppressing a smile. It’s easy for him to joke now that the immediate pressure is off, but something still sits uneasily in my gut. “Cormac Doyle isn’t chicken,” I say quietly as my eyes rake over the weapons thoughtfully. “He’s patient, calculating. He’s playing a longer game.”

“Come on, Loch,” Jasper replies lightly, stepping back and crossing his arms comfortably over his chest. “We took their leverage. They’re licking their wounds. Let’s enjoy the win for once.”

Draco laughs quietly, shaking his head. “Jasper’s got a point. Even Doyle knows when to quit.”

I shake my head slowly, fingers tracing the cold edge of the crate. “He’s not quitting. He’s changing tactics. Trust me—he’s more dangerous now that we’ve cornered him. Whatever he’s planning next, it’ll be lethal.”

Jasper sighs, but his voice softens with reluctant understanding. “You really think he’ll escalate again?”

“Not a doubt in my mind,” I reply honestly. “This isn’t about pride for him anymore. It’s survival. He’ll hit harder, smarter. He wants us to feel safe so he can catch us off guard.”

Silence settles between us, broken only by the distant echo of waves slapping against the pilings. I glance at Jasper's thoughtful expression and soften my tone. "Look, I know you handled the strike well. But Doyle's dangerous because he doesn't react impulsively. He waits."

"Like a snake," Jasper mutters, shaking his head as if finally absorbing the seriousness of it.

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“Exactly like a snake,” I confirm quietly. “And when he strikes again, it won’t be something we see coming.”

Draco nods soberly, catching my meaning clearly. “We’ll double-check security tonight. Make sure we’re airtight.”

“Good,” I say firmly, stepping back from the crate. “I’ll stick around a while, keep an eye out. Something feels off.”

Jasper claps a reassuring hand on my shoulder, his expression more serious now. “You worry too much, Loch.”

I’m about to reply, to brush off Jasper’s concern, when an abrupt crack echoes across the dockyard, freezing us all mid-motion. My blood chills instantly. Gunfire.

Draco’s eyes flash wide in shock, his hand going instantly to the weapon at his waist. “Ambush!” he shouts, and then the night erupts in chaos.

Bullets rip through the air, whizzing past us, splintering crates and ricocheting off metal containers. Jasper dives for cover beside me, pulling his gun free and firing back blindly into the smoky dark. Draco shouts orders as our men scatter and return fire, the docks instantly transformed into a warzone.

“How the fuck did they find us?” Jasper yells, voice barely audible over the chaotic gunfire. “They knew exactly where we’d be!”

“Doesn’t matter,” I snap back. “Keep firing and find some damn cover!”

I lean around the crate, heart pounding like artillery fire in my chest, and squeeze off several shots at shadows darting swiftly through the fog. Doyle's men move like phantoms, precise and calculated. Bullets slice through the thick air around me, striking metal containers in violent, explosive bursts of sparks. The dock erupts into a battlefield of deafening noise—gunfire echoing from all sides, harsh shouts overlapping with the brutal crash of crates splintering into pieces.

One of our men collapses near me, his scream cut off sharply as blood sprays from his throat, painting the concrete with a violent crimson arc. I curse sharply, ducking lower, adrenaline roaring through me like fire. The fog clings to everything, turning figures into ghostly shapes, impossible to fully identify, impossible to truly fight back against. I grit my teeth as I fire again and again, each recoil slamming into my body with ruthless force.

To my left, another one of our guys drops to the ground, clutching at his side, eyes wide and panicked as blood pours between his fingers, pooling darkly beneath him. I try to shout orders, but the chaos swallows my voice, drowning it in gunshots and screams.

From somewhere deeper in the haze, I hear Draco roaring commands, his voice fierce yet distant beneath the storm of bullets. I pivot, pressing my shoulder hard against the crate, firing repeatedly into the darkness, aiming desperately toward any hint of movement.

Two shadows charge closer, emerging abruptly from the murk. I fire without hesitation, dropping one to his knees instantly, blood spilling from his chest. The second stumbles but keeps coming, eyes cold and focused. My pulse hammers wildly as I aim again, firing directly into his chest. His momentum carries him forward even as life leaves his eyes, and he collapses hard onto the ground at my feet.

Blood splatters my boots, hot and thick, seeping across the pavement. The violent

crack of gunfire still fills my ears, numbing every thought except survival. More men fall, ours and theirs, until bodies litter the docks, each lifeless form marking the savage cost of betrayal.

The firefight is brutal. my muscles ache and my vision blurs with smoke and exhaustion. Just as I start to wonder how long we can possibly hold out, a sudden scream cuts through the chaos, frantic and filled with raw panic.

“Cops incoming!” one of our men screams suddenly, his voice panicked. In the distance, blue and red lights begin to flash ominously, slicing through the dark fog.

Draco curses, slamming his fist into the side of a shipping container. “Fuck. Move out! Move out now!”

I grab Jasper’s arm and haul him away from the crates, running in Draco’s direction as bullets hiss past us. We vault through the maze of stacked containers and duck into an alley beside the docks. The three of us sprint together, lungs burning, pulses racing with panic and adrenaline.

Finally clear of the immediate threat, we slow our pace slightly, breathing ragged, eyes scanning for signs of pursuit. Draco glances back over his shoulder, rage and disbelief twisting his features. “They knew exactly where we were storing that shipment. Exactly.”

“Which means someone on the inside is feeding information,” Jasper breathes, grimacing at the reality of the accusation. “No other explanation.”

Draco stops abruptly, turning sharply toward us both, his expression dark and furious. “There’s a mole. Someone close enough to know every detail.”

Draco’s words are sharp and bitter. Betrayal is staring us in the face like an invisible

enemy more dangerous than Doyle himself. My jaw tightens, and a cold fury coils deep in my chest.

"Who the hell would turn on us like that?" Jasper asks, voice ragged with disbelief.

Draco's gaze flicks between us, and I see the confusion, the betrayal he's feeling. "Someone we trust implicitly, someone close enough to know every shipment, every location."

I glance back toward the docks, red-and-blue lights flooding through the fog, police sirens wailing. My pulse pounds in my temples as the implication settles like ice through my veins.

"Find them, Lochlan," Draco orders coldly. "Do whatever it takes, because if we don't root out this rat fast, Doyle will pick us apart piece by piece."

I nod grimly, tension knotting between my shoulders. "Consider it done."

But as we melt silently into the shadows, I can't shake the feeling of dread sinking deeper inside me—that the traitor could be anyone. And until they're found, none of us are safe. And if the risk has just been elevated, it means having to keep my cool while protecting Evie. Something I'm not sure I know how to do anymore.



EVIE

I stare down at my lap where the burner phone from Darren rests on my thigh, hidden from view. Da and Jasper are still out, despite the talks for ending the strike going well. I've heard that a shipment has gone missing somewhere, just pharmaceuticals as far as I know, but they're having to deal with the fallout at the docks and that means Lochlan is still hovering. His tendency to show up and question me hedges me in, meaning I can't just drop everything and rush down to the parking lot like Darren is insisting.

I hear him in Da's office shouting into his phone, muffled by the walls the way Da's voice normally is when he's upset. Maybe it's something about that office, but it seems to drive the men who work in it to rage. Something slams into the wall and I jolt. A few heads rise slowly and look in that direction, but I dip my chin to my chest.

Darren insists I come down to speak with him instantly, but if I get up and go down there right now, Lochlan will follow me. If he does that and sees me with Darren Connelly, he will question everything and who knows what will happen then? I'm barely keeping Darren happy as it is.

After four days out sick, too tired and nauseous to get up in the morning, I'm finally back at work, and this asshole thinks I can jump at his beck and call. I glance at the door to Da's office knowing Lochlan will flip out if I walk away from my desk. He's had someone driving me to and from work, watching my every move. I swear he paid Greg to tell him when I go to the fucking toilet.

Whatever he thinks might be going on is nothing compared to what is actually going

on, and I'm afraid if I don't find out what Connelly wants, it's only going to get worse. I have to get down there to speak to him, and I can't let Lochlan's bullying ways stop me. My father can't go to prison because I failed him.

Standing, I smooth my hands down my skirt and turn toward the office door. A few sets of eyes watch me stride toward it, closing in on the boom of Lochlan's shouts. My hand rests on the knob, and I swallow a bit of nerves. He could be furious for my walking in on him when he's upset, but he could also calm down a little. He has to know we can all hear him, even if we can't make out what he's saying.

The door creaks open and his attention snaps on my face. I see the cup that holds Da's pens on the floor by the door with pens scattered around it, handle broken off, and I know what he threw.

"I gotta go, Ro. I'll call you back," he grunts into the phone before hanging it up.

"Hi," I say meekly, closing the door behind myself. "You're pretty upset, huh?" If I can find a way to calm him down, get him a bit distracted, maybe then I'll be able to slip out and find out what the hell Darren wants to get him off my back.

"What do you want?" he asks gruffly, dropping his phone on the desk. He rakes a hand across his face and then through his hair.

"Everyone can hear you shouting." I step farther into the room, closer to him. A plan starts to form in my mind. He needs to relax, and I need him distracted, and maybe my feminine wiles are what this job calls for. Though I still feel a bit nauseous.

"Yeah, well that's life, right?" His elbows plant hard on the desk, both hands on his head. He is very stressed, maybe because he's stuck behind this desk when he's used to being out and about. I know his history as a military man. He's probably used to action and fighting—very fitting for a criminal.

"Maybe I can help you relax?" I walk around the desk, grip his shoulders with both hands. My thumbs press into his taut muscles and my body begins to warm. Being near him does this to me because of the chemistry we share, but I try to keep a level head.

"You think that will help?" he says dryly. He's right. I have no clue how to actually relax him enough to get his mind in a calm state and buy myself ten minutes of privacy.

"I can try?" I'm no good at this. That much should be obvious to him. I'm twenty-one, barely know anything about this world, and he seems more irritated that I'm trying to give him a rub down. I feel stupid now. I want to slink away and just try to sneak out without his seeing me. It might be my only option.

But Lochlan's shoulders stiffen, his body straightening. He turns until his chair swivels around, knees brushing mine, then he wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me down until I'm seated on his lap, yelping in shock.

"I have something else in mind." His greedy hands paw at my hips, pulling me against his body, and I'm confused when his lips close over mine roughly. But I go with it, not fighting him. If this is what he thinks will work, then I have to go along with him. It's not like I haven't fucked him a few times already.

"You, on my desk, now," he grunts, and his hands start maneuvering me before I can protest.

"Loch—on Da's desk?" I question. My feet barely hit the floor before he turns me and I find myself draped over the desk. Papers fall off, the stapler too, and I grip the edge while he hikes up my skirt hard, shoving it around my waist and stripping my panties down to my ankles in one movement.

"Loch, this isn't—" I start to protest as I feel his length against my entrance, and then I gasp as he pushes in without warning. I'm not even worked up, still dry enough that he has to work to force his dick into me. He likes it rough, and he likes me to fight him, so I'm not sure what to think or feel. Until he starts thrusting slowly, filling me, then pulling out. His dick slicks my entrance slowly but surely, and I find myself clawing at the desk, arching into his movements.

"Look at that ass pucker," he grunts, gripping my right ass cheek with his palm. "One day, I'll take that too."

I grit my teeth when his thumb presses the tight ring of muscles, whimper when he picks up speed. My body is on fire now, aching to feel that sweet release.

"Christ," I pant. "Oh, God, Loch!"

"Mmm, we finally agree on something," he growls as he grinds against me, his thumb stoking the fire low in my belly. I can't believe I'm liking this. I don't want to, but God, does it feel good. My hips start to move more frantically in time with his, and when his hand grips my hair hard and forces my head up, I know he's close too.

My head arches back so hard I almost can't breathe. I reach a hand under my body, rubbing my swollen clit feverishly to push myself closer, and before my body snaps, I feel his release, hot and sticky. It coats my insides as he slows, then drains down my thighs when he pulls out, and I'm left breathless, fingers drenched in his hot release as his grip on my hair tugs me backward and up to a standing position.

I'm in shock, panties around my ankles, body quivering with need as he zips his pants and sits back down. His cum drains down my leg almost to my knee. He reaches for my wrist and grips my hand, forcing me to wipe myself clean with my own fingers, then lifts an eyebrow as I step back carefully and shake my hand.

It's degrading and gross and so fucking hot how he treats me like his little fuck toy. I'm so horny, I may have to sneak away just to rub off now, but the thought of Darren waiting for me to show up in the parking lot needles its way back into my thoughts.

"Yeah, you're right. I feel better," he says. His head lolls backward on the headrest of the chair and I grit my teeth. My eyes scan the desk and I see one of Da's old work gloves, which I grab and use to wipe my hand clean. Then I bend and yank my panties back up and Lochlan is still loopy, eyes shut and body enjoying his afterglow.

"I'll, uh..." My mind races. If I had time to process any of this, I'd have been sitting on that desk with my legs spread, telling him to devour me. But I don't. And I can't pass over the chance to use this to my advantage. "I'll go get some coffee from that little shop across the street." Backing away slowly, I'm very aware that I smell like sex, but there's nothing I can do about it.

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Lochlan grunts approval and I'm gone, out of Da's office, past my desk, snatching my phone on the way. I shoot Darren a message that I'll have five minutes, and I hit the elevator running. Fuck, I'm so angry I couldn't stay and enjoy that, but protecting my father is far more important than sexual gratification.

But this is the last time. I have to tell Connelly to fuck off now, and he has to listen. Because if this sneaking around shit keeps happening, I'm going to get caught. And right now, I have a lot to think about. I have to keep Da safe, Lochlan distracted, Mom happy, Elvin at arm's length, and my mind from panicking about missing my period. That is a lot of stress, even for me.

18

### LOCHLAN

Relaxation pulses through my entire body from head to toes. I sit back at the desk and watch Evie saunter out, my cum still glistening on the back of her thigh. She has no clue how much that relaxes me and helps me settle after a stressful moment, and her allowing me to dominate her just adds to the enjoyment.

Sucking in a deep breath, I turn back to the computer and continue digging into the files I've been sorting through all morning. After seeing our gun shipment go up in literal smoke, there is no doubt in my mind that I'm right. Cormac has been making threats against us, and they're escalating.

With the striking workers getting back to work, there is no "front line" for him to attack anymore. He's focusing his efforts on our shipping routes starting here at

home. So maybe he isn't planning an attack directly on the main offices, but this is close enough. He has infiltrated a carefully vetted staff member and intends to disrupt our business by chipping away at our shipments one at a time. And who knows what he'll do next if this fails.

My eyes pore over the screen as the words out of Evie's mouth slowly register. She said something about going next door to get a coffee for us, but we have a coffee machine right here in the office. I sigh and move the mouse to the next screen, trying to see who has sent this particular shipment schedule out via email, but no one has shared it at all. We weren't hacked, and if someone did anything, it was to save it to an external drive or print it—but we'd have seen it go through the printer.

Glancing at the door, I think about Evie again, so I check my watch. She's only been gone a few minutes, but something is gnawing at my conscience. There is no reason for her to go next door for coffee. Maybe she wants one of those fancy drinks with flavor syrups and foam instead. She should be safe enough, but then I thought we were safe enough at the docks as we did our last once-over the other night.

Rising, I stalk toward the door as my body starts to tense up again already. It bothers me that I feel so hypervigilant, needing to know where she is and who she's with. I'm not stupid. I realize it stems from the fact that I wasn't as cautious as I should've been with Maelyn, that she ran into that building right before it exploded. And as I make my way to the elevator, I try to remind myself that I'm not in a warzone, and Evie is just getting coffee.

The elevator ride seems too slow. The stairs would've been faster. So I suck in a deep breath and hold it, blowing it out slowly to control my breathing. The bell dings. The doors slide open, and I almost turn back. Pausing a second, I grit my teeth and remember how she hung up on me the last time I didn't know where she went. I snapped at her. I shouldn't have. She really was sick—took a few days off work too.

But that was before Cormac lit a fire under this conflict.

