



A Trap So Flawless (Titans and Tyrants #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: Old wounds have been opened. Sins and secrets revealed. While Darragh is in Dublin, Im punished for past lies and forced into a secret marriage with another man in Montreal. But when bullets fall like rain and turn my bloody world upside-down, I seize my chance to run. From my new husband. From my father. From Darragh Gowan most of all.

But even from across an ocean, Darragh is still capable of controlling me. And Im about to find out there there is no escape from him. I have nowhere left to run

Unless its straight into his trap.

A Trap So Flawless is a dark age gap mafia romance and it is part two of Darragh and Valentinas duet. Part one, A Game So Reckless, must be read first.

Total Pages (Source): 30

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:20 am

Darragh

It's raining in Dublin.

Fat drops pelt my suit jacket on the tarmac of the private airstrip. It's the same suit I was wearing last night in Toronto. The same one I was wearing when I was with her.

When I danced with her. When I fucked her.

When I shoved my ring into her hands and told her I'd be back for her.

I haven't showered. Haven't slept. Haven't done shit but get on a private plane and fling myself across an ocean since then.

I hated every minute of that goddamn flight.

If I could kill a kilometre, I would.

I'd strangle every single one that's opened up between us. All five thousand two hundred fifty of them.

Even though I'm the one who put them there.

But I had to come here. Back to Dublin. My grandda is dead and someone has to clean up the mess.

And then?

Someone has to pay.

I tilt my head back, letting water spill across my burning eyes.

“Boss?” Rowan calls to me. “Car’s ready.”

I pull my head back down to squint at him through the rain.

Rowan is dressed much less formally than I am.

Of course, he didn’t come straight from a fancy-ass masquerade ball where he unceremoniously presented an engagement ring to his beautiful, horrified fiancée.

He’s got on a pair of old, worn blue jeans and a white T-shirt that’s already soaked-through from the rain.

The water has turned his red ponytail to a darker colour much closer to mine.

He carries two bags – one for each of us. He packed them both.

“Let’s go,” I say, already striding towards the waiting black vehicle.

The sooner I deal with all this shit...

The sooner I’ll get back to her.

And make her mine for good.

“Go over it all. Again,” I command Rowan once we’re in the car. He slips easily into left-lane driving. The windshield wipers slam back and forth, smearing the glass.

“Callum’s body was found in the River Liffey,” he says. “Gardaí are saying the cause of death is drowning, compounded by blunt force trauma to the head. They think he fell and hit his head on the way down.”

Rowan’s already told me all of this. But I need to hear it again.

And again. I need to make it real. Because the realest thing clinging to me right now is the feeling of Valentina’s bleeding cunt clamping down on my cock while she came.

The sound of her moans. The hate and the horror and the desire in her heart-shaped face.

She’s all I can fucking think about.

This is exactly the problem. This is what he warned you about.

The very man who warned me about this sort of obsession was the one whose body got pulled from The Liffey yesterday. Feels like a fucking omen.

Feels like fucking pain. Or it would, if a blanketing fog of sleep-deprivation and curdling lust for the woman I just left behind weren’t dulling every other sensation.

So wrapped up in her I can’t even fucking grieve him yet.

“Preliminary reports say there was a lot of alcohol in his system.”

“Bullshit,” I shoot back. Not bullshit that my grandda was drinking, but bullshit that it would have contributed to his drowning.

He could hold his liquor better than anyone.

The man could have walked a tightrope over that goddamn river after drinking all night.

There isn't enough alcohol in all of Dublin that would have caused Callum Gowan to...

what? Just fall over a guardrail, hit his head, and sink into the water?

It reeks. And it reminds me of the drowning on Georgian Bay. Connor McNair, wannabe rapist. He was drunk, too. He had blunt force trauma, too. He drowned, too.

And none of that shit was by mistake.

It was fucking by design.

Now I just need to know who had similar designs on Callum Gowan. Not an easy task to narrow it down. A man like him probably has dozens of names on that list.

Had. Had dozens of names.

Shit.

“Gardaí will be no fucking help,” I mutter. “Either some dirty son of a bitch working for one of grandda’s enemies is helping cover something up, or they’re so eager to celebrate the death of a crime lord that they don’t give two flying fucks who did it.”

Rowan gives a grunt of agreement. He knows what I know. Callum Gowan didn’t fucking drown. Or if he did, it’s because somebody smashed his bloody brains in first.

Outside, grey clamps down on green. Clouds as thick as wool press downwards from

above and buildings punch up to meet them as we leave behind the rolling rural grass for Dublin streets.

Before I know it, we're in Ballymun in North Dublin.

Blocks of flats just like the one I lived in – and my parents died in – line the streets like gravestones.

There's a paralyzing sort of nostalgia, being back here. Ireland is in me so deep I couldn't cut it out even if I tried. Those years, those fights, the blood. The streets that made me.

It's all here.

Except for Callum Gowan.

It's fucking jarring, the way the buildings still stand, the cars still drive, and the rain still pisses down without him. Feels like all of Dublin should have ground to a halt in the vacuum of his absence. Everything collapsing in on itself.

But the city survived. And so did I.

I yank out my phone and stab my finger at the screen, navigating to my contacts and scrolling down to the single word the makes me feel like my blood is acid inside my own veins. Pet.

I've had Valentina's number for quite a while now.

Never used it.

Fucking hell. I want to. Want to hear the perfect poison of her voice.

She'd probably hang up the moment she knew it was me. Or maybe take just long enough on the line to repeat the words she said to me last night.

I hate you.

My lips curl at the memory. I'll take her hate. Drink it down like the finest whiskey.

She's mine whether she likes it – likes me – or not.

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Valentina

Papà hasn't spoken to me in three days. Not since the night of the masquerade ball. Not that I don't see him – I do. He's come with Mamma, Curse, and me to Montréal. But he doesn't look at me whenever we're in the same room.

Not that I'm too keen on speaking to him, either. I doubt I'm even capable of it. It would probably devolve into a shouting match.

He bound me to Darragh Gowan without ever even letting me know.

And now, he's severed that bond before it even formed, arranging my engagement to another man entirely. A man I've never even met. A man more than twenty years my senior. Salvatore Di Mauro.

Do I have two fiancés now? Is that even a thing?

Papà hasn't said a word about how he's going to deal with Darragh.

I don't even think he can be dealt with.

I shiver despite the warm September sunshine spilling down on rue Saint-Hubert.

Mamma clucks at me from a few steps ahead. She turns her head back towards me. The sun catches on the diamond-accented frames of her dark sunglasses and gleams on her dark burgundy-brown hair.

“Hurry up, amore ,” she huffs. “We don’t have much time left to arrange your gown. We’re already going to have to buy something off the rack.”

She practically wails it, like the mere thought wounds her at her very core. Never mind the fact that she’s marrying her only daughter off to a forty-one-year-old mobster from another city. Never mind the fact that this wedding could implode our entire world when Darragh catches wind of it.

No. It’s the off-the-rack dress that’s the problem.

“We should have gone to Donata’s,” I remind her, my tone barbed. Donata makes all our dresses in Toronto. She designed Deirdre’s wedding gown. I always imagined that’s where I’d end up when the time came.

I might not get to choose my groom, but I always assumed I’d at least get to choose the fucking dress.

“Don’t remind me. I feel like we’re cheating on her,” Mamma groans. She pauses on the pavement, rubbing at her temples, then pushing her sunglasses further up her nose. I think she’s probably hungover. We’re up bright and early for our nine o’clock appointment at the dress shop.

It perks me up, just a little bit, to know that Mamma doesn’t love the way this is unfolding, either. Gives me the smallest semblance of hope.

“Why don’t you talk to him and-”

“Don’t start.” She pins me with a hard stare.

I can see the sweep of her false lashes behind the dark lenses.

“Your papà has told me all about what you’ve been up to.

You’ve made mistakes, ragazza. Huge ones.

Your papà is merely trying to clean up your mess.

If he feels this is the best way to do it, so be it. ”

“My mess?” I scoff. Bitterness climbs up my throat as she turns and begins walking once more.

I hurry to catch up, striding so angrily beside her that I actually think I might break one of my heels on the pavement.

“ My mess?” I repeat, louder this time. “How is it my fault that I’ve been meeting with my own fucking fiancé!

I was engaged to him, Mamma! I might still be!

And it wasn’t my fault he threw Dario off that roof!

Dario was fucking everybody up the ass and-”

“Quiet your voice!” she hisses, glancing around at the milling, shopping crowds surrounding us.

Despite the fact that we are among the other people on the street, I feel like we’re separated from them by some invisible, impenetrable barrier.

We all stand in the same place, in the same time, but not on the same plane of existence.

The smiling couples and families enjoying a stroll on a sunny September day could never fathom a conversation that included casual mention of someone being thrown to their death from a rooftop.

“The shop is just up ahead.”

“Jesus, Curse!” I snap, whirling to face him. My cousin stands behind me in all black, totally still. He’s so fucking silent when he wants to be. I nearly forgot he was chaperoning us.

“Meno male ,” Mamma breathes. “Thank God.” She waves her hand between us, like she’s dispelling cobwebs. Or curses. “No more talk of this. We are going to have a nice morning at the dress shop, Valentina. This is what your papà has decided, and we are going to do it with smiles on our faces.”

“I’m not crazy, right?” I ask as Mamma stomps off towards the dress shop we’ve been aiming for.

Curse doesn’t answer. Which is pretty fucking rude, considering the question I just asked.

“Curse! I’m serious.” I stop walking. He stops, too, staring down at me with those empty assassin eyes. “This is a terrible idea, isn’t it? Darragh’s going to lose his fucking shit when he comes back here and finds me married. He gave me a fucking ring!”

I’m so angry I feel like I’m on the verge of becoming hysterical. It’s like I’m screaming in a dream. No sound is coming out. Nobody can hear me.

Or nobody wants to.

“We’ve avoided a war with Darragh before,” Curse says at length. “We can do it again.”

“Oh, hell no. We aren’t getting out of this with some underground boxing match. This isn’t Darragh coming after us for a debt like he was with Deirdre. This is personal.”

I can see in the resigned set of his jaw that Curse already knows this.

“Darragh’s already killed for me,” I add bluntly.

My cousin rarely shows emotion. But there’s no mistaking the twitch of his eyebrows upwards.

“Who?”

“There was a man,” I tell him, casting my mind back to that night. “At the cottage. All he did was grab my wrist and yap at me. And Darragh drowned him in the fucking lake. What do you think he’s going to do if somebody else actually marries me?”

Curse takes in a slow breath. His eyes go somewhere behind me, dark and distant.

“I’ll stay in Montréal,” Curse says, his gaze snapping abruptly back to my face. “After the wedding. I’ll stay with you and Sal.”

“What?” I snort. “You’re gonna hang around and be my chaperone after I’m already married?”

“I’ll take care of Darragh if it comes down to it,” he says. His tone is very neutral. Flat, even. Like he’s talking about the most mundane thing in the world.

My breath catches in my throat, a trapped gasp. A painful pressure. The image of it is stark in my mind. Darragh, down. Darragh, bleeding.

Even in my imagination, even after everything, I want to go to him.

I want to touch him.

“Yeah, well, if it comes down to it ,” I repeat harshly, spitting my cousin’s own words back at him, “I’m not the one who’s going to be in danger.”

At least, I won’t be first on Darragh’s list. As much as Darragh will hate me for marrying someone else in his absence, he’ll hate Papà even more. I don’t think he ever really stopped hating Papà, to be honest.

Maybe he never stopped hating me, either.

But...

There was a moment... After we had sex...

When I was hitting him and scratching him and screaming at him.

When he caught my wrists in his tattooed hands and said my name. So, so softly...

He won’t have any soft words for me by the time all this is said and done.

And he won’t have any mercy, either.

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Darragh

I n the snatches of space between waking and sleep, I'm fooled into thinking that she's with me.

I feel the thick silk of her hair dragging itself across my chest, feel her nails skim over me and then dig in deep.

I hear her anger. Her moans. I fucking smell her.

There's gold glinting, just at the edges of everything, and I know with something close to desperation that it's her eyes.

But no matter how fast I turn my head, I can never find her.

"It's almost time."

Rowan's words drag me from that hypnotic place of near-sleep. I blink, my eyelids scraping like they're made of sandpaper. My cock throbs in time with my heartbeat.

I shove myself out of my grandda's chair, viciously bending my neck, trying to work the kinks out.

We're in his office. It's where I spend most of my time when I'm in his home, the townhouse on St. Stephen's Green.

Every moment that I'm not out in the city, combing the streets for signs of what

happened and checking in on his many businesses – my businesses, now, since I was his sole heir – I’m here.

Scouring documents, digging through drawers, and reminding myself that I don’t fucking believe in ghosts.

If I’m haunted by anyone, it’s by Valentina. Even awake now, I can still fucking smell her on me. I’ve been here for five days and showered as many times. But it’s still there.

The aching whisper of perfume. Of pussy. Holy and harrowing.

I’m probably going fucking crazy. And I wasn’t the sanest to start with.

“I’ve had an update from Tommy,” Rowan says as I stagger over to the window and stare grimly out of it. “She’s in Montréal.”

I stiffen.

“What the fuck is she doing in Montréal?” I ask, spinning away from the drenched scenery outside to face Rowan fully. He’s already dressed for the funeral, his long red hair tied neatly back, his bulky body encased in a black suit. I’ll have to put my suit on soon, too.

I only brought the one. The one I was wearing that night.

“Not sure yet. But Tommy said she’s been spotted at a wedding dress boutique with her mammy and her cousin.”

And just like that, I feel alive for the first time in fucking days.

I picture my pretty little pet trying on white dresses for me and something savage splits me open. I don't know if it's happiness – I don't even know if I'm capable of that, especially today of all days – but it's hot and bright and it makes my fucking dick hard.

I don't have time to jerk off to thoughts of my angry fiancée wrapped in silk and white lace. Don't have time to take my cock in my hand, to dig the nails in, and pretend it's her.

Cold shower it is.

I leave Rowan in my grandda's office, heading up the narrow stairs to the bathroom on the second floor.

On my way into the bathroom, with its black and white tile and shower, I pass a familiar door.

The door to my old bedroom, where I slept from ages fifteen to eighteen.

I went in there a few days ago. It looked exactly how I fucking left it.

Same single bed, same faded blue wallpaper, same stupid framed quote that one of grandda's mistresses gave to me on my sixteenth birthday, incorrectly attributed to Oscar Wilde.

Always forgive your enemies. Nothing annoys them so much.

Clearly, that advice never quite sank in.

In the bathroom, I strip, then get into the shower. The water is so much softer here than in Toronto. Even on the coldest setting, it feels oddly like a caress.

It makes me think of Valentina. Valentina in the fountain. Valentina soaked under the sprinklers of that club. Valentina sprayed by cold Georgian Bay in that tiny white bikini with its little red ribbon.

The ribbon that I took.

The ribbon I have with me now. I've had it on me ever since I took it from her. Had it in my jacket beside the ring when I saw her last. As I blink freezing water from my eyes, I can see the red edge of it poking out of the pocket of the pants I discarded on the floor.

I wash myself with Grandda's soap. Same one he's been using as long as I ever knew him. When I step out of the shower, I smell more of him than of her. But I know the effect is only temporary. By the time I try to close my eyes tonight, it'll be Valentina overwhelming my senses once more.

I use his razor, too, shaving along my neck, cheeks, and jaw. A tiny nick bleeds scarlet ink. Scarlet like Valentina's sweet pussy streaking blood along my cock.

I never should have let her talk me into using a condom. What I wouldn't fucking give to have let her stain my skin.