I step off the elevator and move toward the front door. The staff goes about their business, not even looking up, and my eyes train on the coffee shop across the street through the windows of the storefront. Cars zip past on the street. My tension starts to dissolve, and then I see her walk out of the shop with two coffees in hand and a scowl on her face. It makes me pause just inside the door and watch.

The same man who was in the parking lot a few weeks ago follows her out of the coffee shop and she turns around on him. He's scowling, hands planted on his hips. My body reacts instantly, but I've been working on keeping my cool and not jumping to conclusions. She's safe enough for the moment, and I'm curious. That man was here before, and I need to find out why.

Is he seeing her? Or is something darker going on? And who is he?

Evie's back is to me. She doesn't see when I slip out the door and stand in the shade of a tree grown in the easement, crossing my arms over my chest. They're arguing, but I can't make out what they're saying and my blood is starting to boil. This isn't just a work-related chat. There are huge emotions at stake in the conversation and I'm starting to get the feeling this was way more than just a coffee run.

I told her the other day that I don't share, and I meant it. The way that man is leaning in, grabbing her arm possessively, I'd say this is a lovers' quarrel and I'm not supposed to be watching them.

She glances around nervously, and I can see the tears streaking her face. She's so upset that she's crying, which is another indication that man is more personal to her than he should be, and after seeing him around before, my mind has only one conclusion—she's trying to break it off. Or he is...



The man catches sight of me and backs away shaking his head. As I start to cross the street, he says something else in a low tone I can't hear and then turns and walks off. Evie, so distraught about whatever just happened, throws one of her coffees at the man, but it misses, falling to the sidewalk where the lid pops off and the hot brew spills everywhere.

She doesn't even pay attention to what she's doing, turning and walking right into the street as a car approaches. I hook my arm around her middle and pull her off the street before the car reaches us, and she swats at me angrily.

"Let go of me! You stupid—Oh, God... Loch." Her face pales, hand trembling. I set her down, and she takes a few steps backward as she swipes the tears off her cheeks.

"What the hell was that?" I ask in a low tone. I'm furious, but I don't want any more attention drawn to us. There are already people staring at her after that showdown with the dark figure.

"It's nothing," she says, stretching out her hand and offering me the coffee.

"It wasn't nothing. You're crying and he walked off when he saw me. What the feck is going on?" I resist the urge to grab her arm, but I want answers.

"I told you, it's nothing." Evie turns to walk away, and I walk around her, stopping her from entering the office. "Move, Lochlan."

"I told you, I won't share. You are mine now. If we're doing this thing, you break it off... Unless that was a breakup?" I'm totally serious. There are so many emotions raging through me, I don't know which one to latch onto and process first. Are we doing this thing? Is she playing me? Was that something more than a bad breakup?

"I don't belong to you," Evie snips, "and even if I did, I'm not screwing him. It's not

what you think and you don't own me." Her face screws up into a scowl. "Besides, you know I have to marry Elvin Murphy. Did you think this was going to last forever?"

She turns and stomps off, taking the coffee with her, and I stare after her, too angry to respond. I know she's promised to Murphy, which is something I've been meaning to speak to Draco about. I just didn't realize that it was what she wanted. It doesn't change how I feel about her, but maybe it should. I never should have gotten attached to her. It was foolish of me to think she wanted more than a good fuck.

Turning, I look in the direction where that man vanished. My gut tells me something is off. Evie swears it wasn't what I assumed it was, but what does that mean? Who is that man and why is he verbally assaulting Draco's daughter? If I don't figure this out, what will he do next? One thing is for sure—I won't be letting her out of my sight again. It's too dangerous, even if she doesn't belong to me.

I still have to protect her.

19

EVIE

Christ, Lochlan makes me so mad. I didn't want to be angry and snap at him. I wanted to throw myself into his arms and feel their strength wrap around me, and here I am stomping away in a huff instead of pouring out everything to him and asking him for help.

My heart feels dead now, too stressed for too long to even know to react to the situation. Darren wants me to pull our financials. He seems to think that in doing so, it will show my father's ties to local politicians and Garda authorities whom he may be paying off. I refused, but I know I don't have a choice. If I don't do this, he goes public with his smear campaign. Part of me wishes Da really did have ties to the Garda. That way, he could make this all vanish.

Still crying, I head to the elevators, keeping my head down. People in the front office stare. I know they watched what happened, and I can't deny Lochlan's anger. At least he's not following on my heels to make it worse. The elevator at least shields me from some of it.

I pull a tissue from my pocket to clean up my face as well as I can and I head straight to my desk when I get to the second floor. If I'm going to get the stuff Darren wants, I have to do it fast. Lochlan will come up to my desk and see what I'm doing. At this point, I'm surprised he hasn't moved my desk into Da's office like a naughty child being moved to the front of the class.

I've done horrible things, but he doesn't know it was me. No one knows. I'd like to keep it that way, at least until I figure out how to make Connelly fuck off. So my hands work as quickly as possible, pulling up banking statements and downloading them as files to a thumb drive again. The more I sift through things, the sicker I feel. There really are huge payments to men whose names I know are synonymous with authority in Dublin. Da is paying men off, but why?

My head swims. I feel like I'm going to be sick, but I keep pressing on. What I have is sufficient. Darren has proven his point, though I'm not sure why he wants these files except for more means to blackmail me. My gut tells me the only reason he wants this information is to prove to me that my father is corrupt, and he's done his job. I'm ashamed of Da and anyone else who knows who he is and allows him to continue what he's doing. Lochlan included.

When Jasper and my father walk in, it brings tears to my eyes. I shut the windows on my computer, but the emotions don't stop. I rub my temples, willing the vomit not to rise. Jasper talks loudly, slamming things around in a huff as he sits down at his desk, and I feel a firm hand on my shoulder.

"Everything okay, Evelyn?" Da never uses my nickname at work, which I normally appreciate, but right now, I could use one of his big hugs and assurance that I'm wrong, that he's not a monster like Lochlan O'Rourke's family. There are just too many ties, too many things that have come out to show me I don't even know who he is.

"Da," I grunt, but I lose the battle with my stomach. Gagging, I yank the trashcan toward me and spill my breakfast into it, inadvertently knocking the coffee off the corner of the desk onto the floor. It splashes on Da's shoes and he backs away quickly.

"Jasper, Christ," Da hisses. "Get some towels."

I throw up so hard I think my eyes pop out of my head. I know it's brought on by nerves, or at least I hope it is, but it's the worst I've felt in weeks. My gut roils hard. I stay there leaning over the trashcan for several long minutes until I think I can safely straighten up.

Da is hovering, Jasper stuffing wads of tissue into my hand while others in the office stare at me. I'm not well, and though I pray it's just the stress over Darren Connelly and the secrets coming out about my father, I can't rule out the fact that I may be pregnant. I've been having unprotected sex. I haven't been thinking clearly.

"Take her home," Da growls at Jasper, then he crouches next to me and pats my knee as I wipe my nose.

"Go home and rest, baby. You're just not back on your feet yet." His eyes search mine with curiosity. He's not a stupid man at all. The flu doesn't last weeks. It only lasts days. It's like he's seeing through to my soul, tuning in to my fears and reading my mind. But he's too kind to say it aloud.

"Yes, Da," I say, nodding. As he stands, I glance at Jasper. When neither of them are looking, I swipe the thumb drive without ejecting it safely, then press the power button to power down my computer.

My chest feels heavy and I feel a bit lightheaded as I follow Jasper down to his car. We pass Lochlan on our way out. He's seated at a computer downstairs, studying the screen intently. It's the security camera playback he's staring at, and it makes my heart flutter as I see my face blown up on it next to Darren Connelly, but I can't stop to explain myself now.

"Let's go," Jasper grumbles, grabbing my arm. He's not pleased at having to leave work to take me home in the middle of the day, but it isn't my choice to be going home. I'd rather be here too, diving into the banking records more carefully. It's

heartbreaking uncovering my father's corruption, but at least I know I'm learning more about him, who he really is.

On the way home, I make Jasper stop by the chemist with the excuse of needing antacids and peptic syrup. I've just thrown up, so he doesn't balk at my request, though he does tell me to hurry up. Inside, however, I purchase a pregnancy test and cram it into my purse so he doesn't see it. The vomiting is too obvious to me, but I won't believe it until I've seen a positive test result.

If I really am pregnant, then maybe I should back off, tell Da what Connelly is doing. I can put my life at risk, but I can't do that to an unborn baby. I won't even let myself panic about what will happen if I'm pregnant yet. My mind is too cluttered with panic over Darren and my father. If I let those new fears seep in, my body will shut down.

At home, Jasper pauses near the street only long enough for me to climb out. Whatever is going on at the union office has all the men who work there acting like idiots. Da stopped to be gentle with me, but any other day, he'd have brought me home himself. I wish I could access the computer right now and find out exactly what was supposed to be shipped and to whom. Maybe if I knew what shipment was intercepted, I'd understand what all the fuss is about.

I glance up at the house. It's dark. Mum isn't home right now. Her SUV isn't parked in the garage, and I've got the whole place to myself, which is good. If they knew what's in my purse right now, I have a feeling shit would hit the fan.

I slink back to my apartment and pull the test out of my purse, locking the door behind me and leaving my purse on the stand by the door. With all the coffee I've had to drink this morning, I'll have no problem peeing on this stick. I've never taken a pregnancy test, but it seems easy enough. Kelly will kill me when she finds out I've done this without even telling her about my suspicions, and Mum—my God. What will she think? What will they tell Elvin?

My eyes well up with tears as I slide my panties down and hold my skirt up around my waist to sit on the toilet. I can barely see straight as I tear the plastic wrapper off the test and hold it between my legs.

Tears slide down my cheeks and land on my knees, but I don't wipe them away. I can't stop them from coming any more than I can stop the pink lines creeping up the stick to confirm what my heart already knows is true.

I'm pregnant.

It's Lochlan O'Rourke's baby, and if he finds out, I know my life is signed away. I am forever tied to the O'Rourke family now, and that means I'm tainted. Elvin will never marry me. My mum will be devastated. Da will probably try to marry me off anyway, get me away from O'Rourke before he finds out I'm carrying his child, and who knows what Loch will think. He's already told me I'm his. This will only make that seem more real to him. But how can I belong to him? How can any of this be happening?

I'm not supposed to be roped in with the Irish mafia. I'm just supposed to finish my degree and work for my father's business.

I wash my face in cold water to rid myself of my self-pity, compose myself as best as I can. It's time for me to get a fucking grip. If my father can work with criminals—maybe even be one himself—and hide it from our family, then I can handle this last delivery to Darren Connelly and tell him to fuck off. I'm going to be a mother, and that means I need a backbone to protect my child. I have no clue what I'll do or what will happen next, but folding isn't an option.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

I'm my father's daughter. Mum has said it more than once. Now I have to prove it.

20

LOCHLAN

Jasper scowls at me as he walks past, his shoulder bumping into mine. I see the despair in Evie's expression, the way she won't even look me in the eye. And then they're gone, closed into the elevators as I stare after them, stuck between wanting to tell Draco she's mine, that I want her to be mine, and the nagging feeling of betrayal at the sight of her arguing with that other man.

I should've said something to Draco already, but I haven't. It's not the right time to bring up something like that, what with the enemy sniffing around. The strikes were bad enough, but with Doyle sending his men to disrupt our weapons shipment, I can't distract Draco or ask him to put thought into anything else, no matter how important or pressing it is.

Turning, I push the door to the offices open and the stench of vomit wafts up to meet me. It's telling—the reason Evie is on her way home, probably. She's been sick, but I thought that was better. Still, maybe she's one of those women who throws up when she gets emotional. It would make sense. The last time she was sick for days came after an argument with me too, which only makes me feel worse.

Maelyn was never like this—always steady and even-keeled. But Evie is everything my former partner was not, soft and meek, pliable. And alive... Which is the way it needs to stay. So her home is much safer for her, and there is less of a chance that



Draco will see her bickering with me and understand the reality. That I'm falling in love with his little girl even though I shouldn't be.

Besides, it's not like they're going to plan a shotgun wedding with Cormac breathing down our necks. Evie is worried about marrying that suit and I know it's a very real thing she's facing. But Draco has too much on his plate, and I have time. Time to think about what I really want and time to think of how to confess those desires to Draco. Or time to shake these emotions loose and get Evie out from under my skin. If she can't stop seeing that man, then there is no reason to think we have a future anyway.

"Loch, could I speak with you?" Draco stands in the doorway to his office with a serious expression and his phone in his hand, fingers pressed over the mic.

"Yeah," I grunt, glancing at the trashcan next to Evie's desk. The whole office reeks now, and I'm happy to shut myself behind Draco's office door and avoid the stench. He struts around the desk and sets his phone down, pressing the speaker button so I can hear what's going on.

"We're listening," Draco says to seemingly no one, but his gaze darkens as he stares at the phone. The caller ID reads, TD Byrne, and I know why my friend is tense. A man of his status doesn't call for fun and games.

"Gentlemen, I want to remind you that the agreement we have with Chief Ronan is of the utmost confidence." He sounds angry. I look up at Draco with narrowed eyes, but his expression doesn't give away any reason why this call may be happening or how to interpret the deputy's frustration. "My name is being tossed around Antwerp. Do you understand what sort of problem that poses?"

Draco's eyes are inky black, hand gripping his own chin. He's hearing this for the first time too, which means I'm seeing his reaction in real time. My shoulders feel so tight

they could snap like a piano string even after that romp with Evie, and all I can do is picture that asshole trying to grab her on the street. Anger bubbles in my chest just waiting for a chance to blow off some of the pressure.

"Deputy Byrne, you have to understand that we do everything in our power to?—"

"I don't have to tell you what sort of problems it will cause us all if I'm found out." His voice is sharp, cutting Draco off. I jam my hands into my jeans pockets and look away from his face. It's shameful to look a good man in the face as he's being reprimanded. Byrne has no right to bite Draco's head off, but he's under the gun.

I'm not a fool. I know Ronan's ties to high up in the political world here in Dublin, so if something has gone wrong and Byrne is at risk of being exposed, we all are. This is serious.

"Deputy Byrne, can you give us context? What's happening in Antwerp?" I sneak a peek at Draco's face as he sinks into his chair, massaging his temples. First the attacks on the picket line, then the gun shipment, and now this? And Draco doesn't even know that Evie is sneaking around with some idiot behind his back. It's like I'm watching the perfect storm develop over the ocean that's headed for land bent on total destruction but there's nothing I can do to stop it.

"The shipment of pharmaceuticals was stopped and searched and my name is being shared in conjunction. Gentlemen, fix this, now. I am not planning to go down alone." The line crackles with tension. I shift my weight from one foot to the other. Draco sighs and reaches for his phone.

"We're on it, Deputy Byrne, you have my word." He ends the call, not allowing for any more righteous threats from Mr. Byrne, and then shoves the phone in his pocket as he stands up glaring at me. "We have to get to the docks to find out what's going on. I'm not going to sit around here waiting until we get a call from the port

authority."

He walks past me, yanking the door open, and without being beckoned, I follow. Evie is on her way home with Jasper, and this office can handle itself. I've been sitting on the sidelines for long enough while Jasper and Draco take the heat. This is my family business at risk now and I'm not going to sit on my fucking hands and watch it burn to the ground. If Doyle wants to play hardball, we need the bench empty, all hands on deck.

The fog rolls in off the water as we approach the docks, wrapping around the car like we're invading a ghost town. The entire drive has been quiet, the car tense. Draco is never like this, but he knows as well as I do that Cormac is fucking with us. He's been pushing boundaries for months now, and with someone on the inside, it's not hard to determine how our weapons shipment was interrupted or this new surprise happened.

"Go round back and see if you can find the port inspector," he orders, gesturing at the warehouse. "I'll head inside. If the boys can't tell me what went wrong, we'll have to call Belgium." The lines on his forehead are etched deep into his skin. He looks tired and ready to kill someone.

"Draco," I say, pausing to rest my hand on my weapon holstered behind my back. He stops and looks up at me.

"If Doyle has a man on the inside, we have to be careful about who we speak with, what we say to them." My mind is whirring with thoughts. Cormac has been sneaky enough to infiltrate us in spite of our heavy vetting system. My mind conjures images of a spy sifting through the files on computers, but in reality, it could be anyone. "We can't spook them. We need to know who it is and find out how they got through."

Draco nods at me with a knowing expression. He may be Ronan's right-hand man, but his team missed something and slipped up, and it's my family name on the line.

Those drugs being moved won't just come back to bite the union workers in their legitimate positions. Customs and import authorities will come after anyone who had cargo on that ship, including Ronan and our family businesses.

"We're gonna sort this, Loch. And I know I'll take the heat for it." His head dips as he turns back toward the office, and I start to move toward the end of the building.

The port inspector is a stodgy man, late forties, balding. His combover looks like he walked through a windstorm, always wet and slicked down. And his belly is rotund from one too many beers. But I don't see him anywhere. I search the docks and the shipping warehouses. Walk past the fishery and the parking lot, and only when I round back toward where the shipping warehouse is situated do I see movement.

A tall man, slender with dark hair and sunglasses, stands chatting with the man I'm looking for. Except, my eyes lock on the taller man, not the port inspector. I've seen him a few times now and it makes lava surge through my chest into every vein in my body. It's the man Evie was speaking with this morning, here at the docs. And this time, I see something I didn't see before.

He has a tattoo on his neck just below his right ear, a black sword with the tip covered in blood—the Doyle family crest.

Before I can think, I'm reaching for my weapon. My hand is steady as I draw it from the holster, but I can feel the tremor running through my arm, like the gun's going to slip from my grip. The man with the tattoo sees me move and his expression sharpens. He's already pulling his own gun, aiming straight for me.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

I fire first, but my aim is off. The tremor in my hand throws the shot wide. The man ducks behind a stack of crates, but the port inspector stumbles forward, a cry caught in his throat, and then he's gone. The bullet meant for the tattooed man hits him squarely in the chest. He crumples, blood pooling beneath him. His body lies still and I can't even bring myself to look at him.

I focus on the man with the tattoo. He's moving fast, slipping between crates, vanishing into the fog. I run after him, but my legs feel like lead and every step is heavier than the last. The air's thick with the smell of gunpowder, and I can't get the image of Evie out of my head—her face, her tears, the way she looked at that man earlier this morning. She was close enough for him to touch her and I did nothing except accuse her.

She doesn't know what she's gotten mixed up in. This man, this Doyle, has her tangled in something dark. I let her get too close to this because I didn't pay attention, just like with Maelyn. I should've kept her away, should've seen it before, but he got to her and I'm not sure how deep she's in.

Another shot rings out, and I duck behind a crate just in time. The bullet slams into the crate beside me, the resounding boom so loud I cringe. I scramble for cover, my heart pounding, and I'm breathing too fast. But I push forward, staying low. The trembling in my hand won't stop. it's like my body knows what's happening before my mind does. I can't keep up with it.

I push through the fog with my legs burning, and my body refuses to cooperate. Every step feels heavier than the last. I don't stop, but the tremor in my hand won't let me aim properly. I'm losing him.

Another shot cracks through the air, and I duck low, but the man with the tattoo's already gone. I scramble forward, desperate, trying to get one clean shot, but the fog swallows everything up. He's too fast.

I hear movement, but it's faint, footsteps too far in the distance to know which way to aim. He's a ghost now, like the ones that haunt me in my nightmares, taunting me, telling me I'm a failure. Well I'm not failing Evie, not the way I did Maelyn. Even if I have to lock her in my cellar and not tell anyone about it, I intend to keep her away from that man and out of danger.

And my first step is to tell Draco everything. He has to know what we're dealing with. Not only do we have a mole, but the enemy is courting his own kin. He's not going to like this.

21

EVIE

Kelly and I are sitting on patio chairs outside my little nook of the property as Mum walks away after delivering tea. She watches as Mum disappears into the house before she says a word, and after the bombshell I dropped before Mum shuffled out here to "check on me"—she's been hovering—I know what's coming.

"Are you effing kidding me?" Kelly's eyes are wide, both palms splayed on the wrought iron table between us, and she leans forward in shock. "Pregnant?"

"Shh!" I hiss, glancing back at the house. Mum may be inside, but she has supersonic hearing and I don't want anyone to know yet. I feel like I may wither into myself, like my insides are coiling around a spool that will tighten me down into nothing any second. It's not what I wanted either, but here I am being fucked up the ass by life. All because I wanted a little adventure before being married off like a cow at the

auction.

"Evie, feck's sake, girl, you're having a gangster's baby." She can't stop gawking at me, shaking her head, and she hasn't heard the worst of it yet.

"Look, just listen to me." I lean forward now and pour a cup of tea with shaking hands. "It's not just that. There's more?—"

"What more than screwing the man who's supposed to be your boss? What more?" She sits back and takes the tea, sipping it coolly. She's my best friend and I know she cares about me, so I have to take this all willingly. "Evelyn, your da is going to kill you. Lochlan O'Rourke is?—"

"A violent criminal, I know. And he's a bad boy and you said yourself how hot he is. So I screwed up and we didn't use protection. Listen to me." This time I'm serious, narrowing my eyes at her. "Someone is blackmailing me."

I don't mince words when I tell her about Darren Connelly, about his threats and the visits. The way he thinks he owns me and can demand things of me. I'm surprised he hasn't tried something sexually aggressive too, and maybe had I stayed in his car a bit longer that day we met, maybe he would have. Kelly's eyes are wide the entire time, like she can't believe what I'm saying, but the slight shudder in my hands, the way my shoulders curl in on themselves should tell her I'm only speaking the truth.

When I finish, I say, "Well? Don't just sit there. Say something." Mum is going to come back to ask how the tea is any minute, and what I need right now from my best friend is advice. Lochlan might not be the ideal man to marry or run off with, but I am having his baby. It means even if I don't want to be, I'm forever connected to the Irish Mafia, and so is my Da. Even if he cuts ties with their business and goes straight.

I've seen his records. There's proof he's laundering money, cooking books, maybe skimming union dues, and definitely paying off public officials. Before he gets too far into this, I think there is a way to save him. I just have to get Lochlan to have his family back off. Maybe telling him I'm having his baby will help him. Maybe there is some sort of arrangement I can make to free my da from whatever hold they have on him.

"I think you need to be honest with everyone, Evie." Kelly sets her tea mug on the table and finally lets her eyebrows droop. "Why didn't you say anything weeks ago?"

I shrug one shoulder and scrub both hands over my face. "I thought I could handle it. I couldn't let my da go to prison." My elbows plant on the table and I hide my face. Saying it out loud—that I thought I could take on Mafia blackmail and make the assholes go away just sounds foolish. She's right to question me.

"Tell your da right away, Evie." I feel her hand on mine and hear the chair's feet scrape on the cement beneath it. Looking up, I see her standing, putting her sunglasses on. "I have to go. Tell your mum thanks for tea. And get your arse to Lochlan's house and tell him you're having his baby. You'll thank me later." She purses her lips at me and then squeezes my shoulder as she walks away. I knew she only had a minute, but I wish she had longer.

I feel like trash and it's not just the morning sickness. I've been home from work all day because I don't know how to face any of this. I've even kept the phone from Darren turned off and hidden so I don't have to face whatever it is he may ask of me again. I know it's a risk, but I'm too emotionally overwhelmed by all of this to face it.

So overwhelmed, I bury my face in my hands again and don't even hear as Mum walks up until the chair scrapes on the ground as she sits. My eyes pop open in fright, thinking some stranger has stalked into our property, and I breathe a sigh of relief when I see it's just my mum. She furrows her brow in concern and sighs.



"You haven't touched the tea."

"Sorry, Mum, Kelly had a sip but she had to leave." My hands reach for the kettle, but she stops me, pressing her hand to the back of mine. I hate letting her down. I hate seeing my da be threatened. I hate all of this, even the black eye Jasper got from the picket lines and the fighting, and I just want my life to be peaceful. I want all the horrible truths I've uncovered to be lies, for things to go back the way they were.

"Evie, what's wrong?" Mum's question is sincere and honest, and I don't want to hide from her, but right now, I can't confess anything. I have to tell Lochlan first and find out what he knows about Da and the crimes he's accused of. And if I feel safe enough, I will tell him about the baby too.

"Mum, I..." My lip quivers. Darren, Elvin, Lochlan, Da... I don't know where I could even start if I had the courage to tell her.

"Oh, baby, I know," she coos, and she laces her fingers through mine. "An arranged marriage isn't as bad as you think it will be. You haven't taken time to get to know him, but you may like him. And if you don't you will respect him. He's a good man. And that respect will grow to companionship, then to mutual respect. Eventually, that respect will grow to love." She smiles softly and I press my eyes closed.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

"What happens if I back out?" My brain is already thinking fifty steps ahead, to when Elvin sees my swollen belly and Lochlan demands answers. What will my father say then?

"Oh, dear," she says, sounding hesitantly firm. "That can't happen, Evelyn. Mr. Murphy and your father made an arrangement a long time ago." Her hand pulls back from mine as she starts to reiterate the same things I've heard a million times, how love is a choice and how loving my family means doing what my father wants.

I let my thoughts zone out because I can't stand to listen to it one more time. I've heard it too many times already. I've memorized it. But this tiny baby growing in my body changes everything, and I'm afraid that when the bomb gets dropped, it's going to affect more things than just my relationship with my family. It's going to make this problem with my father seem like child's play. Because Lochlan O'Rourke isn't going to sit back and watch the woman who carries his child marry another man.

I've seen how possessive he is over something like sex.

22

LOCHLAN

After nearly being gunned down this afternoon, I tried to talk to Draco about the mess Evie has herself mixed up in, but he was onto something, tracking the person who may have leaked the shipment information. I told him we need to talk, but then I came home, where I now pour myself a third shot of Scotch and listen to the drone of international news, hoping to hear what TD Byrne is talking about when he says

they're "tossing his name around."

If Ronan has heard, he hasn't said a thing to me yet, but maybe he's doing what Draco is doing. While this affects my family, it's not a direct impact on me personally. All I can do is take orders in the situation and follow them. So I sit stewing, not getting any updates, obsessing over the face of the man I now know is called Darren Connelly. I found that by sorting through all of Draco's files at the docks while I was waiting for him.

I can't get my body to calm down. My nerves are shot—muscles tense, head pounding, hands curled into fists I can't release. Since the moment I saw him on that dock with the port inspector, I've been like this. Evie has no clue who he is, or at least, she doesn't act like it. If she knows Connelly is working with the man who is attacking the union, she's not the girl I think she is.

She's clearly not afraid to fuck a criminal—she's thrown herself at me enough times to prove that—but now that I realize the lengths she's gone to hide this relationship from me, I have to wonder if she actually does know who he is, what he's capable of.

The thought only makes me more enraged. I grip the shot glass in my hand and launch it to the wall where it shatters. All I want to do is protect her, but if I come to her with this information, about who Connelly is and how dangerous he is to her and her family, she'll respond to me the way she did that night in the club. She'll think I'm controlling her and telling her who to associate with. She won't see it as protection or concern.

So I'm left with a hard choice—expose her to her father and watch him rain wrath on her, or try to talk sense into her and see her blow up at me. Either way, I lose any chance I have with her, and it sends her right into Elvin Murphy's arms. Right where neither of us wants her to be.

The bell rings, and I assume it's Draco or Jasper here to update me. Or maybe it's my brother or one of his lackies. I move that direction with a thought of calling the staff to clean up my mess.

I'm looser now after a few drinks, but by no means am I wasted. I feel like this has become the norm—a few drinks bring me down a notch so I can think straight and do my job better. It's not a healthy place to be, but I have to function, and the only other thing that helps is something I feel like I'm about to lose.

When I pull the door open, I get a shock. Evie stands with her hands wringing, her lip pinched between her teeth, and I glance around, wondering who brought her or how she found out where I live.

"Evie?"

"Let me in, Loch." She steps in boldly, pushing past me. Her eyes sweep over my living room. It's dark, the way I like it, and a bit messy. I don't pick up after myself often and I don't like the staff coming in, nosing around, so I don't keep a maid service frequently. My life is transient, going wherever Ronan orders, so I eat out a lot and even stay the night other places pretty frequently. I'm not much of a homebody. No reason to sit here and stew over my past mistakes.

"What are you doing here?" I thought I'd have to be the one to hunt her down and find her, so having her waltz right into my home is surprising.

"I need to ask you a question and I need you to be honest with me." Her eyes are insistent, prying into my thoughts.

So much emotion in my chest makes me feel like I'm on the verge of exploding. She's right here in front of me, safe and sound, and I want to pull her into my arms and make sure she stays that way. But I also want to lash out at her, tell her how stupid

she's been sneaking around with a man she knows nothing about—or worse, a man she knows is evil. But I stand with clenched fists staring at her, not moving.

"What is my da involved in? Is he like you? Is he a criminal?" Her eyes search me again the way they did the first time she asked this question. Draco wants her to be safe. He wants his secret kept from her, but she's not stupid. "Because I saw that he's paid off some of the senators, and I've seen the trail of money... He's washing money through the union, isn't he?"

"Your father is a good man, Evie," I tell her, moving toward her when I see her eyes well up with tears. So she's stumbled upon some dirt in her da's life and it's shattering her perception of reality. Is that why she's rebelling by dating Connelly?

She doesn't allow me to hold her. She pushes me away, swipes at her eyes and scowls. "You knew?"

"Evie," I groan, raking a hand over my face. "Please trust me."

"Trust you?" she scoffs. "You're a lunatic, a criminal. You are literally the opposite of someone I could trust."

My anger is getting out of control. She doesn't realize she's pushing my buttons so hard. "I'm the one you can't trust? Do you even have any clue what you're doing or who you're dealing with?" Connelly is dangerous and she doesn't even see that.

"You're one to talk. What have you gotten my father involved with?" Evie steps closer, fury flaring her nostrils, and all I can think about is how much it will hurt if I lose her, if I end up watching her get hurt. I can't do it. I won't do it.

I grab her and pull her against my chest, crushing my mouth against hers. She pushes me away, squirming and grunting.

"Stop it! You can't just kiss me to ignore this problem. I know who you are. I made a calculated decision getting into bed with you. Did my da have the same choice?" Her eyes are blazing, but she stops resisting me.

"Evelyn, all I want to do is serve your father and protect you. It's what I promised to do." The idea of losing her to Darren Connelly, either by force or by deception—whether physically or emotionally—doesn't sit well with me. I refuse to sit back and watch life take someone else I care about when I have the chance to stop it this time.

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"You mean control me?" Her voice cracks, emotion flooding it. She has some sort of agenda here that I'm not following, but I need answers.

"Why meet with him? His name is Darren, right? Why sneak around, Evie? I told you I don't share." Lowering my tone, I continue holding her against my body and she stops resisting.

"You wouldn't understand." Her words make me want to shake some sense into her. "And I don't belong to you."

This time when she says the words, it isn't an argument in protest. I hear the sadness in her tone, but it's resigned, as if she's given in to her fate. Like she knows even if she fights it, she'll still end up marrying Murphy.

"All I have to do is tell your father that I'm staking my claim," I say softly as I curl some hair around her ear, and she turns her face away.

Capturing her chin, I force her to look at me and notice how upset she is. My God, I would do anything for this woman and she doesn't believe I can. My desire to protect her and keep her safe overrules my clear thinking. I kiss her again, grasping for any semblance of connection we have, and this time, she doesn't fight me.

We both know this isn't the answer, but we cling to each other as if our lives depended on it. Our tongues do a delicate dance while my cock presses into her stomach and her legs wrap around my waist. I walk us to my couch, not breaking our kiss once, as if severing physical contact would break this tenuous bond we have, and I lay her down.

Kissing her fervently, her hands trail up under my shirt to grip my back while mine make short work of unbuttoning her blouse and cupping her breasts through her bra. My lips trail a heated path down her neck, kissing and biting gently along the way. God, she tastes like an angel, something I don't deserve to be near, let alone touch.

"Loch." Her voice catches in her throat when I unsnap her jeans and yank them down her thighs. Her panties follow quickly after, and I throw myself between her legs like a man starved of water. When my tongue makes contact with her core, her hips buck and she moans my name like a prayer.