But there will be plenty of time to fuck her raw. Plenty of time to get her juices all over my bare cock – or her blood, if she's on her period – when she's my wife.

I wipe the blood, smearing it more than cleaning it off. I pull the ribbon from the heap of clothing on the floor, twirl it between my fingers, and stalk naked from the bathroom. Rowan is still in the office when I get there.

“Where's my suit?”

He tips his head towards the small closet in the room. “Got it cleaned, too.”

I freeze, jaw working.

Must be the lack of sleep. Or maybe the lack of proximity to Valentina. Because suddenly, it’s taking everything I’ve got not to turn around and break Rowan’s nose.

Of course he got my suit cleaned. He’s done shit like this countless times before. I can’t go to my grandda’s funeral a rumpled fucking mess, smelling like sex and sweet Sicilian pussy. It was the correct thing to do.

And I’m fucking seething over it.

The suit looks perfect. Pristine. Like my last night with her never even happened at all.

I put it on, hating the feel of the fabric. I clutch the silken surface of the ribbon in my hand the entire time.

Instead of donning a proper tie, I slide the ribbon around my neck, below the collar of my shirt, and tie it there.

Like a weird, skinny bowtie.

Or a noose.

“I’ll go bring the car around.”

I’m not sure if I answer Rowan or not. By the time I turn around, he’s gone. I move to follow him, grabbing a bottle of whiskey from an office shelf as I go.

I don't even know why I bother. I don't drink from it as Rowan drives us to the church. I just hold it, like the weight of the glass with the liquid inside actually means something.

We're early, but there are already vehicles in the lot and little groups of people beneath umbrellas waiting to be let in for the service. I ignore them all, and not one of them attempts to speak to me as I walk by with Rowan. In fact, most of them recoil.

Despite the clean suit, I must be quite a fucking sight. Tall and tattooed. Bloodshot eyes and blood-stained throat. Carrying a bottle of booze like I'm about to club somebody with it.

If anyone gets too close to me right now, I probably will.

It's a short walk from the car to the big, wooden door of the building, but Rowan and I are soaked by the time we step inside. My hair is plastered to my skull. I scrape it back from my face with my free hand.

"Darragh?"

Ahead, a short man wearing glasses and a brown suit is standing beside a priest. I recognize him at once, even though I haven't seen him in years.

He was Grandda's lawyer, and was one of the only people in this world Grandda trusted.

He's the one who called Rowan with the news, and who put this funeral together.

"Murphy," I grunt.

James Murphy says something quiet to the priest, who nods and then departs.

“Come on, then,” Murphy says, sighing and adjusting his glasses. “He’s in the other room.”

Not sleeping has turned my brain into fucking soup, because I almost ask him, “Who is?”

But all at once, I know exactly what he means.

My grandda’s corpse is waiting for me.

Murphy eyes the bottle in my hand. He looks like he might say something about it, but holds his tongue and leads the way.

Our wet shoes pad damply over old, burgundy carpet towards a large set of closed doors.

Rowan goes ahead of both of us, yanking them open and checking to make sure nobody’s hiding behind the casket with a gun ready to blow my head off.

He turns and nods back at me, and we all head into the main area of the church.

It’s old. Musty. The pews are worn. The casket is straight ahead.

I’m not afraid. Wouldn’t last long in my line of work if I were scared shitless of a lifeless corpse. Usually, I feel some sort of satisfaction when presented with the dead. A soothing of the soul – if I’ve got one, that is.

And it’s usually because I’ve killed them.

I walk down the aisle between the pews, and in that moment I swear to myself that I’m not marrying Valentina in a fucking church. In a hotel, in a garden, standing in

my own fucking grave, I don't give a shit. But not in a place like this.

The aisle seems to stretch on forever, and yet suddenly, I'm with him. The casket is open, ready for viewing. I refused to hold a wake at his townhouse, so they've put him on display here.

I stare down at his greyish face, barely warmed with what has got to be a layer of makeup meant to imitate life.

I don't even realize I'm speaking until I hear my own rasped words in the room.

“When I'm dead, don't put me on display in a fucking box.”

I blink, and suddenly I'm the one in the casket.

I wonder what Valentina would do.

Would she cry over my corpse?

Or fucking spit on it?

I blink again, taking a moment to scrunch my eyes shut. When I re-open them, it's Callum Gowan lying there once more. Not me.

He looks older than when I last saw him. Smaller. Or maybe I'm just bigger. He's dressed in a suit not unlike my own. His hands are peacefully folded, one over the other, on top of his stocky chest. They're hands I'm much more used to seeing curved into fists.

Fists that have taken my consciousness, fists that have bruised me, made me bleed.

The fists that fucking made me.

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I bend over the casket. His face looks fine – apart from the fact that he’s a goddamn dead man. But there’s no bruising, and not really any swelling that I can make out. He must not have been in the water for long.

I slide my free hand beneath his neck and lift his head. Ah. There it is. On the back of his head, there’s a wound clearly visible through his thinning hair. An angry gash that’s been sutured.

Fucking cowards. Putrid fucking scum. They hit him from behind.

Probably because everyone in this fucking city knows that nobody could take down Callum Gowan in a fair fucking fight. They’d be swallowing their own teeth before they even had a chance to raise their fist.

Or their crowbar.

Or their gun.

I’m going to find whoever did this even if I have to burn all of Dublin down to do it.

Fire rips through my head, followed by blood that does nothing to extinguish the flames. It’s carnage inside me. And behind it all, beyond the smell of doom and smoke...

It’s her. Still there. Even now.

The quiet clearing of a throat has me lowering my grandda’s head back down onto its

silky pillow in the casket.

“I don’t want to disturb your time with him,” Murphy says.

“Then fucking don’t.”

His mouth thins. But he doesn’t back down or run away.

“We have some business to discuss. I wanted to find a quiet moment with you. The will.”

“What about the will?” I blink, and even that simple action scrapes.

I need a fucking drink. Or twenty.

“I’m his sole heir. What else is there to know?” I press, straightening up to face him fully instead of twisting to regard him from over my shoulder.

Murphy stiffens, then sighs, and I already know I’m not going to like what he’s about to say next.

“He changed his will not long before his death,” Murphy says evenly, emotionlessly, as if doing his best not to provoke a reaction. “You will only inherit his businesses, his house, and his wealth, if...”

“If?” I hiss, taking a warning stride towards him.

“If you do not marry.”

I feel Rowan tense nearby, though I don’t hear his swift intake of breath. I can only hear my own. My inhales are ragged, my heartbeat loud enough to bring the fucking

roof down on all our heads.

“When?”

“A little over a fortnight ago.”

After I left Toronto for Halifax.

After I told him about the engagement.

And now he’s too fucking dead to take it back.

Flame and blood and rage. My bones are too big for my skin. My free hand rises practically of its own accord. Seizes Murphy by the throat. I drag him to me.

“Maybe you pretend this new will never existed then, eh?” My fingers tighten involuntarily. Murphy jerks in my hold. “File this new one away somewhere nice and safe. Like the bottom of a fucking fireplace.”

I shove him hard, sending him stumbling and gasping. He almost topples over, only saving his balance at the last moment by grabbing the side of the casket. He stares down at Grandda’s face, panting.

“Those... were his wishes...” he wheezes. “I won’t change them for you.

” He turns towards me, his gaze watery but steady.

“Will you kill me, then? Kill me here in the house of the Lord? Kill the witnesses to the new will, kill my staff? I know you’re capable.

You’ve got all of Callum’s anger and power and none of his control. ”

Control. If I had me some of that, I wouldn't be engaged to the daughter of my most hated enemy. I wouldn't be marrying a fucking Sicilian, throwing away everything my grandda worked for, because I can't get a grip on my own twisted desires.

I wouldn't be breaking my own fucking rules.

I am slipping.

If I'm not careful, I will fall.