"Tell me you need this. Tell me I'm the one," I growl against her damp folds before lapping at her core with a desperate edge. I've missed this, missed her.

"Feck you," she pants, both hands fisted in my hair as I nip at her clit roughly. Her legs push me away, but her hands pull me close and I know she wants to please me. Her core writhes against my face, and I unzip my pants with one hand while I lap at her folds.

"Tell me," I growl, inserting a finger roughly, causing her to moan a muffled yes.

"What?" I tease her mercilessly, my blood pounding in my cock as I itch to be inside her. I work it free of my pants and suck her clit harder, making her jerk and jolt on the sofa.

"I need you," she pants, struggling against me as I work my dick inside her tight core. Her previous protests melt away with each deep thrust into her wet warmth, and I can't help but moan with satisfaction.

"And?" I ask again as she claws at the couch, her nails leaving marks in the upholstery.



"You're the one I want." The words leave her lips in a shaky breath as I pick up my pace, slamming into her with renewed vigor. Her legs wrap around my hips and her nails dig into my back, drawing blood.

"Say it again!" I growl, angling my hips to press deeper.

"Loch, God, I want you!" she cries out, meeting my thrusts with hungry abandon. When her muscles clench around me, her eyes roll back in her head. She whimpers and gasps, writhing, and I flood her with my release.

I pump slow, long thrusts into her and she melts into the couch, pants still dangling from one ankle. She looks at peace for a moment, and then her brow furrows, worry creeping back in. I know she wants answers about her father, but I can't give them to her, and while I want to demand that she cut off all ties to Darren Connelly, I think I have a better way to show her what he's made of and help her see the truth for herself.

I back away, pulling out, and she sits up. I help her to her feet, and she dresses quickly. Her hair is frazzled, eyes puffy from crying, and she presses a kiss to my cheek.

"I have to go, Loch. Da will worry. He doesn't know I left." I catch her hand as she starts to walk off, and she stops and looks up at me.

"Be careful, Evie girl... This world's not safe." My warning can only go as far as she takes it.

Her pained expression tells me she feels torn, though I'm not sure if it's over whether she should heed my warnings or if it's heartbreak.

When she leaves, and I'm left tucking my dick back into my pants, I make a new plan. I'm not going to tell Draco a thing. I'm going to find Connelly and follow him

and when I get a chance, I'm going to kill him.

Then I'm going to stake my claim. Elvin Murphy can find a different woman. Evie is mine.

23

EVIE

I've made up my mind, though I don't know how to actually make my play. I'm meeting Darren at the docks. I sent him a message saying I'd be there, and this time, I fully intend to make him back off.

As I drive there, my mind is racing. Lochlan is everything that I want, while simultaneously being so many toxic things I am terrified of. But even though he has a horrible way of showing it, he does care. He wants to protect me, even if that protection comes in the form of an iron grip that seems controlling. And no matter how much I fight it, I know I'm in love with him.

My eyes well up and I blink back the tears so I can see straight while I'm driving. What started as infatuation and deep-seated lust that drove me to be wildly flirtatious has turned around now. I see that look in his eyes, the one that says I really do belong to him. Somehow, he's gotten it into his head that I'm his and he isn't shy about it. Having a man make such an outrageous claim about me, almost treating me like his property, I'm not sure how to respond, but it feels strangely comforting.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

When I pull into the parking lot at the docks, I see Darren's car right away. He's standing next to it, leaning on it like I've seen him do a few times before. He's an arrogant man, betting on his own ability to intimidate me, but this time, he's in for a surprise.

I park my car but leave it running, door open as I stomp toward him with the burner phone in hand. He gave me orders to bring him the times and locations of my father's meetings with Ronan O'Rourke, Loch's older brother and the chief of their organization. I'm not a fool. I know he intends to use that information to either set them up or have them killed, and I won't give him the assist.

"Smart girl, Evelyn. Now where is my information?" Connelly unfolds his arms, pushes off his car, and stalks toward me. And when I slam the phone into his open palm, he narrows his eyes at me.

"I'm done," I tell him, starting to back away before he even registers my words. "Find someone else." My back is toward him, which may be a mistake, but I walk toward my car with even, determined steps.

Darren's low, deep chuckle makes my hair stand on end. I know he's a cruel man, and I don't doubt he's capable of wicked, vile things, including killing me, but I won't be bullied. Not by him, not by my parents, not by Lochlan. I will live the life I want to live.

"Do you know you're signing your father's death certificate?"

Reeling around, I glare at him, narrowing my eyes to thin slits. "You're a fool,

Connelly. You've made mistakes." The blood thrumming past my ear drum is enough to make me realize how bad this fight or flight in my body is, but I don't back down.

"Oh?" he says, lifting his eyebrows. "What mistake is that?" He moves closer to me slowly, as if he's trying not to spook me. I'm not worried. There are plenty of people here to hear my scream. Even if they can't stop him from hurting me, they will know who he is. He'll be caught eventually. The important thing is that I'm breaking this tie. I'm not playing his pawn anymore.

"Yes, you led me right to my own answer. Your very proof that my da is guilty is what gave me the idea. My father has Garda officials, politicians, and lawyers on his payroll. If you think he's going to go down for anything, you're wrong. He has the whole fecking city in his back pocket." My hand trembles on the top of my open door as I continue. "You can't touch him."

Darren moves swiftly, coming after me, and I try to launch into the car. But he's faster than me. His hands grab around my waist, the phone skittering across the pavement, and he yanks me out kicking and screaming.

"You little bitch," he growls, grabbing me roughly and tossing me to the ground next to the running car.

I scramble backward, crab crawling as fast as I can, but he swings a booted foot and kicks my ankles out from under me. When I think he's going to pin me down, we both hear squealing on the pavement of someone's tires and he looks up. It gives me enough time to jump off the ground and start running before I hear gunfire erupt. I don't know where it's coming from, Darren or someone else. All I do is run.

The booms are so loud, I cover my ears while I race away, not even sure where I will go now. My car is still there, running with its door open, but I can't turn back and run into the fire fight. I duck behind a large metal shipping container to catch my breath

and feel tears streaking down my cheeks.

The gunshots continue, and I can't even allow myself to peek out there to see what's happening. I hear more squealing tires, and then an engine approaching. When the car skids to a stop, I leap up to run again but I see Lochlan's angry eyes and instead run toward him. He opens the door, pulls me in, and presses on the accelerator, peeling out.

My chest is heaving. I'm sobbing, hands shaking, and I crawl across the center console to curl into a ball in his passenger seat. Lochlan had to have followed me, and I've never been happier to know he is so obsessive.

"What the hell were you thinking, Evie?" He's angry, and rightly so. Darren was going to kill me. There is no doubt in my mind.

"I wasn't," I sob, palms pressed against my ear as he continues to shout at me while he drives.

"You leave my house after I tell you I will speak to your father, tell him I want you, and you go straight to that bastard's arms?"

The car lurches as it weaves, slamming me into the door a few times, and all I can do is sob and wonder if I've just dropped a nuke in my own life. Lochlan will never forgive me. I ran right out of his arms to Darren Connelly, and he thinks I'm ducking out on him to see another man. It's so overwhelming and I've royally fucked up. I need my da to fix this because this time, I don't think I know the way out.

When Evie finally adjusts in her seat and buckles in, I stop going off on her. She's not supposed to know about this world. It's supposed to exist around her in plain sight without her being aware of any of it. But here we are after a fire fight, with her sobbing in my passenger seat with her innocence shattered. She's a damn fool is what she is, and I'm an idiot for letting her walk out of my house. I'm just thankful I decided to follow her.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I ask again, shaking my head.

"I was fine," she blubs, covering her face. I hear the anger in her tone, but there is fear there too. She wasn't fine. She isn't fine. She is realizing for the first time the dangerous world we live in and she's in shock that her father willingly partakes of it. If she thinks his laundering and extortion are the worst of it, she has no clue the pain she's about to experience.

My hands trip the wheel so tightly, my knuckles are white. I'm not thinking rationally. My mind is racing too fast for that.

"You were about to be killed or raped. Do you realize that? Can't you see? You were warned so many fucking times, Evelyn. Your da told you to listen to me. I told you to stop fecking around with that man. You just keep walking right back into danger like you're invincible and you're going to get killed."

"Stop it!" she screams. Her hands fall from her face as she glares at me. Her eyes are red-rimmed, tears streaming down her cheeks, and she pounds her fist into my shoulder so hard it actually hurts. Then she pulls her hand back, cradling it. "Just stop. You don't fecking own me. I keep telling you that. And why the hell did you follow me?"

"Because you're a lunatic. You ignored direct orders, put yourself and this entire mission in danger. You walked into that building and?—"

"What building!" Evie screeches, and I hear a horn blasting in my ear. I jerk my head around to see an oncoming car and I'm in their lane, so I swerve back into mine and slow my pace. The speedometer shows I'm going twice the legal limit without realizing it. My hands are trembling at the near miss.

"What fucking building? What are you talking about?"

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

After nearly getting us killed in a head-on collision, I keep my eyes locked on the road but my stomach clenches, my entire chest feeling paralyzed. Everything I've thought about Maelyn and her choice to ignore my orders and go into that building all those years ago is fresh in my mind.

I see the last expression on her face before she vanished, the nod she gave, the fear in her eyes. I see the building explode and the shrapnel rain down on me. I see her dead body, dismembered and strewn out on the cold dirt, and I see how badly I'm losing it.

"Nothing," I growl, peeling around a corner and up Draco's street. "Your little boyfriend is the fucking enemy. You'd know that if you took a minute to listen to people around you who care about you." It was the closest I think I'd ever get to telling her I love her. But I do—more than I ever loved anyone else. "Your da will flip the feck out."

"You can't tell him," she whimpers. "Please do not tell him. He can't know." There is more fear in her eyes now than there was when I threw her into my car with bullets whizzing past us. "You can't tell him, Loch."

I'm not sure why she's so on edge about this, but I have no choice. Draco needs to know that Evie has been sneaking around with a Doyle.

"What were you doing with him?"

"Nothing, I swear. I did not sleep with him. I'm not out whoring around. Just please don't say anything." Using her shirt sleeve, she wipes her eyes, stains the white material black from what's left of her eye makeup.



I turn into Draco's driveway and see his car there. By now he's probably heard there was another shooting at the docks. The Garda are going to install more security around there if this keeps happening.

"Go to your apartment and this time, fucking stay there. Do you understand?" I slide the shifter to park and she looks away from me.

"Don't tell him, Lochlan. If you care about me and my family at all, just let me handle it." Her trembling hand rests on the door handle, and I glare at her.

"There is nothing between us at all unless you stop sneaking around. I can't be with someone who doesn't respect my orders." As I say it, I wince.

Evie's shoulders drop and she climbs out. I watch her walk past Draco's car into the back yard, past the house. Those were the last words I said to Maelyn too, and then I lost her. But Evie isn't walking through a warzone into a burning building. She's headed to her home where she's safe—for now.

And I have to go deal with her father and sort this mess out. Somehow, Connelly is involved in this push from Cormac Doyle. They want our shipping routes and our influence over dock workers. Well, it's not going to happen because I'm cutting off their access to it, starting with Darren Connelly's fascination with Evie.

I climb out of my car thinking about it. It's probably one of Cormac's other long games, having one of his men cozy up to Evie and manipulate her somehow. I'm certain that after that bullshit at the docks, Evie is never going to speak to that man again. Still, we can't be too careful.

I want to respect her wishes because I care about her, but Draco has the right to know how big of a risk his daughter has been taking. Maybe she's naive, and maybe she didn't know until it was too late, but my gut tells me something bigger is happening

here.

Draco opens the door before I get to the first step, and he glares at me as he says, "Get in here."

"What now?" I grumble, wiping sweat from my forehead. If the bullet holes in the side of my car aren't enough to clue him in that some nasty shit is going down, he's too distracted to care. He stalks toward his liquor cabinet where Jasper is pouring a few drinks.

"Add another," Draco says as I shut the door behind myself. Miriam isn't around, probably chased off by Draco's sour mood, so it's just the three of us as I stalk over and down my glass of whiskey in one drink.

"It's not just Byrne now. O'Malley called. How the feck are these arseholes getting our intel? Doyle is threatening to go public, the bastard. He has proof we've paid off a few of them and they're running scared. We have to fix this." Draco drags a hand down his face then drinks his whiskey. Jasper plays the bartender, refilling our glasses as he sips his own.

It's not the right time to tell Draco about Evie's dangerous involvement. He'd just lose his temper and drag her in here. She's just been shot at, nearly pissed herself, and she needs a few moments to decompress. Our dangers are coming at every angle now, but as long as I keep her locked up on this property, at least that much is under control.

"Da, you're gonna give yourself a coronary." Jasper's comment draws a deeper scowl from his father, then his face softens as he grips Jasper's shoulder.

It reminds me that family is everything and that if Draco's daughter really is in danger and I keep it from him, he'll kill me. These are his children, not just men he's formed contracts with. If it were my family, I'd want to know.

"Draco, there's something you should know, and before you do something foolish, just know I'm handling it." I set the empty glass down on the liquor cabinet counter and lean on it hard, palm splayed out on the cold wood.

"Feck's sake, Loch. Your brother is going to kill me for letting this get out of control. Don't tell me there's more." Draco's concern is very real. The minute Doyle found out my brother, the chief, had replaced his late soldier with Draco, they started targeting him. His business has been under fire, then his son. They threatened bodily harm, attacked at the picket lines, and now his daughter. They see Draco as the weak link, and they're going for the jugular, all in hopes of destroying the O'Rourke name.

"It's Evie," I grunt, and when I look up at him, I see a rage in his eyes like nothing I've ever witnessed.

"No..."

"Alright, she's fine," I say, holding up a hand to calm him. "She's back in her apartment. I've got her there safe and sound, but you should know they're getting at her too. Sent one of their footmen to manipulate her. She's been dating him behind our backs, sneaking around. It's not safe, and I put an end to it this afternoon?—"

"At the docks?" Jasper asks, cutting me off. "That shooting was you just now?" He scowls at me and Draco's glare worsens.

"It was, but she's fine... But she knows a lot more than you think, and she's terrified. You should talk with her, but she's not a kid, Draco. She's asking questions, and she knows things. But she understands how dangerous this is now. I think she won't be seeing him anymore." My body feels tired, like my adrenal glands have given up the ghost and stopped caring whether I'm in danger or tired. I'm numb and hollow, and all I can think about is that Evie is safe now, locked in her apartment. It's the only thing that grounds me.

"But they're smart, and they won't quit. They'll come at us another way." Draco shoves his whiskey glass in Jasper's hand.

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"We'll be ready," I tell him, nodding at my own glass.

"I'll keep her under lock and key," Draco breathes. It makes me feel better knowing he understands this risk.

I have to understand why they'd target her, and I have to find out why very quickly, before she gets any stupid ideas again. If being shot at doesn't sober her, nothing will, and something tells me whatever it was Connelly wanted, he's not going to stop until he gets it. He'll come back, and when he does, I'll find out how deep this rabbit hole goes.

25

EVIE

As I dab on the last bit of eyeliner and check my appearance, I think of my car left at the docks. It was running with the door open and I have no way of knowing whether someone there shut it down and locked it up for me. Da knows enough people who work there that someone might have taken care of it, but until I go to find out, I have no clue where it even is. Which means begging for a ride to work from Jasper. He's used to it now after Lochlan's petty orders to have someone chauffeur me.

I pause for a beat, letting my shoulders sink. It was the first indication that he cared about me and I was so upset with him for "micromanaging" me that I didn't see it for what it was. He wanted me safe and he was just horrible at showing it. I feel horrible for being so callous with him when he deserved better. I was lost in my own stress and grief. I couldn't see anything else.

I pick up my phone and grab a sweater in case the office is cold, then head into the main house where I find Jasper wearing sweats and a T-shirt, seated at the kitchen table to enjoy his breakfast. His hair sticks up at odd angles, sleepy eyes trained on me as I shut the sliding glass door at the back of the house.