A sudden beam of sunlight illuminates a stained-glass window above us. It sends a spear of scarlet light straight down onto my grandda's corpse. Like it's trying to push him all the way down to Hell.

But Hell is here. I'm already fucking in it.

I approach the casket once more. Murphy takes a wobbly step away from me.

I lift the bottle of whiskey over Grandda's head. I consider smashing it down. Caving his dead face right in.

Instead, I pull out the cork at the top.

Tipping the bottle, I let the contents spill down over his greyish skin, soaking into his hair and the suit somebody's dressed him in.

The scent of whiskey mixes with the sour chemicals of death.

When the bottle's empty, I toss it into the casket, followed by the cork.

Then, I close up the entire thing and leave.

A few minutes after I exit the church through a side door, Rowan follows.

“Are we staying for the funeral?”

“No,” I bite out. The rain has stopped for now, everything glittering green and grey. “I need to get a copy of that new will. See who stands to benefit from me being taken out.”

It could be a hint as to who killed Callum. Who would stand to gain?

“There is no other heir,” Rowan says. “I spoke briefly with Murphy just now. If you negate your claim through marriage, everything gets put into a trust.”

“A trust that Murphy will manage?”

Maybe I should have killed the fucker. Squeezed and squeezed that skinny neck until his eyes popped like grapes.

“I think you know,” Rowan says in a low voice, “that Murphy would rather not be responsible for all of this. It wasn’t him.”

I know it wasn’t him. I wouldn’t be surprised if he advised heavily against the decision Grandda made in the end. He likely knew how messy this would be. Knew his life could be in danger as a result. Murphy was probably the most loyal son of a bitch Callum had in his circle.

Besides me.

But what of that loyalty now? Now, when my grandda’s chosen to strip everything he can from me? I oscillate between nuclear fury and a grim sort of understanding.

Because, in his own shitty way, I know he thought he was doing this for me, not to me. He saw his own son lose himself in obsession. Drugs. Drink. My mammy.

Love for my mammy killed him dead as surely as that fucking rope.

I promised my grandda that would never be me.

And here I am – here I fucking am – already grinding the gears of my brain into dust trying to figure out how I can keep my inheritance while keeping Valentina, too.

Two months ago, this wouldn't have even been a question. I would have laughed out loud at the idea that a bride would be worth forfeiting everything I'm fucking owed.

Not now. Now, I'm running through scenarios. I could keep her as my fiancée for a while until I figure out what to do. But something tells me Vinny won't tolerate a drawn-out engagement.

Something tells me Valentina won't, either.

I might call her my pet, but she'd try to gnaw her way out of any cage I could construct for her that didn't have the legal stamp of marriage on it.

She won't bow to being my mistress. And if I don't make good on my offer of marriage, Vinny will make sure some Italian fucker does.

I'll kill him. Slice his guts out if he even tries...

“Who?”

Rowan's question makes me realize I've said those last words out loud.

I shake my head and start walking. The line of people outside the front of the church is gone now. Everyone's been let inside. I wonder if somebody tried to wipe all the whiskey away. Or if they're just going to leave the casket shut.

There's only one person out here now – a man – who unfolds himself from the backseat of a black luxury sedan.

He's tall, dressed immaculately in a cream-coloured suit with a soft grey sweater beneath.

Some fancy looking fabric that moths would love.

Cashmere or some shit like that. Odd choice for a funeral.

But he isn't heading for the doors with those long-legged strides.

He's heading for us.

"Darragh Gowan." He speaks with a London accent, a posh one that makes me think of Buckingham Palace and boarding schools. Black hair is swept back from thick brows and smoke-grey eyes.

"Who's asking?"

"Oh," he gives a slight chuckle, showing large, white teeth that contrast with the olive richness of his complexion. "I wasn't asking."

I crack my knuckles, trying to release some of the tension drumming up at the backs of my eyes. I'm about to tell him to cut the shit before I cut out his tongue when he holds out a hand and says, "I'm Amos al-Khatib. I am – was, I suppose – in business with Callum Gowan."

I stare at his outstretched hand. Stare at the perfect line of his ivory sleeve. It would be so easily stained with blood. I can almost see it now. Seeping from edge to elbow.

Then, he says something that has me jerking my gaze right back up to his face. Straight to the strange smoke of those eyes.

“I know who killed him.”

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:20 am

Valentina

One week in Montréal and everything's arranged.

Tomorrow, apparently, I will be marrying Salvatore Di Mauro.

I say apparently, because I still don't really believe it's going to happen.

I don't think Darragh will let it.

Even as we gather for the rehearsal dinner and I prepare to meet Sal for the first time, I still don't accept that this is real.

Mamma fusses with stray strands of my hair as we enter the large restaurant for the rehearsal dinner.

My hair has been trimmed and highlighted within an inch of its life, shimmering honey and gold breaking up the dark shade I've worn since August. New hair, new me, I guess.

Or maybe I should say old hair, old me. Since I always used to wear it lighter like this.

It was only that brief stretch of summer, from August until mid-September, that I had it back to its near-black natural colour.

They echo through my head. Words wrapped in the rough smoke of Darragh's voice.

The memory of what he said to me on that rooftop.

This hair colour suits you.

He was the only one who said it. The only one who liked it. That natural slice of myself.

Oh, Jesus. If I'm going to start whining that Darragh Gowan was the only one who saw the real me...

It's just too pathetic to think about. Even if it might be true.

"Stop poking at her like she's your pet poodle," Papà grunts at Mamma. The little jabs spoken through Mamma are the closest he's come to speaking directly to me. Mamma's hand drops at the same moment that my teeth clamp together. Pet.

I force my jaw to unlock.

"He used to call me that, you know," I say lightly. Breezily, even.

"What?" Papà says distractedly as he leads us towards a large table with a white tablecloth near the back of the restaurant.

"Pet. I was called that by my fiancé," I say, flashing my teeth in a falsely sweet smile. "You know. My other fiancé. Darragh Gowan."

I think Papà might actually burst a blood vessel in his forehead. His face and neck flush dark with rage. Mamma tenses, and he takes a step towards me, as if he's planning on dragging me right out of the restaurant.

"Do not speak that fucking name in front of me," Papà hisses under his breath. "And

don't even think about speaking it in front of Sal. He's not a man to be trifled with."

Not a man to be trifled with. Ha. Yeah, I got that impression, considering his last wife – young and healthy, by all accounts – just died recently. A tragic fall down the stairs, from what I've heard.

Would be even more tragic if she were pushed.

By her husband.

Who is now going to be my husband.

Apparently.

I turn from my papà's enraged face, twisting to look back towards the door. As if Darragh might walk through it at any moment. An uninvited ghost.

An apparition.

But all I see is late-afternoon sun streaming in through the glass, illuminating bottles of wine and beautiful tiles and Curse, who stands near the door beside one of Sal's men.

A waiter in white directs us further into the restaurant, speaking Italian in polite tones to my parents.

We resume our trek towards the large table at the back.

Only now, there are two men sitting there who weren't there before.

Both dark-haired and dressed in suits. I know immediately that the one on the right is

Salvatore Di Mauro.

Mamma has shoved his picture under my nose several times over the last week, the action usually accompanied by nervously uttered lines like, “So good-looking for his age, no?”

He is decent-looking, I won’t deny her that.

He’s got broad shoulders, a nice jaw, and the few strands of silver at his temples add an air of sophistication instead of age.

But he doesn’t have hair the colour of dried blood.

He doesn’t have the wounds I gave him inked into his skin.

He doesn’t look at me like he can’t quite tell if he wants to strangle me or fuck me.

In fact, Sal looks at me without any sort of obvious feeling at all.

There’s a bland, uncaring sort of calculation in his gaze that leaves me cold.

He’s sizing me up the way a man buying a car might.

No, not even a car. Something much less consequential.

Like he’s buying a new water filter for his fridge or a shirt he never plans to wear.

Something he doesn’t give a single fuck about.

The man beside him – who must be his consigliere – rises at our approach. Sal doesn’t.

Not at first, at least. It's only when Papà greets him that he finally stands to shake Papà's hand.

"You remember my wife, Carlotta," Papà grunts, releasing Sal's hand and gesturing towards Mamma. Mamma takes up her practised, polished mafioso-wife smile and leans in for two kisses, one on each cheek.

"And my daughter." Papà says my name with a chilling finality. "Valentina."

I could laugh. I could run. I could pull out the ring Darragh gave me – the one I've got in my clutch purse right now, though I still don't quite know why I've brought it – and brandish it mockingly in Sal's face.

I don't do any of that. I smile serenely and lean forward for kisses of my own, ignoring a sudden tightness in my throat. Like an olive getting stuck.

Sal grips my elbows. The shaved line of his jaw scrapes my cheeks.

When he pulls back and lets me go, a short woman with big hair and even bigger boobs joins our group. She is Sal's consigliere's wife, and she begins chatting with the others, leaving Sal and me in a little bubble of quiet to the side.

"Nice place," I say blithely. I know he owns this restaurant, though I didn't notice what it was called.

Sal sits back down in his chair.

"Sofia's?" he says.

I freeze, my cheeks twitching with the effort to keep my smile on my face. Sofia was his late wife's name.

“It was her project,” he goes on, waving a casual hand through the air. “Rename it Valentina’s if you want.”

Well, isn’t that just fucking ghoulish. We’re sitting in the restaurant his late wife ran – a place literally named after her – while we prepare for our wedding tomorrow.

Sorry , I say silently, as if the spirit of Sofia Di Mauro can hear me.

But I sit down beside her husband anyway.

The next morning goes so smoothly that I’m becoming sickeningly aware of the fact that I may actually end up married by the end of the day.

During a quiet moment after getting my hair done and before putting on the dress, I begin to frantically consider how I might escape.

We’re getting ready in the same townhouse we’ve been staying in this entire time – one of Papà’s Montréal properties – but there’s no easy way out.

There is a window with a fire escape leading down from my large bedroom, but two of Sal’s men are stationed on the ground below.

“Come away from the window, amore ,” Mamma says, her brow furrowed with concern. Like she’s worried I’ll yank it open and jump.

I’m not suicidal. But I’d risk breaking an ankle to get the hell out of here.

“It’s time to put on the gown,” she says.

The hair stylists and makeup artists have long since departed, leaving only Mamma and me in the room.

We're wearing matching ivory silk robes.

The dress she chose for me, altered in a flurry of activity over the last few days, lies like a white silk abomination – or accusation – on the bed.

“I'm not putting that on.”

She inhales through her nose, then pinches the bridge of it.

“Don't do this. Not today. My head is already aching. I can't deal with both you and your papà like this.”

“Then don't. Just take me back to Toronto.”

She laughs, and it's brittle.

“Then what? Wait for your papà to come drag you back?” She shakes her head, then points a dark blue fingernail at the dress. “You know if you don't put it on your papà will come in here and hold you down and make you do it.”

It seems like a grim metaphor for the entire situation. Not just putting on the dress.

Getting married in the first place.

It's strange how much more fight I feel like I have in me this time. I hadn't ever planned on rejecting or trying to wiggle my way out of my marriage to Dario. So why now?

Could be the fact that my new husband may or may not have killed his first wife, and it's a sense of self-preservation. Or...

Darragh's face is in my head. Those strange eyes, swallowing me whole.

Is it crazy? To feel like I'm betraying him?

When he betrayed me by arranging our secret engagement in the first place?

"Valentina!" Mamma snaps, dragging me back to reality. "Please! I do not want to have to tell your papà you are not cooperating!"

I don't want that either. Because she's right.

Papà will hold me down and make Mamma yank the dress on, no matter how hard I kick.

I could try to ruin the dress – spill something on it, rip it – but I have a feeling Papà would drag me down the aisle in nothing but this thin, silky robe I'm wearing if the dress became an issue.

I can't stop this. Not yet, anyway. Maybe the only one who can is...

No. Stop . I can't keep relying on Darragh to come and save me.

After today...

He might not want to.

I have a feeling I'm not the only one who is going to – unfairly, unreasonably – think today is a betrayal to him.

The heat I experienced with Darragh, those odd moments of softness behind the swinging blade of his being... It was like a fever dream. Intensely vivid. But

temporary. Dark and strange and in some ways, exquisite.

But not real.

What's real is the dress on the bed. My papà's anger. The man waiting for me at that church. The church near the restaurant that bears his dead wife's name, where we will host the reception.

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I take the dress from the garment bag and step into it.

I hear – practically feel – Mamma's exhale of relief.

She says nothing as she does up the fasteners at the back.

It's hard to breathe in this thing. The bodice is tight, and it's got heavy long sleeves.

Just perfect for a September wedding on a day that promises to be unseasonably hot.

Outside, the sun shines merrily down, like all is right in the world.

Too soon, the dress is on and done up. Mamma says something under her breath – it sounds like a prayer – then grabs her glass of champagne and heads into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

I stare at that shut door, feeling like something is slamming shut on my own future.

My hands tingle, then begin to go numb at my sides.

Trying to focus my fingers on something so that they don't lose feeling entirely, I grab my clutch purse and start rifling through it. My trembling fingertips brush, then seize, that smooth, black box.

I take it out and snap it open.

And then, I put on Darragh's ring.

No one notices at first. I head outside with Mamma, feeling like the ring on my finger is as big and bold as a flashing neon sign. But not one person says a word. Black vehicles line the sunlit avenue. Papà's and Sal's.

"Carlotta. You go with Curse."

Papà's voice cuts through the pretty scene. I turn to find him coming out the dark green door behind us, dressed in a suit, his hair slicked back.

His eyes settle on me. "I'll drive the bride."

Foreboding sinks through me with cold claws.

Childish visions of me somehow escaping on the way to the church, a triumphant runaway bride, get crushed under the heel of his expensive Italian leather shoes.

Papà won't let me out of his sight until this ceremony is done.

He'll hold my fucking hand and make me sign the Declaration of Marriage if he has to.

The wedding has been kept fairly small. Every guest there knows the reality of our two families.

No one will bat an eye at a young bride's signature being forced – practically forged – on the page by her papà.

No one will lift a finger to help me.

Papà doesn't wait for acknowledgement from me. He approaches the driver's side of a sleek black SUV. When I reach for the door handle nearest me, he grunts, "Not

there. Front seat.”

He probably thinks if I sit in the backseat, I’ll try to throw myself out into traffic or something. Maybe he suspects I’ll still try it from the front. But at least he can grab me from there and haul me back.

I hold my skirts with my right hand, my left hand going to the door handle. Sunlight catches on the bright, beautiful yellow of the pear-shaped diamond of the ring, sending hot bolts of multi-colored fire spangling against the vehicle’s black paint as I pull open the door.

Inside the vehicle, Papà doesn’t speak as he drives.

So I do. I fill the silence, recognizing that this is the first time I’ve had alone with him since coming to Montréal.

If there’s ever a chance to change the course of things, it’s now.

I tell him that I don’t want to live in Montréal.

That I don’t want to marry Sal. That I’ll probably make him miserable as his wife.

That finally earns me a snort and a growling retort.

“You’ll learn to be a good wife,” he says bluntly, “or you’ll learn it from the back of Sal’s hand.”

My mouth floods with the tang of metal. I still remember the ringing slap Papà gave me when he found out I’d lied to him about Dario’s death.

“From the back of his hand,” I reply flatly, “or from the bottom of his stairs?”

His eyes slide to me from the side, and a little of the anger has gone out of them.

“Sofia drank too much,” he finally grunts, as if that’s that. As if that somehow makes it all better. As if that even makes sense.

“And your wife doesn’t?” I scoff, amazed that he would think that’s some kind of convincing excuse. “Doesn’t matter how drunk she gets, I’ve never seen her fall down a set of stairs to her death!”