"Why aren't you ready?" Looking at the microwave clock, I see it's twenty 'til nine, so we only have a few minutes to be on the road or we'll both be late.

"Not going," he says with his mouth full, dripping milk down his chin to his sweats below.

"Feck, well can I borrow your car? Mine's at the docks." I don't let him know why it's there or that it may very well have been stolen along with my wallet, but he doesn't seem to care.

"No can do." He takes another bite before his other one is fully swallowed and speaks with his mouth full of food.

"God, you're such a jerk. Why not?" My hand plants on my hip as I drop my sweater on the back of the chair next to him. We haven't had a good bickering match in ages because I thought he grew up. When I took the job at the union, I thought it showed some maturity on my part, and it showed me how grown up he seemed too. All of this is just rude.

"Da said. He wants you to stay home today. Probably tomorrow too. There's a few things to work out round the office and?—"

"Ugh!" I growl, stomping a foot. Both of my hands curl to fists at my sides in fury. "No, I'm not a child. I don't need a man telling me what to do. Get your keys and let me take your car to work."

Jasper flicks a glance at my face and scowls. "You think I like sitting on the sidelines to play babysitter? You got yourself into a mess, and now we have to clean it up."

I'm about to retort something nasty when the guilt clamps my jaw shut. I don't know exactly what he means or what he knows, but if Lochlan told my father about Darren Connelly, it makes sense that he's keeping me locked up at home. I have no car to go anywhere on my own, either, so I can't even look into it and find out what Da knows. Unless Mum will let me take her car.

Luckily, before my own guilt and shame can give me away, Mum strolls into the room with a serious expression. "You two, knock it off. We have company." It's been a while since Mum scolded us for bickering too. It makes me feel shameful, like a naughty child whose parents disapprove. "Evelyn, you have company. Please come into the living room." Her tone shifts on a dime, and I scowl at Jasper as I walk past.

The only person in the world I can think of who might come over this time of day is Lochlan, but if he wanted something from me, he'd just come to my apartment. I move toward the living room with purpose, not really knowing what to expect, but as I round the corner and see Elvin Murphy seated in my father's recliner with his expensive white suit and dark blue shirt, unbuttoned at the top to show off his chest hair, I cringe.

"Mum," I whisper, but she doesn't hear me. She continues into the living room and sits down across from him in her normal seat, leaving the spot at the end of the sofa nearest to Elvin for me to sit in.

He smiles as he sees me enter. Charm oozes off him like puss from an infection, and for the first time I realize how little I actually care for this man. I've known him for years, since we were both preteens, but who he's become, the thing his father has turned him into, isn't at all attractive to me.

Elvin stands as I approach under Mum's watchful eye. I can't be disrespectful, so I offer my hand, which he kisses—not nearly as smoothly as Lochlan would've—and then he sits. My heart is hammering against my ribs begging to be loosed. The anger that wants to explode at my mum for this little set-up, and at my father for locking me away, gets tidily locked behind a plastic smile as I settle on the couch.

"Evelyn, it's so good to see you." He sinks into Da's chair, smoothing his shirt over his chest. The act draws my attention to the flashy rings on his fingers, the expensive watch on his wrist and the tattoo peeking from the cuff of his shirt. He's put together, but there is still a hint of rebellion about him. It's part of him I've always liked but figured would be trained out of him by the time he got to marrying age.

"Elvin, Mum didn't tell me you'd be here. You'll have to forgive my late entry." I'm flustered, wanting to snap at my mother for this, but the wheels in my head are turning, trying to make it all make sense.

Lochlan snatched me off the street at the docks in a crazy rescue, then shuttled me home to bed like a good little girl. He tells Da something that has Da locking me up at home and Jasper telling me I'm a fuck-up, and now Mum has Elvin Murphy in our living room. It's spun way too far out of control and things just went from calm talks I'm not ready for to actual courting. He's here in my parents' living room courting me.

"Elvin, if you will excuse me for a moment. I need to speak to my mum..." I glance at her, and she gives me a determined look.

"No, dear, Elvin is here to see you. We can begin discussing the arrangement."

I hate how she says the word arrangement like it's not my entire life she's fucking with. I am in love with Lochlan, not Elvin Murphy, and I don't want to marry him. I don't know what I want. I just know he's not going to like it when he finds out I'm pregnant, and if she's not careful, I'm going to throw up all over her Persian rug.



"Surely, he can wait a few more minutes while we go talk for a second." I keep my jaw firm, hands folded in my lap. I've been trained what to do, taught how to act, but I'm sick of being the fucking good girl who gets shoved toward things she doesn't want. I am a grown woman who makes her own choices. I'm pregnant with another man's baby. I can't marry Elvin.

"Evie, we've been looking forward to this for years. At least, I have. I'd love it if we could finally make the plans to wed." Elvin's voice sounds sincere. For a second, I feel a twinge of guilt at wanting to cut off the agreement. His expression is full of compassion too. I know him. He's a good man, albeit a bit flashy, but kind hearted. "I hope to make a good life for you, one fuller than your father's humble businesses can provide—one that's more secure."

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

He reaches for my hand, but I turn toward Mum and realize what's happening. My da told him about Darren Connelly, about the danger. That's why he's here. He thinks he's going to whisk me away to safety that I don't want or need. I'm safe enough with Lochlan, and he's the man I want.

"Mother of God," I grunt, covering my face with a palm.

"Evelyn Elaine, watch your language." Mum's tone is harsher than I expect it to be. I hear her shift in her seat uncomfortably and picture her smiling in embarrassment at Elvin. I don't know what she knows about Da or his businesses, the crimes he's committed, but I can't just blurt it out. What I know and what I've learned aren't something to just announce at a family coffee.

"Mum, I'm sorry. I'm not feeling well." I uncover my face and smile politely at Elvin. His offer does seem genuine, and if he knows anything about what my father is involved with, his protection would be genuine too. I just can't do this. I'm too emotional, and I might throw up. So I turn their game against them.

"I'm so fatigued right now. Da has asked me to stay home to rest up, so that's what I should do." I stand, smoothing my hands down my skirt. I'm not marrying this man no matter what anyone says. And I don't know how to tell them yet, but I will. "Thank you for stopping by. We'll talk another time."

"Evelyn, don't be rude," Mum hisses, standing, but I push past her and ignore her entirely. Jasper is gone when I walk through the kitchen, bowl still sitting where he was at the table. I head to my apartment and lock myself in. If I can't get out, then no one else needs to come in. I have thinking to do.

I need to figure out how to tell Lochlan about the baby soon. If I'd have done that already, Elvin wouldn't have shown up at my parents' house. And I need to figure out how to let them all down easily.

As I change into my own sweats and T-shirt, I curl up into bed and think how glad I am that at least Darren Connelly is off my back. I never should have thought I could protect my father. I should've said something right from the beginning.

26

LOCHLAN

Draco's pacing like a fucking animal, shoulders coiled tight like he's gonna snap and take someone's head off. The blinds are half-closed, light slashing across the desk and striping the floor like a goddamn interrogation room. The silence between us isn't quiet. It crackles. Tastes like rage and burnt coffee.

"I've been getting calls," he mutters, low and hard. "From people who used to owe me favors. They're jumping ship, pulling their names out of any deal I touch. Like I've got a fucking disease."

I watch him. He's not spiraling. Not yet. Draco doesn't spiral—he dismembers things slowly, piece by piece, until there's nothing left to fight back. But he's close. His rage is too controlled. That's when it's most dangerous.

"Cormac Doyle's running his mouth," I say. "Leaking names. Connections. He's turned half the TDs into cowards."

Draco stops moving. His eyes cut to mine, flat and murderous. "I gave those bastards protection. Political cover. Free rides and padded contracts. And the second things get noisy, they toss me to the wolves."

I let the silence drag for a breath and watch him anxiously scrape a hand over his face. “They’re not doing it loudly. They’re using back channels. Quiet pressure. You’re not being indicted—you’re being erased.”

He exhales hard, the kind of sound that should come with blood on the floor. “You got an answer, then?”

I nod slowly. “We burn a body. Not literally. Not unless we have to. But we give them someone they can crucify.”

He stares at me like I’m handing him a knife. I am.

“Tiernan Callahan,” I say. “Little prick’s been skimming since the minute you gave him a keycard. He wants to be important? Fine. We make him the story. Tech boys can rewrite his logs, bury your name, make it look like he’s been doing deals behind your back.”

Draco doesn’t answer right away. He just walks to the window, drags one blind down with a snap, watches the street like he’s picturing where the bullets might come from.

“He won’t go quietly.”

“Then we send him off in pieces.”

A beat passes. Then he mutters, “Do it.”

Draco walks out without a word. The door clicks shut behind him, but the weight of him still clings to the room. After a moment, I stand, move around the desk, and lower into his chair. It creaks under me like it knows I don’t belong. Everything here feels wrong—like sitting in another man’s skin. They want me stationed, obedient, useful in a way that doesn’t draw blood. But I’ve never been good at pretending.

The silence doesn't leave. It freezes slowly around the bones of the room, tightening in my chest like a belt cinched one notch too far. I sit with it a moment longer, then pull the chair in and turn to the monitor. Draco's login's already active. His files are right where he left them. All I have to do is dig.

Whatever Doyle's feeding to the press didn't come from thin air. This leak isn't a lucky guess or someone stumbling into the wrong server. It's precise. Someone on the inside gave them a map.

I start with the network logs. Every access point leaves a mark, even if they think it doesn't. Our tech crew likes to boast about security, but they're only good at burying things after they go wrong. I want to see who cracked it open in the first place.

The financial logs are messier than they should be. Someone's been inside them in the last seventy-two hours. Multiple times. Same user. I sort through the timestamps, and my stomach tightens when the name pops up.

Evelyn O'Leary.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

At first, I think I've read it wrong. But it's there again. And again. Same terminal. Same credentials. Accessing the protected files, the restricted servers, every page that could damn this union in the hands of someone like Cormac Doyle. It's not casual browsing, either—this was a full dive. Line-item payments, routing numbers, donation accounts tied to fake charities. Everything we've worked to bury.

I click deeper. Her activity log lights up the screen. She pulled files from the off-books side of the ledger. Exported copies. Some went to the printer. Others were dumped to a flash drive. The audit log shows four external devices connected over the last two days. One of them stayed plugged in for nearly forty minutes.

Forty minutes is enough to gut us.

My chest goes tight, breaths short and sharp. I force myself to slow it down. This doesn't make sense. Evie doesn't have access to half of this. She shouldn't even know where to find it.

Unless someone showed her.

Unless she was looking.

I shift in the chair, fingers moving faster now, flipping through system logs, surveillance notes, building check-ins. There's footage flagged by internal security—low priority, never reviewed. I open the files. There's no sound, but I don't need it. The image is enough.

Evie. Out behind the warehouse. Talking to someone I don't recognize at first. Tall,

dark hair, fitted suit, face turned away from the camera. But when he steps back, adjusting his watch, his profile's clean as a knife.

Darren Connelly.

Doyle's fixer. His enforcer. His shadow.

He's standing inches from her, and she isn't pulling away.

My hands tighten on the edge of the desk until the leather creaks. The room suddenly feels colder, smaller. The weight in my gut shifts from suspicion to something heavier. Betrayal is a word too clean for what I feel creeping up my spine.

I've been watching her. Protecting her. Stepping into this desk job I never wanted just to keep her safe. And all the while, she's been feeding them the bullets they'll use to shoot us down.

I sit back slowly, let the monitor glow in my face. I replay the footage. Once. Twice. Her hands are shaking. She looks scared. Not defiant. Not smug. But scared doesn't make her innocent. Scared means she knew what she was doing.

I drag both hands down my face and exhale through my teeth. The truth sits in my lap like a loaded weapon. And now I have to decide what the fuck to do with it.

Evie wouldn't betray her father. She worships the ground he walks on. She defends him like it's a religion. I've seen the way she looks at him when he walks into a room—like nothing could touch him, like he's invincible.

So what the fuck is this?

I stare at the screen, replaying the footage again. She's scared. That's what rattles me

most. She's not reckless. She's not stupid. But she's in deep with something, and it's crawling under my skin because I don't know why. I don't know what she's doing or who made her do it. And I should.

I should've seen this coming.

My chest tightens again, breath hitching without permission. For a second, it's not Evie on the screen—it's Maelyn. Same fear in her eyes. Same way her hands shook before she walked through that fucking door in Kandahar and never came back out. I should've stopped her. I should've been faster, louder, anything but what I was.

And now here I am again, sitting behind another desk, watching another woman I should be protecting stand one breath away from getting herself killed.

I shove back from the chair. The floor groans under my boots as I stand. My skin's too tight, heart racing like it wants out of my chest. This isn't a leak anymore. It's a ticking bomb.

And Evie's right in the blast radius.

I don't know what she's done. But I do know this—I can't lose another one. Not like that. Not again.

I shoot to my feet before I even realize I've moved.

My legs feel numb, my chest too tight. I don't think—I just grab my phone and bring up Jasper's contact.

Lochlan 3:13 PM: Where's Evie? Call me now.

The second it sends, I open a thread to Draco.



Lochlan 3:14 PM: Evie's in danger. I'm coming to the house. Something's very wrong.

I don't wait for replies. I shove the phone in my pocket and get out. Down the hallway, through the stairwell, boots slamming on concrete like they're trying to make the building feel it. I don't bother with the lift. I need the burn in my legs to match the fire tearing through my chest.

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She's in trouble. I don't know how deep or who else is involved, but she didn't come to me—and that says more than I can stand to think about.

She should've told me.

I hit the street, air sharp in my throat, and cross to the car without slowing. The second the engine turns over, I peel out fast, tires screeching as I take the corner too hard.

I keep seeing her. That moment frozen on screen—Evie standing with Doyle's man like she's already bracing for something she can't avoid. Not angry. Not defiant. Just scared.

And she did it alone.

I told myself I was protecting her, keeping distance so she'd be safe. But she was already under. Already drowning. And I didn't see it.

Just like Maelyn.

That same crawl in my gut is back—like something vital is slipping just out of reach and I'm too fucking slow to stop it. I should've been there. I should've known.

Whatever she's stepped into, it's killing her from the inside out. And if Connelly is involved, this doesn't end with a threat. It ends with blood.

She's not a soldier. She's not built for this kind of war.

But I am.

And if I have to burn down every piece of what's left between me and her to get her out, then that's exactly what I'll do.

27

EVIE

The bath water's gone lukewarm, but I haven't moved. I just keep sinking deeper into it, like maybe if I lie still long enough, I'll disappear. Just... vanish into the steam. No more lectures, no more staged tea talks about Elvin fucking Murphy and his "stable job" and his "respectable family". No more talk about duty, tradition, or what I owe my father.

I'm not sure what scares me more—telling them I'm pregnant, or letting Lochlan find out first.

My hand floats across my belly, barely a swell. It's stupid, I know. Too early to feel anything. But it's not about the size. It's about the weight of it. The permanence. This isn't a mistake I can hide behind the veil of a drunken night or bad judgment. This is life-changing.

And I love him. That's the mess of it.

I don't want to. I know I shouldn't. But I do.

The knock at the door cuts through the silence, not loud, just firm. One knock. Then nothing.

I close my eyes. "It's open," I call out, voice sluggish. "I'm in the bath."

Probably Mum again, come back to apologize. Or Da, finally wanting a word of his own. Maybe Jasper. I don't know. I don't care.

I pull the plug with my toes and reach for the towel, the sound of draining water swallowing the noise outside. But I hear it—movement. The creak of the hallway floorboard. Someone stepping lightly. No voice calling back.

I dry off fast, still talking over the sound of water like I'm not alone.

“I don't want another lecture, alright? I've heard enough today. I'll meet Elvin, I'll smile politely, but I'm not promising anything. Not tonight.”

I slide into my robe, tugging the belt snug at my waist, still not listening to whoever is out there, and step out of the bathroom, steam trailing behind me. I freeze halfway through tying the robe at my waist.

Darren Connelly is standing near the window, his back partially turned like he's been there long enough to get comfortable. The sight of him knocks the breath from my lungs, not with shock but with a kind of slow, crawling horror that settles beneath my skin before my brain catches up to it. The gun in his hand is pointed down, loose and casual, like it doesn't need to be aimed yet. His coat is still buttoned. His shoes are dry. He didn't just arrive—he's been here.