“Basta!” he snaps. “I don’t want to hear another word from you about your mamma!”

“Fine,” I shoot back, my temper rising in tandem with his. He’s the one I got it from, after all. “Then why don’t we talk about Darragh?”

Sal’s restaurant – Sofia’s – is visible for a few moments as we drive by. We’re almost at the church.

“I don’t want to hear a word about him either!” Papà thunders.

“Well, you have to! What the hell do you think is going to happen when he comes back to Canada? He’s just going to let us all go live our lives without him, all hunky dory?”

The car slams to a sudden stop. We’ve reached the church. I pretend I don’t notice, pretend it isn’t even there, focusing the entire force of my attention on Papà.

“He isn’t coming back for you.”

It’s silly, but I can’t help it. I jerk with the impact of the words as surely as if they came in the form of a slap.

I'll be back for you.

It was the last thing Darragh said to me.

A promise. A threat. A vow forged in the blood between my legs.

“What are you talking about?” There's a tremor in my voice. It matches the renewed jittering of my fingers in my lap. “You can't seriously believe that.” Mad Dog Darragh. Like a hound with a bone. Doesn't matter how far I go. How deep I'm buried. He'll find me.

“The engagement deal I struck with that Irish fuck was built on a foundation of false pretenses,” Papà says.

He aims a furious finger at my throat. “He's a liar.

Just like you. He has no right to you now.

Not to mention the fact that I've spoken with Callum Gowan.

We've made the prospect of marrying you distinctly unappealing to him now. ”

“What?!”

“He'll be disinherited if he marries. All the Irish business. All that wealth.” He snaps his fingers. “Gone.”

“You... You've been in contact with his grandfather? What the hell did you offer him?”

“I didn't have to offer him shit,” Papà sneers.

“He wanted this marriage even less than I did. He figured a little change in his will might scare his batshit fucking crazy grandson straight.” His eyes suddenly fall to the hands twisted together in my lap.

His brows draw themselves into a harsh line.

His nostrils flare. “What the fuck is that?”

“An engagement ring.”

“Sal never gave me a ring to give you.” Realization dawns, but that dawn is darkness on his face. “It’s from Gowan, isn’t it?”

I nod. A stilted jerk of my head.

“Can’t believe he actually fucking bought a ring,” Papà spits. “And I can’t believe you’d be stupid enough, and stubborn enough, to wear it to your wedding today.” A vein throbs at his throat. He holds out his hand. “Give it to me.”

“No.” The word’s out before I can call it back. I bite my lip, tasting the vanilla smear of my own lipstick. “It’s mine.”

“Everything you have, everything you fucking are, is mine!” Papà explodes.

“Until you walk down that fucking aisle and sign yourself over to Sal! Do you understand me?” He takes an uneven breath, then stabs his open palm closer, right below my throat.

“Give it to me. Now. Before I break your finger trying to take it off of you myself.”

I clutch my hands together, my left inside my right. As if to protect the glittering ring.

It's bizarre, almost comical, the attachment I have to it now. I didn't even want it in the first place.

Papà's eyes flash. He seizes my left wrist. I cry out, trying to drag my hand out of his grip, but I should know by now it's futile.

At least he doesn't break my finger. He could if he wanted to. But I think all he really wants is to get the ring off of me. The band yanks harshly against my knuckle, scraping the skin.

"Stop!" I gasp as the ring disappears into his fist. "What are you going to do with it?"

Why the hell does it even matter? Why do I even bother asking?

But I can't stop myself. I'm suddenly frantic. Like what happens to that ring is somehow even more important than what happens to me.

"I'm going to keep it," he says, "because this doesn't even scratch the surface of what he – what both of you – owe me.

And if he dares to come within a hundred metres of a Titone after this, or a Di Mauro...

"He drops the ring into his suit jacket pocket, pushing it down below the pocket square.

"Then I am going to take this ring and shove it down his fucking throat."

Papà exits the vehicle, and before I can even take a breath he's at my side, yanking the passenger door open. "Followed," he adds, his bulk blocking out the sun, blocking out everything, "by a bullet."

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Darragh

Jim Shaw hasn't eaten in three days. He's lost just as many fingers. I keep those fingers in a neat little row on the warehouse floor right in front of his chair, each one aimed at him like an accusation. I wonder how many will be pointing at him like that by the time we're through.

The motherfucker won't talk.

Well, he did talk at first. He admitted to killing Callum mere moments after Rowan and I strapped him to this chair under the level grey gaze of Amos.

But he won't tell us why, or who hired him.

Jim Shaw is a goddamn nobody. A spineless little weasel who never would have even fucking breathed on my grandda if someone hadn't paid him off.

His greasy head hangs low, his skinny chest rising and falling with whistling inhales and harsh exhales.

I think he's unconscious again, the vile bastard.

Cutting off another finger ought to wake him up.

"I can start doing some more digging on my end," Amos says. "Look into the banking side. Where any funds might have come from."

He is here again today. Or tonight, rather, since the one small warehouse window has long gone dark.

Amos seems to want to prove himself an ally to me.

I have stopped to think once or twice that it's just a little too convenient that Amos came out of nowhere after Grandda's death with a name of some fucking nobody conveniently ready to go.

But Grandda's demise seems to be fucking with Amos' plans even more than my own.

Amos al-Khatib is apparently big in fintech and trade, and was looking to move a large portion of his western operations from London to Ireland for tax reasons since it's still part of the EU.

But clearly, not all of his business is on the up and up. For one thing, he was partnering with Callum Gowan. For another, he seems completely at ease in his multi-thousand-euro suit standing in an abandoned warehouse with a man tied up and bleeding in front of him.

"Do it," I reply. My voice rouses Shaw from his stupor.

"I don't know," he moans. "I don't know!"

"Oh, hush now," I say, the words a vicious caress. "You can think harder, can't you, Jimmy?"

I close the distance between us in one step, pressing the point of my knife to the base of his left pinky finger. It's like the knife is live with an electric current. Shaw's whole body reacts, spasming so hard against the bindings that the chair bucks a

couple of centimetres across the grey floor.

“I used to sleep on the floor of a warehouse just like this,” I say to no one in particular. “It’s where my grandda found me.”

Getting no sleep is making me fucking chatty, I guess. Sentimental.

Or maybe it’s Ireland that’s making me sentimental.

I experience a sudden, choking throb of feeling, so forceful I literally don’t breathe for a second. It’s not nostalgia. It’s not grief for my grandda.

It’s longing.

Jesus fucking Christ. Darragh Gowan. Fucking longing.

I want to touch her skin. Want to bury my face in her hair. Her pussy.

I want to know what she’s doing right now.

“Rowan,” I growl, withdrawing my knife and giving Shaw a brief moment of reprieve. “Check if there have been any updates from Tommy.”

My soldier Tommy is still in Montréal, sending me updates on Valentina’s activities. So far, she’s mostly been accompanying her parents and cousin around town, alternating between dress fittings and schmoozing with some mafia bozo named Salvatore Di Mauro.

Rowan nods and strides to the corner of the dark space. Unzipping the bag there, he sifts through ropes and plastic and cleaning supplies and pulls out his phone. He unlocks it, raises the screen to his face...

And quietly swears.

“What is it?” Hot urgency scrapes in my throat. I’m already moving towards him, my pulse more a thrum than a beat.

Rowan doesn’t speak. He merely turns his phone around so that I can see the screen.

At first, I want to ask him why he’s wasting his time showing me a picture of some bride with blonde hair, walking down the steps of a church on a street I don’t recognize. Why the ever-loving fuck would this warrant my attention right now?

But Rowan doesn’t move. His stoic silence makes me take a second look.

And then?

Then I see her eyes.

Eyes that have fought me, begged me, searched for me, hated me. Eyes that punctured something in me, just like her pretty fingernails, the first time they met my own.

But it doesn’t make sense that those are Valentina’s eyes, in Valentina’s face. Because the body they’re attached to is in a wedding dress, not for a fitting appointment at a shop, but for the actual fucking wedding.

A wedding that looks like it’s already happened, judging by the fact she’s leaving the church...

On the arm of another man.

My fiancée has gone and married someone else.

Waited until I was out of the country, waited until I was distracted dealing with the one thing important enough to temporarily take me away from her.

And it isn't just her. I know she can't marry anyone without her dear daddy organizing the entire shebang.

There's Vinny just behind her in the photo, now that I look closer.

I got him Halifax. I offered him my support against the bikers and the bratva. I gave him exactly what he asked for, exactly what he needed, all while I lost sleep and money and time. I made myself his fucking dog.

For her. All for her.

If this was a trap, it was a damn good one. I walked right into it and happily left all my weapons at the door.

No, I didn't walk. I was dragged. By those long, beautiful, bloodied fingernails. She dug them in and that was it. I was snared. It was too late.

Maybe it's the lack of sleep. Maybe it's the obliterating punch of pain – not rage, not the familiarity of fury, but fucking pain – that suddenly blinds me.

Whatever it is, my vision slides and warps, like someone's poured oil across my eyes.

I can't see this strange, married, blonde Valentina clearly anymore. I can barely see the phone at all.

I think I'm having a goddamn stroke.

I think I'm fucking bleeding.

There's a hot stripe of moisture on my cheek. But when I reach up to wipe it away, it isn't red. It's colourless and watery. I blink, and feel more of that moisture sluice down my skin at the same moment that my vision clears.

Holy fuck.

I can't let this happen. Can't let this be what I've become. Fucking weeping in a warehouse because of a picture on a phone. Because of her.

If my grandda could only see me now.

But he can't. Because he's in the ground. Maybe rolling in his grave at what's become of me. But dead all the same.

And you know who isn't?

Jim fucking Shaw.

I turn from Rowan, turn from the photo and the phone and my foolish fucking ruin. The knife in my hand feels like salvation. A sacred, soothing weight as I stalk back to the chair.

"You know, if we were in Morocco," Amos says coolly as I pass him, "I'd make him walk out into the desert until he went mad and died."

"We're not in Morocco," I reply through clenched teeth, raising my knife. "We're in Dublin."

And in Dublin, I am going to make him bleed.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:20 am

Valentina

There's a big juicy steak on my plate at Sofia's . Usually, I love steak. As rare as I can get it. It looks like a good one, too. But I can't force myself to take a single bite. Every time I lift my fork and knife, my throat closes up when the soft, low light catches on my new wedding band.

Except, I'm not convinced that it's new at all. The white gold band shows signs of wear. A few pale knicks and scratches.

I think this was Sofia's ring.

"You should eat," Sal grunts, sawing into his own steak beside me. "I don't need you passing out on me tonight."

Tonight. After dinner. After this ridiculous reception. When I have to go home with him and lie down in the bed of his first wife's ghost and consummate our marriage.

Passing out would be a blessing.

My left ring finger itches underneath the band and around the knuckle, the skin still raw from earlier.

Papà and Mamma are across from Sal and me at the table, along with Sal's consigliere and his chatty, busty wife.

Apart from that, it's mostly just Sal's men, some of Papà's other Montréal allies and

their wives, and Curse in attendance at the reception.

The wedding was a small one. There wasn't even a photographer, besides Mamma trying to take some frantic shots on her phone when she realized no one was documenting the day.

I can feel Sal watching me from the side as his jaw works, the muscles pumping beneath the shaven skin while he chews. If this is some test of wifely obedience, I think I'm already failing.

Might end up at the bottom of the stairs on my very first night with him.

It should be a terrifying thought, but fear has been buried under a cascading numbness that goes from my head all the way down my spine to my toes. It's only early evening, but I'm already exhausted.

I'm only nineteen, but I feel so fucking old.

I curl my left hand into a fist and raise my right hand. Only my right hand doesn't go for my fork, it goes for my glass of wine. I hold it gingerly by the stem, swirling the burgundy liquid in front of my face, letting Papà's words from earlier filter through my head.

He'll be disinherited if he marries.

He isn't coming back for you.

Despite that, despite everything, I still half-expected Darragh to come blasting through the church doors before I had a chance to say "I do."

He didn't. And I pretend that a part of me wasn't disappointed, wasn't just a little bit

hurt, by that.

Pathetic. Literally pathetic. I shake my head at myself and bring my glass closer to my face. Hopefully I can drown just a little of that disgust for myself in these sweetened waves of wine.

But I never get to take a single sip.

The glass explodes in my hand.

I stare dazedly at what used to be my wineglass.

It's only a stem between my fingers now, a sad little spindle of glass with a lethal, broken end.

Some distant part of my brain surmises that this must have been Darragh's revenge.

He put a tiny bomb inside my drink. Maybe he hoped that I would swallow it.

Or that I'd choke on it.

There's wine all over me. My sleeves are spattered, the front of my dress soaked red like somebody's gone and slit my throat above the sweetheart neckline.

Even the side of my face is somehow wet.

I bring my quivering left hand to my cheek, smearing thick, warm moisture.

So slow, so slow it's like a movie, so slow it's like a dream, I turn to the left to see my new husband with a dark hole where most of his face used to be.

And then, everything happens fast. A cacophony rushes in, like someone's just yanked cotton from my ears. The sound of screaming and swearing and glass shattering and the revving of engines outside. Pop pop pop.

I gasp as a set of mercilessly strong hands drags me from my chair. Curse has me in his grip, and he's hauling me further into the restaurant, away from the broken front windows and the road with the flashing metal and spinning wheels of motorcycles beyond.

"Stay here," he says, shoving me down behind the barrier of the bar. Then he rises and disappears, a gun in his tattooed hand.

I don't dare look out from behind the bar yet.

I'm stubborn, maybe even stupid, like Papà said, but I don't need my own face looking like Sal's does now.

The image of it is as crisp and clear in my mind as it would be if I were gazing upon him now.

I'm not. I'm staring at the ruined front of my own dress, wine and blood converging in a nauseating set of stains.

I can't breathe.

I'm going to throw up.

I have to get this fucking dress off of me.

Despite the fact I just survived a goddamn shootout, apparently the most pressing issue in my survival is the sudden, visceral need to disrobe.

I should be worried about what to do next.

I should be worried about what's become of Curse, or Mamma.

But I guess some primal part of my brain is trying to protect me.

And I guess it's focusing on one of the very small things within my control.

Honestly, I don't care about the psychology behind it. All I care about in this moment is getting this dress off before I puke or pass out.

I'm still holding the broken stem of the wine glass. I take the sharp end of it and hook it into a seam in the bodice. I don't stop hacking away until a tear opens up. I gasp at the sight of it, like it's the first sign of light I've seen in days of darkness.

Dropping the broken glass, I get my fingers inside the hole and yank for all I'm worth, feeling the fabric go taut with resistance, then give out.

The dress tears harshly, loudly. It sounds like the teeth of a zipper getting yanked apart.

Soon, the entire side of my dress is split, from armpit to hip.

It gives me enough leeway to shunt my shoulders backwards to peel my arms out of the sleeves.

Panting desperately, I wrench it down to my hips and then kick it viciously off my legs until it's nothing but a torn and dirtied pile of silk on the floor. My chest heaves and burns. I stare at it the way I'd stare at a viper, as if it can somehow still hurt me now.

But it's just a dress. Something pretty. Something beautiful.

Something ruined.

I'm still breathing hard, but getting the dress off has released the pressure points of constriction inside me.

I don't feel like I'm going to hurl or black out now.

I feel like I can think again. I consider taking off my shoes, because it will be easier to run without them if I need to.

But a set of shoes – even ones with heels as high as these – will probably be better than bare feet among the broken glass.

The rest of me is awfully exposed. All I've got on besides the shoes and the makeup is the matching lingerie set of lacy white bra and panties.