My first instinct isn't to scream or run or speak. I just stand there, cold seeping into my feet from the tile as every nerve in my body tries to lock down at once. There's nowhere to go. No corner to retreat into. It's just the two of us and the ten feet of open floor between me and the bathroom, and the tiny room might as well be a cage.

“You left the door unlocked,” he says without turning around.

His voice is quiet, low enough that I barely catch it. I don't answer. I don't think I

could even if I wanted to. My throat is too dry, and the fear has already done its work. It's wedged itself deep into my spine, hollowing me out from the inside.

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He turns to face me, finally, like we're old friends meeting in the middle of a conversation. His eyes land on me, scan the towel in my hair, the thin robe, the bare feet, and I hate how small I feel under it. I hate that he sees me like this.

"I need to know when your father is meeting with Ronan O'Rourke," he says. The words come smooth, practiced, like he's said them before, maybe even to someone who didn't get the chance to answer.

I shake my head, more out of instinct than defiance. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

He says it plainly, and I know he believes it. I don't try to argue. What would be the point? We both know I've seen things I wasn't supposed to. Eavesdropped. Read names I wasn't meant to recognize. He's not here on a guess.

"I won't tell you," I say quietly. "Whatever you think I know, I'm not giving it to you."

His mouth doesn't move, but something shifts in his eyes. Not anger, not yet—just a kind of steel-hard certainty that tells me this conversation doesn't end with a choice. Not really.

"I'm not going to be your pawn," I add, and I hate that my voice quavers at the end.

"You already are," he says. "You just haven't figured out which side you're playing for."

My stomach twists. I thought I'd been scared before. I hadn't even started.

He shifts a few steps to the side, and I realize he's between me and the door. Not by accident. He's placed himself there. I start to back up without thinking, the robe pulling tighter around me as I move until my hip bumps the edge of the counter.

He doesn't raise the gun. He doesn't have to.

"Don't make this harder than it has to be," he says. His voice is level, but there's pressure behind it now. "Just tell me what I need to know."

I shake my head. "I'm not giving you anything."

Another step from him. Another step back from me. The last few feet of space in the room close in fast.

"I've been patient," he says. "More than you probably deserve. But if you keep protecting them, you become part of the problem."

"I'm not protecting anyone. I just—" My voice breaks. "You'll get them killed."

His expression doesn't change. "That's the whole point."

The second I say no again, his face tightens—not with surprise, not even with anger, but with decision. He closes the distance and grabs my arm, wrenching me forward with a force that knocks the breath from my lungs. I barely register the edge of the table hitting my hip before I'm slammed backward into the wall.

Pain flashes through my spine. The impact cracks something loose in my head and my vision blurs. Before I can recover, his hand fists in my hair and drags me upright, shoving me flat against the plaster.

“You’re wasting time,” he says, breath hot at my cheek. “Yours. Mine. Theirs.”

I claw at his forearm, but he jerks me closer until our bodies are flush and I can feel the press of the gun between us. My robe’s already half undone from the struggle, the belt twisted and pulling with every movement.

I try to scream, but he clamps a hand over my mouth, pressing just hard enough to cut the sound but not the breath. His weight is fully on me now, one knee driving between my thighs, pinning me in place. I can’t move. I can barely breathe. The pressure against my ribs makes it feel like the air is leaking out of my lungs one shallow gasp at a time.

I shake my head violently, thrashing, but he just leans in harder. His hand slides down the curve of my side, slow, measured, and when his fingers hook into the belt at my waist and tug it once, everything in me turns to ice.

“I can do this any way I want,” he murmurs, too calm. “We both know that.”

Tears sting my eyes, unbidden and furious. I don’t want to cry. I don’t want him to see what this is doing to me. But the fear is everywhere now. It’s in my hands, trembling. It’s in my legs, locked and useless. It’s in the way I stop struggling—just for a second—because some buried part of me wonders if it’ll hurt less that way.

His hand slides the knot open.

I flinch hard, a full-body jolt, panic overriding everything else. My voice comes back in a ragged, desperate rasp.

“Please don’t?—”

He presses the gun against my stomach.



“Then give me what I want.”

His knee shifts higher, his grip tightening in my hair, and I realize, with sickening clarity, that he’s not bluffing. He didn’t come here to scare me. He came here to break me.

He rips the robe open without hesitation, yanking until the fabric gives. The belt slips from my waist. My hands go straight to my chest, trying to hold the pieces together, but he grabs my wrists and forces them above my head, pinning me to the wall. My bare skin hits cold plaster. The shock of it tears a sound out of me—shame and panic and rage tangled in my throat.

I twist, kick, slam my knee upward, but he shifts his weight fast and traps my legs. His hips grind into mine. His breath is on my face. His hand shoves the robe off my shoulders completely.

He looks down at me like I’m nothing.

I scream, sharp and guttural, fighting like something cornered. My fingernails catch his cheek, and he hisses, grabbing a fistful of my hair and wrenching my head back hard enough that I see stars. My chest is heaving now, fully exposed. His hand moves lower.

That’s when the door bursts inward.

The sound is deafening, the wall turning to powder as the handle flies into it. Lochlan storms in with the force of a hurricane, and Darren doesn’t even have time to turn

before he's tackled off me, his back hitting the ground with a crack.

Lochlan's on top of him in a blink, fists already swinging. The first hit snaps Darren's head sideways. The second splits his eyebrow wide open. Blood splatters across the floor in a crimson puddle. Darren grunts, scrambles, tries to reach for the gun—but Lochlan kicks it across the room without breaking rhythm.

He doesn't speak. He beats.

Each punch lands with a thud of knuckle against bone. One after another, merciless, rhythmless. Darren's face collapses under the weight of it—lip shredded, teeth loose, nose flattened. He chokes, blood pooling in his mouth, but Lochlan keeps going. His breathing is ragged, teeth bared. His hands are covered in Darren's blood, the skin across his knuckles already split and raw.

Darren claws at the floor, tries to roll away, and gets dragged back by his collar and slammed against the side of the table. It breaks under him. Wood splinters across the tile. He screams, arm bent wrong, face unrecognizable.

Lochlan lifts him again, slams him to the ground.

"I'll kill you," he growls, voice deep, barely human. "I'll fucking kill you."

Darren flails, throws an elbow, misses. He kicks off the floor and somehow, barely, slips free. He stumbles toward the door, slipping in his own blood, and disappears across the lawn.

Lochlan stands there, chest heaving, fists clenched at his sides.

And I collapse to the floor, shaking, robe hanging off my arms, exposed and broken and gasping for air.

He turns to me, face wild, eyes locked on mine, and for the first time, I know I'm safe. Because he came.

Lochlan's already halfway to the door, chest still heaving, blood running down his hands and forearms. His jaw is clenched so hard I can see the muscles jumping under the skin, and there's a look in his eyes that says he's not finished. Not by a long shot.

"No, don't," I gasp, stumbling forward. I grab his wrist with both hands, nails digging into skin before I even realize how tight I'm holding. "Please. Don't go after him."

He tries to pull away, but I don't let go. I slide in front of him, pressing my body against his, desperate, still half-naked, shaking so badly I can't get the words out in order.

"I couldn't... I didn't know what to do, he said... he said if I didn't help him he'd—he'd tell everyone about my father, about what he did, and then the union would fall, and he'd go to prison, and it would be my fault and I thought maybe if I stalled them long enough, I could find a way out, but then I saw Connelly and?—"

I choke on my own breath. My knees start to give, and he catches me by the arms, holding me upright.

"I didn't mean for it to get this far," I sob. "I thought I could fix it. I thought I could hide it."

"Hide what?" His voice is low, rough, still barely human.

"Everything. The files, the copies, what I gave them. I didn't even know how much they were using me. They said if I told anyone, they'd kill him. Or you. Or both. And then I found out I was pregnant and Mum—she's making me marry Elvin, like that'll erase everything, like I'm just supposed to start over and pretend none of this

ever?—”

He grabs my face and kisses me.

Hard. Desperate. Like he’s trying to keep me from shattering into pieces. I melt into it, hands still fisted in his shirt, sobbing against his mouth. The kiss doesn’t ask. It takes. And I let it.

When he pulls back, his forehead rests against mine.

“You’re not marrying him,” he says quietly.

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He pulls back, breath heavy against my mouth, forehead still resting against mine. His hands stay at my jaw, thumbs brushing the corners of my mouth like he's trying to quiet the panic spilling out of me.

"I don't want to," I whisper, voice catching. "I just didn't know if you—if you'd want this. Us. The baby."

He goes still. Every part of him.

His eyes search mine, not frantically, but deeply, like he's trying to confirm he heard what he thinks he did. He doesn't speak, just stares at me. His jaw is tight, but not in anger—like he's holding back something massive, something dangerous, something real.

"You're pregnant," he says finally, the words almost breathless.

I nod.

He lets out a sound—quiet, raw, half disbelieving. His hand drops to my stomach. Not cautiously. Deliberately. His fingers press gently against the skin just beneath the edge of my robe.

His throat works like he's swallowing broken glass.

"That's mine," he says, barely above a whisper. "That's my baby."

I nod again, still crying, and something in his expression breaks open. The fear, the

fury, the weight of everything I never said—all of it crashes behind his eyes.

“You should’ve told me,” he murmurs. “You should’ve told me the second you knew.”

“I was scared.”

He doesn’t ask of what. He already knows.

Then his grip shifts. He’s still holding me, but it’s different now—firmer, possessive, like he’s staking a claim. Not violently. Not out of pride. Out of need.

“I’m not letting them take you,” he says. “I don’t care what your mother says, or your father, or that smug little bastard they’re trying to tie you to. I will kill him if I have to. I’ll kill anyone who thinks they get a say in this.”

I start to cry harder.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he continues. “You’re mine now. You hear me?”

I manage a shaky nod. “I didn’t want to lose you.”

He presses his mouth to my hair. “You won’t.” His voice is low, steady, and terrifying in its certainty. “Not now. Not ever.”

Lochlan bends, hooking his fingers behind my thighs and lifting me into his arms. I wrap my legs around him as he uses a boot to shut the door, then he turns, heading toward my bed.

“I told you I don’t share, and I meant it,” he growls, dropping me to the bed. I let the robe fall open, no longer scared of being uncovered. For this man, I will do anything,

even die.

28

LOCHLAN

I spread her like a feast as she shrugs out of her torn robe. Evie is desperate for me, and after what I walked in on, I know why. She's still crying, reaching for me as I shed my clothing and crawl over her, praying Draco and Jasper don't get my messages before I finish with her.

"Oh, God, Loch... Please..." Her hands wrap around my ribs, legs widening to take me in.

I drive myself inside her with one harsh thrust, feeling her wet heat envelop me, squeezing my cock like a vise. Her face contorts in pleasure and pain, nails digging into my back as I piston into her. I hold her by the hips, trying to avoid her wound, but it's impossible. She moans through gritted teeth.

"I'm sorry," I growl, kissing her neck, leaving a love bite behind. "I'm so sorry..."

"Oh, please..." she whimpers. Her fingers pull at my ribs, feet hooking behind my hips. I revel in each slow, deep thrust as my lips claim hers again. Her hair is still damp, still dripping from a bath or shower, and I taste the saltiness of her tears on her lips. Had I been one minute later, who knows what Connelly would've done to her.

"I love you, Evelyn, and I'm not letting another man touch you ever again."

"Loch..." Her moans are music to my ears. I wrap an arm around her and roll until she's straddling my hips, hands splayed on my stomach as her hips rock.

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She's riding me like her life depended on it, eyes squeezed tightly shut as she descends and then rises, nails biting into my skin. "Yes..." I hiss, feeling the familiar pull of orgasm creeping closer by the second. My hands grip her hips, guiding her motions until she leans forward, her hair tickling my chest as I feel the hot spasms of her core around me, preparing to uncoil.

I guide her hips in a languid dance as our bodies find a rhythm. Her tits bounce, mouth dropped open in pleasure. When her gaze meets mine, I know she's there, right on the edge. "I... I..." Her hands brace against my damp chest, her lungs heaving with exertion.

"Come for me," I growl in her ear, thumb finding her clit, rubbing it as she cries out my name on a strangled moan. She continues to ride me as I thrust upward into her, and her pussy pulses around my cock. I watch as her body contorts and writhes. She shudders and jolts and loses herself in the moment, and I slow my thrusts to control my own release.

When she calms, I roll again, putting her back onto her back. I hover, inching in and out of her slowly as her eyes blink open and she smiles softly through continued tears.

"No one," I say, punctuating each word with a thrust, "no man will ever touch you like that again."

Tears still spill down her cheeks but they're quieter now, more calmed than before. "I'll kill him," I promise, still fucking her gently, creating friction between us both. Her walls grip me tighter in response. "I'm sorry."



“It’s not your fault.” she says, her chest heaving with each word. She squeezes around me again, and I can’t help but growl into her neck. “I love you,” she whispers, digging her nails into my shoulders.

“I love you too,” I say, meaning it more than anything in the world. “I love you so fucking much.” Her nails bite into my skin as my thrusts pick up speed again. I grab her hips and pound into her, determined to wipe away every harsh memory of Connelly’s touch with my own.

“Oh, God... Faster...” she whimpers, and her hips rock up to meet my thrusts. Her body begins to move again, rolling against mine as I dig in to push deeper. Her breathing is erratic, fingers clawing up my sides, and her lips pepper kisses on my chest, nipping and sucking my skin.

My cock is throbbing, balls drawing tight to my body as I feel her core tighten again. Orgasm crests over her like sunrise, making her face light up and her body awaken. She shudders and jolts again, and I ride it out until I can’t take it anymore. Hot, violent spasms rack my body and pure white-hot ecstasy shoots through my veins as I spill myself inside her, our wetness mingling together as we both fall over the edge.

I collapse on her, breathless and spent, kissing her forehead. Her arms wrap around me tightly, squeezing me as if her life depends on it, nuzzling against my collarbone. The scent of her shampoo mixed with our combined arousal is intoxicating, a heady reminder that she’s mine and mine alone.

Her head rests beneath my chin. I can feel each breath as it rises and falls against my chest. We’re both slick with sweat, lungs still working through the weight of everything that came before. The room is quiet. The kind of quiet that feels earned.

Her leg is tangled with mine. One of her hands rests over my heart, not moving. Mine is wrapped around her back, fingers splayed across the curve of her spine. Her skin is

warm. She hasn't spoken. Neither have I.

There's blood under my nails. I should care. I don't.

I shift just enough to pull her closer. She doesn't resist. Her body presses to mine like it's where she's supposed to be. No hesitation. No apology.

She's quiet for a long time, but I can feel the way her breath changes, how her body tightens just slightly before she speaks. "I've known for weeks," she says. "I didn't want to believe it at first. I kept thinking maybe I was just late, maybe it was stress. But I knew. And I was terrified."

Her voice is raw, but not falling apart. She's not hiding anymore. "Not because I didn't want it. I did. I do. But because I didn't know what you'd feel. If it would trap you. If you'd think I did it on purpose. If it would make you walk."

I keep still, let her talk.

"I would stand in front of the mirror and try to picture your face when I told you. Sometimes, you were quiet. Sometimes angry. Sometimes, you just walked out. And every time I imagined it, I thought—maybe it's better if I just keep it to myself."

She shifts slightly, her hand brushing over my stomach like she needs something to hold on to.

She doesn't move her hand right away, just keeps it there, as if she's waiting for me to pull away. When I don't, she finally speaks again.

"They still want me to marry Elvin."

Her voice is quieter now, but not unsure. It's something more bitter than fear.

“They’ve been pushing it harder lately. Pressing dates. Talking like it’s a done deal. I haven’t said yes, but I haven’t said no, either, and that feels worse.”

She swallows, then presses her forehead to my collarbone.

“I hate the way they look at me. Like I’m something to manage. A piece of the family they don’t know what to do with, so they’re just shoving me into the next acceptable box.”

I slide my hand up her spine, slow and deliberate. She doesn’t flinch. She leans in.

“I keep thinking if I let it happen, everything gets easier. No scandal, no explaining, no one asking why I picked you.”

I feel the weight in that last word—how much she means it. How scared she still is of what choosing me will cost her.

“I don’t care if it’s easier,” I say. “I care if it’s what you want.”

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She lifts her head and looks at me, eyes shining. “Marrying Elvin is not what I want. I want you. I want this.”

Her eyes draw up over my chest to look at my face, and I pause. I brush my thumb across her cheek, slow, steady, feeling the way her breath catches under my hand. She’s watching me now, fully locked in, like she’s waiting for something heavier.

“I need you to understand something before this goes any further,” I say. “I’m not the man your father wanted for you. I’m not clean. I don’t play by rules that protect anyone outside this circle.”

Her expression doesn’t change. I go on.

“I’ve put men in the ground. I’ve buried secrets and covered blood. I’ve lied, stolen, threatened, and worse—for my family, for the people who matter. That’s the life I was raised in. It’s the life I still choose. And if you’re with me, it means you’re in that world too.”

She stays silent, but there’s no fear in her eyes. No hesitation. Just the steady weight of her love pressing back against every ugly truth I lay down.

“I know who you are, Lochlan.”

“I don’t think you do,” I say. “Not all of it.”

“I do,” she says. “I knew before you walked through my door tonight. I knew the night I let you touch me for the first time. I knew what kind of man I was choosing.

And I chose you anyway.”

I breathe that in. Let it settle.

“All I care about now,” she says, voice low, “is that my father is safe. And that this baby is safe. That I am.”

I close my eyes for half a second, then look at her again. There’s no part of her I want more than this—the honesty, the steel under the softness, the way she trusts me with her fear.

“No one touches you,” I say. “Not ever again. Not while I’m breathing.”

She nods, but I see the last piece of uncertainty still flickering behind her eyes. I lean in, hold her face in both hands, and say it again.

“You’re mine. And I will kill for you if I have to.”

Her eyes don’t waver. “I know.”

I run my hand down the side of her arm again before I move. The sheets shift as I sit up. She doesn’t reach for me, but her eyes stay on me the whole time. I find my shirt at the foot of the bed and pull it on. The adrenaline’s back, slow at first, but rising. My hands are steady now, my mind clear. Everything else can wait. The DoYLES can’t.

Evie watches me dress without asking where I’m going. She already knows. I sit at the edge of the bed and reach for my boots. “I need you to stay here.” She doesn’t argue, but she doesn’t look away, either. “They won’t stop,” I say. “Not after tonight. Not after I laid hands on one of theirs. Someone’s going to answer for what he did to you.”

She pulls the blanket tighter across her chest, not because she's cold. "You're going to kill him?"

I look over my shoulder, meet her eyes. "I am."

She doesn't respond, but I see the coldness in her gaze, the way she approves silently, though she will never say it. Then, I finish lacing my boots, stand, and cross back to her. I bend, kiss her forehead, then linger there, breathing her in for one last second.

"You stay put. No going out. No taking calls. No opening the fucking door unless it's me or someone I send. Promise me."

She nods. "I promise."

I kiss her again, harder this time, then head for the door. And when I leave, I leave with one thing in my blood. War.

29

EVIE

Lying on the bed watching Lochlan leave brings physical pain to my chest. I know what he's going to do and I don't know how to justify that sort of violence. But I also know I'm never going to change him. It's why he spelled it all out for me, that he's a criminal and a violent man, and that will never change. It's why he gave me the choice to back away now, but I can't. I don't want to.

My father is just like Lochlan, probably into deeper crimes than the ones I know about and probably not the least bit ashamed of it. It all makes sense now, the way he kept me at arm's length from his businesses for so long, the way he shelters me and tries to control my actions. He's been keeping things from me to keep me safe. It's

honorable, but ignorant. His entire life is wrapped up in sin, and like Lochlan and the sins of his past, it's catching up with him.

I push myself off the bed, struggle to my dresser to pull out some clothing. If Lochlan can go hunt down men who want to harm my father and murder them in cold blood to protect my family, then I have to grow up and stop putting off the hard conversation I need to have with my mother. I don't know if she knows about Da's criminal involvement, but I don't like secrets, and I'm not going to let her walk around in the dark about this or anything else. I have to tell her everything.

After sliding into some yoga pants and a T-shirt, I tie my hair up into a knot and shove my feet into my slippers. Loch asked me to stay here unless he sends someone to me, but I can't keep that promise right now. Besides, I'm not going out, just to speak to Mum in the main house where she's probably busy cooking or reading.

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I make my way across the lawn, carefully rehearsing what I'll say to her. I don't know how my father got tangled up with the O'Rourke clan, but I know he's in deep. It's likely the reason he wants to marry me off. I know things like that happen in families like Lochlan's all the time. I'm just not letting it happen to me, not anymore.

Mum is sitting out back on a patio chair when I walk up. There is a pile of tissues on the table in front of her. Her phone is in her trembling hand. She has mascara streaks down her cheeks, and her eyes are red-rimmed and puffy.

"Mum, are you okay?" My first thought is that something has happened—that Darren Connelly's threats have come to fruition and Da is gone. I rush to her side, pulling up a chair. The heavy metal feet drag across the stone pavers making a loud scratching noise, and I sink onto the seat as I clasp my hand around hers.

"I'm okay, dear," she says, smiling and waving it off with her other hand. The evidence doesn't lie, though. She's not okay. She's a mess.

"Mum, what's going on? Why are you crying?" I'm the one who should be crying, emotional from too many hormones and knowing the man I love is out there putting himself in the line of fire to save my family. I should be hysterical, but I'm strangely calm.

She sighs, pressing her lips into a thin line, and I know something is wrong. She picks at the corner of a tissue as she pulls her hand out of my grasp. I feel confused and slightly nervous about what is going to come out of her mouth next.

"Your da..."



Sucking in a breath, I let the tension out of my shoulders and brace for her next words, but they don't come. "Mum, is Da in trouble?" All I can think about is the threat Connelly made about turning Da in. "Is he here?"

"Your father is out with Lochlan and Jasper." Mum's eyes rise to meet my gaze, and I know she knows. She acts uncertain, as if she doesn't know how to break it to me, but when I clasp her hand, her head drops.

"Mum, I know..." I mumble quietly. "Da isn't who we've thought."

Her head pops up, eyes wide in surprise. "You know what?" They narrow as her brow furrows. She grips both of my hands in hers, leaving the phone lying to the side.

"I saw the bank records and I know. Mum, he's laundering money for the O'Rourkes, paying off authorities. I don't know what else, and I'm not sure I want to know, but they've been coming for him for a while. Lochlan was just here... He's..." My lip quivers as I try to find the words.

"They're going to be fine," she says stiffly, a fake happiness to her tone, like she's trying to convince herself it's the truth.

"They're going to kill him," I whisper, shaking my head. Connelly just got the beating of his life. I don't know how he walked away, but he did, and now Lochlan and my father are hunting him down, probably his boss too.

Mum nods and tears well up in her eyes. "I get so scared when he does this."

"So you knew?" It surprises me that she knew about my father's dark side and stayed, or maybe he's always been this way. Maybe she, like me, loves the man and hates his sin.

"Oh, Evelyn," she sighs, leaning back in her seat. She uses a tissue to dab her eyes, and I relax a little as she continues. "I've always known. We tried to keep it from you kids for so long. Jasper stumbled upon it years ago. I wanted so desperately for your father's life to stay a secret, but there was never a chance we'd keep it from you forever.

"It's why he wanted you to marry Elvin. The Murphys are a good family, not at all a part of this life. And Howard and Melanie are such dear friends. They know the debts your father had, the way he got sucked into this situation. They, like us, wanted a better life for both you and Jasper—offered to adopt you. But I wouldn't have it."

"So you arranged for me to marry Elvin?" It all makes sense now and I understand what's been going on. They thought they could keep this from me forever, and they were so close to doing it. If not for Darren Connelly—if not for Lochlan. "Mum, I have to tell you something."

She looks up at me with such sorrow in her eyes, and I rub my face to sober myself. "What is it?"

"Mum, Lochlan and I... We've been seeing each other. We, uh... we had sex, and..." My chest is so tight, I think it might snap in two. "I'm pregnant."

Her eyes don't blink. nothing about her changes or shifts even slightly. She absorbs the news without any reaction. I think I'm going to vomit on her.

"Say something." The idea that they've spent my whole life trying to keep me away from Da's world of darkness and crime isn't surprising. The irony of how I walked into it on my own is.

"Do you love him?" Her voice is hollow, but I can hear the disappointment, not in my choices or the fact that she'll be a grandmother soon, but the fact that I am closer to

the danger than I've ever been and I chose it for myself.

"I do, more than anything." Pressing a hand to my belly, I tell her bravely, "I'm not marrying Elvin, Mum. Lochlan and I are going to raise this baby together. I want to be with him." Tears form in my eyes as I stand my ground, watching her sit forward. She reaches for my hand and squeezes it.

"Well, the men we love are out there defending our family, Evelyn. I can't speak for your father or give his blessing, but I can tell you that you don't get to choose who your heart loves. Let's just pray those men we love come home to us, and when they do, we'll talk about it." The worry creeps back in around her eyes, pinching them, forming wrinkles, and I weave my fingers between hers and blink a few tears out.

She's right about one thing. We need to pray.

If the storm they're walking into drops tornados, we could both be sleeping alone tonight. And I'm scared that might actually happen now.

30

LOCHLAN

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

We park four blocks out, well clear of the security lights. The dockyard is busy tonight, freight trucks idling, forklifts rattling across slick concrete. Men shout orders into the wind, their voices tangled in the steady drone of machinery. Jasper steps out first, lighting a cigarette as he leans against the car door. Draco joins him quietly, eyes scanning ahead. Neither speaks at first, both of them taking their measure of the scene.

I come around the car and watch with them. Across the yard, Doyle's men cluster near a container that hasn't been offloaded yet, their laughter audible even from here. Jasper tips his head toward them.

"Connelly's right there. Blue jacket, talking to the fat fucker by the forklift."

Draco nods slowly, checking his weapon one last time. "Cormac?"

"Inside the main office, probably. He doesn't like getting his shoes dirty," Jasper says dryly.

Draco's eyes slide toward me. "You ready?"

I flex my knuckles, feeling dried blood crack across the joints. "More than ready."

We spread out quietly, Jasper peeling away to the left, Draco and I approaching head-on. The sounds of our steps get lost in the chaos, swallowed by the groaning of engines and clanging metal. One of Doyle's guys spots us late, beer bottle halfway to his mouth. He freezes, then drops the bottle, scrambling for a gun tucked clumsily in his waistband.

Draco doesn't wait for him to draw it. His shot cracks sharply through the yard, precise, controlled. The man falls backward, blood misting the air behind him. Panic breaks out instantly—men shouting, grabbing for weapons, ducking behind crates. Jasper opens fire from the side, calmly picking off those slowest to cover.

I move through the gunfire, eyes locked onto Connelly. He sees me coming, fear pulling his face tight. His pistol lifts, and he fires three shots wild, nowhere near hitting me. I don't flinch or slow, closing the gap between us quickly. When I reach him, I slam my fist into his jaw with enough force to spin him sideways. He staggers, dropping his gun, catching himself awkwardly against the container wall.

“You really thought you'd get away with touching her?” My voice is rough, my breathing controlled. The rage is cold and clear now, filling every vein, driving out everything else.

He pushes himself up from the container, blood already streaming down his chin. “Fuck off?—”

I hit him again, this time lower, my knuckles digging into his gut until he doubles over, coughing. I grab him by the hair and pull his head up so he can look into my eyes.

“Beg her forgiveness,” I snarl. “Right here, right now.”

He spits blood at my feet. “Go to hell.”

My next blow breaks something in his face, bone shifting visibly beneath skin. Connelly screams, a high, desperate sound. I drag him to the ground, pinning him with a knee to his chest. He flails weakly, grabbing at my wrists, nails scratching uselessly across my skin. I hit him again, again, each strike landing heavier, my fists slick with his blood, his pleas choking to silence beneath the violence.

Gunfire cracks sharply to my left, snapping me out of the tunnel vision long enough to look up. Jasper shouts a warning, and I turn just in time to see Cormac Doyle charging out from the office building, gun drawn, firing recklessly in Draco's direction. Draco ducks smoothly, rounds snapping the metal siding behind him. Jasper fires twice, hitting nothing but the containers Doyle ducks behind. Doyle curses, firing a final shot before disappearing through the maze of crates and equipment.

I glance down at Connelly, bloodied beneath me, still breathing weakly. My chest tightens with something cold and sharp. "You touched my woman," I say quietly, wrapping my hands around his throat. "And now you fucking die for it."

His eyes bulge, bloodshot and desperate, his fingers scrabbling at my hands. I tighten my grip, feeling muscle and bone give beneath the pressure, the pulse beneath my palms fading slowly to nothing. Only when his hands finally fall limp do I let go, straightening slowly.

The yard goes quiet around us. Draco steps over, glancing down briefly at Connelly's body. "Doyle got away," he says, frustration edging his voice.

"Doesn't matter," Jasper says, moving to join us. "They'll get the message loud and clear."

Draco gives a short nod, eyes narrowing as he surveys the wreckage left behind. "Leave everything as it is. Let Cormac see exactly what we did here tonight."

He gestures toward the bodies scattered across the wet concrete. Blood trails shimmer beneath the dock lights, reflecting off puddles already tinged red. Workers have scattered, leaving forklifts still running, abandoned mid-shift. It's a mess, deliberately so.

“Police response time will be quick,” Jasper says quietly, checking his watch. “We’ve got maybe ten minutes.”

Draco holsters his weapon, glancing briefly toward me. “Get the cars ready. We’re done here.”

As Jasper moves away, I catch Draco’s arm and pull him aside, out of earshot. His eyes cut sharply to mine, brows raised in silent question.

Draco waits, motionless, his eyes searching mine like he’s bracing for a blow. I straighten my shoulders and meet his gaze directly.

“Evie wasn’t dating Connelly,” I say quietly. “She never wanted him. He had her trapped, Draco—blackmail. He threatened to expose your deals, the union money, all the back-channel shit. He knew exactly what would tear your family down, and he forced her hand.”

His expression hardens instantly. “She was the mole? My own fucking daughter?”

I shake my head sharply. “She didn’t want it. She did it because she was scared. Scared for you, scared of losing everything you built. Connelly put her in a corner, and Evie tried to handle it herself, tried to buy you time.”

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Draco's gaze turns icy, rage flickering in the depths of his eyes, quiet but lethal. "And how do you know all this, Lochlan? How come she's talking to you and not me?"

I don't flinch. "Because we've been seeing each other."

His eyes snap wide, anger flaring openly now. He takes a half-step toward me, fists clenched. "You've been—what?"

"I'm not proud of lying to you," I say steadily, refusing to break eye contact, "but I'm not apologizing, either. Evie means everything to me. If what she says is true—and I believe her—then she's pregnant, Draco. And that child is mine."

Draco looks like he might hit me, muscles taut beneath his jacket, jaw grinding as he holds himself in check. I stand my ground, ready to take the hit if it comes, willing to pay whatever price I owe for loving Evie. The noise of sirens grows louder, closer, lights cutting jagged lines across the shipping yard. Draco finally lets out a slow breath, one heavy with resignation and anger.

"She was supposed to marry Murphy," he says, voice low, bitter. "He could've kept her out of this shit, Lochlan. Given her a life outside of everything I've done."

"You think Murphy could protect her from men like Connelly?" I ask, voice raw. "From Doyle or any of the bastards who'd hurt her to hurt you? Murphy's soft. He doesn't have what it takes. You know it. She needs someone who understands this life, who'll keep her safe, no matter what it takes. I'd die for her, Draco. I'd kill every last man in this city for her."



Draco is quiet, his jaw tight, eyes storming as he weighs everything. The sirens are nearly on top of us, flashing lights bathing the dockyard in red and blue. He finally nods, reluctantly, the motion short and sharp.

“If it were anyone else, Lochlan—” He cuts himself off, eyes darkening. “If it had to be someone from our life, I’d want it to be you. But understand this. She’s all I’ve got left that’s untouched by this poison. You swear to me, right here, right now, that you’ll never let harm come to her. Not from the Doyles, not from the fucking cops, not even from yourself.”

“I swear it,” I say without hesitation. “On my life.”

“Then you have my blessing.” He turns sharply toward the approaching lights. “Now get the fuck out of here and go to her. I’ll handle the cleanup.”

I turn toward the car, blood cooling on my knuckles, heart steadying as I picture Evie waiting at home—alive, safe. After losing Maelyn, I never believed I’d deserve peace again, but Evie’s changed everything. She is my salvation, the only thing saving me from the guilt that nearly swallowed me whole.

31

EVIE

Mum and I wait for hours. I’ve never seen her this worried, though from what I can tell, they’ve done a really great job of hiding Da’s entire world from me my entire life. I coax her into the house, make a kettle of hot water for tea. She tells me of other times like this, before Lochlan’s brother took over as the head of their organization, when Da was much lower level, when he had more risk.

I sit on the edge of my seat watching her sip tea and nurse shaking hands. My

stomach is churning the whole time. Twice, I slip away to throw up—morning sickness combined with anxiety. When it grows dark, my fear escalates.

I want to go back to the days of naivety and innocence. My zeal to uncover the truth thrust me into a life I'm not sure I feel safe living. Knowing my father and the man I love are out hunting down their enemies with the intent to physically harm or kill anyone who gets in their way terrifies me. Something could go wrong. Someone's blood will be shed, and I'm so scared it will be one of them.

Hovering over the toilet for the third time tonight, I hear voices, men's voices. Mum's wails of relief meet my ears slightly after, and I take a moment to slurp down some water, then wipe my face clean before rushing into the living room to find Da, Jasper, and a tired-looking Lochlan. He stands to the side with his head down as Mum squeezes Jasper in one arm and Da in the other.

I walk in, feeling tears welling up. There's blood on Da's shoes, a splotch on Jasper's shirt, but I can tell it didn't come from them. Lochlan's fists are bloodied again, and there are significant bruises on his cheeks from the fight he had earlier in my apartment with Darren Connelly. He still carries a weight on his shoulders, but it appears more from fatigue than worry, like his stress is lighter.

When his eyes rise to meet mine, I see it there too. Everything has shifted in his expression and body language. When he left, he was on a mission, and I can see just from his slouched posture that his mission is over. Connelly must be dead, or at least the threat neutralized. I want to run to him, wrap my arms around him, and sob into his chest because he's safe and my fears have all been eradicated.

Instead, I tiptoe to my father, wait for him to let go of Mum's shoulders, and lean into him when he turns to me. He stinks of cigarette smoke and whiskey, a hint of sweat and other musky smells. I've smelled it before, but not since I was a child. I've come to know it was what Da smelled like on a bad day—on days when he would pull me

onto his lap and read me a story, or later when I got older, when he would sit across the table from me and seem overly eager to hear about my day.

"Da," I whisper as the threads knit together in my mind. The scent I'm smelling is gunpowder, and I've only just realized it. All three of them were together hunting Connelly and the men who put him up to blackmailing, perhaps even more things I'm too scared to ask about.

"Evie girl," he purrs, cupping both cheeks hard. He presses his lips to my forehead, squeezing my head so hard it hurts. But I don't pull away. Tears steal down my cheeks. I grab the lapels of his jacket and sob. I thought someone was going to die, and most likely, someone did—just not them.

For that I whisper a thanks to the universe for watching over them. It doesn't make the tension release my aching muscles, but it means I'll at least be able to sleep tonight.

"I'm so glad you're safe, Da." Pushing against his chest, I pull away and look up into his eyes. There is concern there, perhaps fear too, but not anger. Not what I expected to see.

"You should be saying that to him now," he says, nudging his chin upward at Lochlan. He doesn't let go of me, though, and I smile through the tears. "We'll have to let Murphy down easy, Evie girl. He's not gonna like it, but you belong to Lochlan."

When his hands let go of me, I almost want them to stay there, to hold me captive in the moment where I'm his little girl and he's my da and nothing in the world will ever separate us or tarnish the connection we have. But when I turn my head and see Lochlan, now with shoulders squared and hands clasped together in front of his belt buckle, I know Da is right. I am no longer Draco O'Leary's daughter. I am Lochlan O'Rourke's woman. My heart and soul and body belong only to him, and forever, that

will be how it is.

He stands stoically as I walk toward him, but the tears only increase as the same feeling of relief washes over me about him. He could've died tonight, and what would I have done then? How would my heart have continued beating?

"It's done?" I whisper before I even reach him, and he nods once, opening his arms to me. It's such a powerful feeling when they close around my shoulders, even more so when he tips my chin up and kisses me hard. My parents are here watching, Jasper too, and there is no shame in this moment at all.

"It's done, baby, and he'll never hurt you again." Lochlan says the words so tenderly, like applying salve on my wounded heart.

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I haven't even stopped to think what that monster would've done to me in my apartment if Lochlan hadn't broken the door open and chased him out, and I don't want to. I don't want to allow that moment to define this one, where Da finally gives his blessing over our love and the pressure of being pushed into marrying Elvin Murphy is lifted. It's too sweet to tarnish.

Clinging to him so tightly I can feel his heart pounding against my cheek, I ask, "Is he dead?" I'm afraid to know what he may say, afraid of what that means about him even though he already told me he's a killer.

When he pinches my jaw and turns my face up to meet his gaze, his eyes are firm. "Never ask me what happens out there." His tone is so severe, not angry or hostile, but stern. "And I promise that you never have to worry about whether your heart is safe or if I'm protecting you." I nod without thinking. I wonder if this is how Mum does it, if she and Da have an arrangement like this too.

"Yes," I whisper, but I know the answer. I see it in his eyes. Darren Connelly is dead at his hands, and my heart can rest at ease that Lochlan will be my protector and shield as long as we are together.

"I think we have an audience," he says softly, brushing his lips over mine again, and I smile. His thumb wipes away a few tears, and I turn, not letting go of his hand, and tuck into his side to face my parents.

Da is still tense, scowling as he walks over to his recliner and sits down. Jasper plops onto one end of the sofa as he puts a single boot on the corner of the coffee table. Dutiful as always, Mum rushes off calling, "Tea soon!" and disappears into the

kitchen, and Lochlan guides me to sit at the other end of the sofa, next to him so our bodies are still pressed together.

"Evelyn, we have a wedding to plan." Da's eyes meet mine only briefly, and he looks away as he tugs his tie off, sheds his jacket. "I assume you'll be moving out now... won't need a job anymore."

"What?" I turn to look Lochlan in the eyes, frowning, then face Da again. "What do you mean, I won't need a job? I'm getting a degree in business, just a few classes left. I'm not going to sit around someone's house baking and knitting. I want to have a career and?—"

Lochlan grips my knee hard and sighs. "It's alright, Evie."

My heart is thudding quietly as Jasper's eyes rise to look at me. He shrugs a shoulder and turns to Da. "You have to admit she was the best one we've ever had in that position, Da."

Da rubs his face with both hands, which I now see also have blood on them. He doesn't look happy about the situation, but I know he'll adjust eventually.

"It's just not safe." His unhappy protest only makes Lochlan tighten his arm around my shoulders.

"Evelyn isn't a child, Draco..." The way he defends me warms my soul. I relax into him and rest my head on his shoulder. "We'll hire security. The office needs it anyway." He's not giving Da an option, and that tells me a lot about who plays a bigger role in this game they're engaged in.

Da doesn't seem to like that much, but he grunts out his acknowledgement. Then he stands, slapping the fronts of his knees. "I'm going to wash up before tea." I watch

him turn his hands over and look at his bloodied knuckles. Then he walks off, and Jasper stands too.

"I'm exhausted. I'm gonna crash." Jasper doesn't even say goodnight or wave goodbye. The evening hunches his frame over as he heads out of the room, and I'm alone with Lochlan for the first time since earlier this afternoon.

Turning to see him better, I splay my hand on his chest thoughtfully. There are so many questions I want to ask him about what happened, where they were, how it went down, but I can't. He asked me not to say a word about it, so I have to respect that. Instead I ask, "What did Da mean by 'we have a wedding to plan'?" I ask him cautiously. He preceded it with a comment about letting Elvin down easily, so I know he's not referring to the arrangement.

"I'm going to marry you, and I told him as much." His arm pulls me closer. I'm not even a little put off by the blood on his hands. I trace the dark purple bruise on his cheekbone and frown.

"You're just announcing that?" My words hang between us in a quiet challenge of his authority, and he scoffs at first, then chuckles. Then his chuckle turns into a laugh that shakes his body.

"Of all the things to fight me over, this is the one you're choosing? The hill you'll die on?" Lochlan's lips still curl into a half smirk as he pulls me tighter against himself, hand cupping my ass.

"You told me to bring my A-game, and why would I let you conquer me that easily?" I can't help but smile at him as his hand slides up my back to my head. He pulls me down until my forehead rests against his, then shuts his eyes.

"I'm a very fucked up man, Evelyn." His voice is quiet now. "Things beyond my

control affected me and changed me in ways I don't know how to handle. Be patient with me, and I'll figure it out." His eyes open again and stare into mine. "But I give you my word that I will love you until the day I die, and you will never be safer anywhere else than in my arms."

Our lips touch softly, then eagerly, and I let myself fall off into the moment. He went from being my crush to someone I was scared of, to the driving force of my life. And soon, he will become my husband. I never thought it would go this way, but if I had to go back and do it over, I wouldn't change a thing.

32

## EPILOGUE: LOCHLAN

Evie's lips are warm. That's the only thing I register for a second. Not the people watching, not the priest behind us, not the weight of a thousand eyes waiting to clap or cry or nod with approval. Just her—kissing me like she means it, like she already knows I'll never walk away from this.

When she pulls back, her eyes are locked on mine. No hesitation. No nerves. Her hand is still in mine, her fingers firm, sure, like she's anchoring me there. I don't need anchoring—but it still helps.

The priest says something final in Irish. I hear my name. Hers. Then it's done.

We turn. The pews are packed—family, soldiers, killers in suits, and a few men who don't fit into either category but know their way around a rifle. I spot Ronan near the front, jaw tight, hands behind his back like he's on watch. He meets my eyes for a second, gives the faintest nod. Nothing soft. Just a silent agreement.

Outside, the wind bites. Early spring, damp and sharp. The sky's all gray and low



clouds, but no rain—at least not yet. The chapel sits high on the hill, stone walls covered in ivy and moss like it's been waiting for this day longer than we've been alive. The bells above us let out one more slow ring as we walk into the open air.

The courtyard is set up for the reception, tables under a canvas tent, strung with lights that'll matter more once the sun drops. Old wooden chairs. White linen that already has a table service on it. Flowers everywhere—wild ones mostly, with roses tucked in here and there. Evie's touch, no doubt. It smells like rain's coming and someone lit a peat fire nearby.

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I feel them before I see them—my brothers from the field. Men I haven't heard from in months, some years. They don't come in loudly, but they're unmistakable. The way they move. The way they look at a crowd, never relaxed, even at a wedding. Always scanning, always reading exits.

Dean's first. Hair a little longer, same scar under his eye. We clasp forearms instead of hugging. That's what we do. Mason follows, then Elias. A few others I haven't seen since the last convoy rolled out under gunfire.

"Well, I'll be damned," Dean says, smirking. "Didn't think you had it in you."

"Neither did I," I admit. "But she said yes, and here we are."

He glances over at Evie, who's laughing at something Jasper just said. The wind catches her veil and she brushes it back with one hand. She's glowing, people would say. But it's not some romantic thing. It's power. She knows who she is now.

"She's your shot at making it right," Mason says quietly. He's not the type to say much, but when he does, it lands.

"I know."

Dean lowers his voice. "You ever think about Maelyn?"

"Every day."

"She'd tell you not to screw this up."

“I won’t.”

We stand there for a beat, not saying more. There’s nothing else to say. These men saw me at my worst. Burying friends. Dragging bodies. Getting high just to sleep. They know what it took to get here, and they respect it in the way only guys like us can. Not with words. Just with presence.

“You look good,” Elias says. “You look like someone who’s not trying to die anymore.”

I look out at Evie again. She’s got one hand on her belly now, almost seven months along, still dancing in those heels like the world owes her joy. And maybe it does.

“Yeah,” I say. “Because I’m not.”

Dean studies me for a second, then nods once. No more than that. Mason finishes what’s left in his glass and sets it down on the edge of a planter like it doesn’t belong to anyone. Elias adjusts his jacket and doesn’t say a thing. They don’t offer congratulations. They’re here to see with their own eyes that I made it out the other side.

“Tell her thanks,” Dean says. “For dragging your sorry ass back.”

“She already knows.” I chuckle.

“Still. You got lucky.” Dean’s shoulders relax as he slides his hands into his slacks pockets.

“Yeah. I did.” A moment passes in silence again. Moments like this are typical with these men. No need to fill the air with chatter when you’ve survived a warzone together and lived to tell about it. Then the tone shifts and I know they’ve gotten the

peace they came to obtain. A collective sigh is released, and my shoulders relax.

Mason jerks his chin toward the tables. “Go dance with your wife, man.”

He says it like an order—a final nudge. They’re done here. They got what they came for.

I nod once, and they scatter, heading back to their wives and families. My eyes scan the room to find what I’m looking for and they land on the most beautiful sight in the world.

Evie’s talking to Jasper near the edge of the tent. He’s got a pint in one hand and his other hooked lazily around the back of her chair like he’s in the middle of telling some story he’s halfway making up. She’s laughing at him in a way that makes her natural beauty stand out, hand still resting on her swollen belly—our son. Her face is alight with emotion I want to always see expressed there. She’s gorgeous.

She spots me coming and stands expectantly, and I wiggle my fingers at her, beckoning her to the dance floor. She untangles her dress and meets me halfway, and I escort her the rest of the way there.

“Your old friends look like they’re half a second from organizing a raid,” she says.

“They probably are.” My stiff smile as I nod at one of our guests in passing feels genuine. I’m coming out of the haze of angry shock from post-war hangover. Evie’s doing this for me. She’s healing me somehow. Loving her is exactly what I needed to do to survive this.

“You okay?” she asks softly. I hear the concern in her tone.

I take her hand. “Better.” And it’s true. Being with her, being near her makes me

better. I am a better person, a better man when I'm around her, and marrying her was the smartest decision I've ever made.

The music changes to something older. A little scratch in the recording, like it's being played off a record somebody found in their uncle's attic. The kind of song that doesn't need lyrics to say what it means.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 9:02 am*

I lead her out, slow steps over uneven stone. Her hand finds my shoulder like it's done it a hundred times as she spins into my embrace. My arm circles her waist. She exhales once softly.

"You're nervous?" she asks, her eyes searching my expression with intent to understand me.

"No. I just don't want to mess this up." That fear still lingers, that I may do something to risk her life or lose her. I'm not sure it will ever go. I'm not sure I want it to. It keeps me on my toes.

She rests her head against me. "Then don't." I can almost see her soft smile, and I chuckle again. I love that her attitude is always no-nonsense. She finished her degree and went back to work like nothing even happened, and even now in her final trimester, she's pushing forward, no hesitation.

We sway back and forth, just the rhythm between us. The space closes until there isn't any.

People watch, but they're not in the way. It's like everything fades out—chairs, tables, noise, even the soft flicker of candlelight against the white tent walls.

When I took that job for Draco under my brother's orders, I worried that it was the end of me as a man. It was a punishment to endure for losing my place in this world and in my mind, it became a black mark on my reputation.

But now I see it as the best thing that ever happened to me. Evelyn is the magic I

needed to find myself again among the chaos and noise that plagued and tormented my mind. Without her, I'd be lost in a sea of guilt and regret that would eat me alive. With her, I am human again. She saved me, and I saved her. But we'll never be even.

I'll spend the rest of my life doing everything in my power to ensure she has everything she ever dreamed of and making sure her heart is full and her mind is at peace.