From where I'm seated on the floor, I spy a set of open shelves with what look like shirts or aprons or something all folded up nicely. I seize on one and pull it out.

It's a white dress shirt, the sort that the waiters wear. I don't bother trying to undo the buttons. I doubt my fingers are capable of that right now. I pull it on over my head. It must be for a big guy. It tents around me.

Somewhat dressed now, I still myself for a moment to listen. What I want to do is peek out from behind the bar, but the way things are going for me lately, that would only be an invitation for a bullet to find its way to my forehead.

But I don't hear any gunfire now.

I hear frantic conversations in English and Italian. I hear the scream of sirens in the distance.

I hear Mamma crying.

It's that sound that has me scrambling out from behind the bar, my heart punching up to my throat. My legs feel weak and watery as I rise and scan the room for her.

She's on the floor, hunched over and sobbing so hard I think she must be badly hurt. Like she's taken a bullet to the leg or the gut.

Mamma. No sound comes out, though I'm sure my lips move. I rush towards her.

Then stop.

She isn't bent over because she's injured.

She's bent over my papà who lies limp and bleeding on the carpet.

Four years old in the hallway of my youth. Papà and Elio and another man bleeding on the floor as a door clicks shut.

But it's always another man. Always.

Never Papà.

"Vincenzo!" Mamma sobs. She bangs on his bleeding chest. I shake myself out of whatever suspension has gripped my limbs in numbness.

"We have to stop the bleeding," I hear myself say. I fall heavily to my knees, and some distant part of myself echoes with pain. "Give me something!"

Mamma jerks her head up and stares blankly at me, like she had no idea I was here even though this is my fucking wedding reception. She blinks through ruined makeup and, absurdly, she then asks me, “ Amore , what happened to your beautiful dress?”

“It got blood on it.”

I’ll have more blood on me by the time this night is through. Papà is bleeding badly from his chest. He’s breathing, though. I think.

“Fuck,” I whisper. I reach up and blindly feel along the table above, hunting for one of the thick cloth napkins. My hand seizes on one, and I tug it down and press it against the bleeding wound. But in mere moments, it’s getting soaked through. “Fuck!”

I need something else. In desperation, I steal Papà’s pocket square from its place, adding it to the bloodied napkin and holding them both down with as much force as I can muster.

It can’t be more than a minute or two, but it feels like I’m frozen there forever, on my burning knees with my hands against Papà’s bleeding chest, gritting my teeth while Mamma weeps beside me.

But the sirens are louder. And then there are new voices, barking in English and in French for me to move, get out of the way, bougez-vous!

I jump up and stumble away. Paramedics instantly surround Papà, as if sucked into the vacuum of my absence.

In seconds, he’s loaded onto a stretcher and carted out the door.

Mamma follows without a single look back at me.

So I look down at myself. The big shirt is more red than white.

My hands look like I've put on shiny scarlet gloves.

The wedding band gleams dully. Just like my dress behind the bar, I'm overwhelmed with the need to get it off.

I clutch at the band. My finger is wet, so it slides much more easily than it should.

I want to hurl the thing, but all I'm capable of is dropping it from my shaking hands.

I watch the white gold descend. It lands among shattered glass and...

And another ring.

Just beside the white-gold band I've dropped is the yellow-gold band with that brilliant diamond. The one Darragh gave me. The one Papà took from me. When I pulled his pocket square free, I must have dislodged it.

I consider leaving them both. Let the stupid rings have each other. Let them both sit here in the fucking carnage forever. See if I care.

But... Goddamnit, I do care. After a too-brief moment of hesitation, I bend and snatch up the yellow-gold engagement ring. I cradle it in my bloodied hands.

Then, I put it on.

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Valentina

The police took my shirt as evidence.

They took Curse too. Along with most of the other men who were at the reception.

For questioning, I assume, though in Curse's case, it could be for something worse.

The last image I have is him leaving me behind that bar with his gun drawn.

I don't know if he killed any of the bikers in the street.

We have contacts in the Montréal police and the justice system here, but I still don't know when he'll be back.

I don't know when Papà will be back, either. He's in surgery now at a university hospital downtown. Mamma is there, having travelled with Papà by ambulance straight from Sofia's. I'm alone at our townhouse after being dropped off by the police, my own round of questioning finished for now.

I shower, scrubbing myself thoroughly despite my exhaustion. I emerge raw, naked, makeup-less. But not ringless. I towel dry my hair roughly, then twist it into a tight knot on the top of my head. The pulling sensation at my scalp feels weirdly good. Reminds me I'm alive.

My phone, which is on the bathroom counter, begins to vibrate, and I have to swallow a panicked yelp. I take three deep breaths, then hover my finger over the screen,

about to ignore the call.

Until I see that it's Elio.

I accept the call and I hear his voice before the phone even reaches my ear.

"What the fuck happened?"

"Bikers," I reply. "I think. I saw motorcycles."

He breathes out harshly on the other end.

"Curse just called me from fucking jail. He shot two of them. It's going to take me some time to get his situation sorted out. And what about Uncle Vinny? Curse said he thought he got hit."

"Yeah." I'm surprised by how quiet and even my voice is. There's no tremor, nothing to indicate I was the one trying to keep his blood in his body with my own two hands. "In the chest. He's in surgery."

"Christo Santo."

"Sal got hit too," I say woodenly. "In the head. I guess I'm a widow now."

I try to catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror, but it's obscured by steam from the shower. Like a veil.

"I'm coming down there tonight," Elio says. "I just need to make sure Deirdre's safe first. The bratva are making some fucking moves right now." He swears. "This is the worst possible timing for us to show weakness."

“Timing. Yeah,” I reply without emotion. “And what about the timing of Darragh’s return?”

Silence.

The quietness enrages me. Hot anger floods my body, piercing the numbness.

“Answer me, Elio! Curse is with the police. Papà might not make it through the fucking night.” My voice cracks on that last part, but I keep on going, my voice rising higher and higher. “What the hell do you plan to do about Darragh in the meantime?”

“Why are you asking me about Darragh?” Elio replies. “He hasn’t been a problem since he used my ribs and kidney as his own personal punching bag.”

Oh my God. He doesn’t know. Papà didn’t tell him. Neither did Curse or Mamma...

Probably because they all knew he’d lose his fucking shit.

“Darragh is the one who threw Dario off that roof.”

“What the fuck are you-”

“And I was engaged to him. Am engaged to him.”

“To Dario? I know, I-”

“No!” I practically screech. “To Darragh Gowan! He gave me a ring! And it was all sanctioned by Papà! But then Papà found out about what happened on that rooftop, found out about the lies, and he dragged me here to marry Sal instead. I don’t think Darragh even knows.”

If this were a video call, I would hold up my ring finger like I was giving him the bird. Show him the heartbreakingly perfect yellow diamond.

“Well, Darragh coming back to Canada and finding out his fiancée has been married off to another man was not a variable I was fucking anticipating,” Elio says dryly.

“I will come to Montréal tonight,” he reiterates.

“I will see what can be done about Curse. And I will see to it that Darragh never fucking gets his hands on you.”

If only he knew. If only he knew how many times Darragh’s had his hands on me already...

How much I’ve grown to hate it and to crave it.

“Don’t do anything. Don’t talk to anyone,” he orders me. “Stay exactly where you fucking are.”

He hangs up without another word.

For a moment, I follow his commands. I remain motionless in the steamy bathroom with my phone pressed to my damp ear.

And then I’m moving. Getting dressed and grabbing my shit. A bag. Money. Credit cards. Extra clothes and toiletries. I’ve even got my passport, because there was talk of a honeymoon after the wedding. I toss that in as well.

I shouldn’t be doing this. I should be waiting, like a good little principessa , at the house.

Or joining Mamma at the hospital to support her and wait for news on Papà.

But I just... I can't. I fucking can't. Papà's the reason we're in this city at all.

He would have happily married me off to someone who, on a balance of probabilities, probably murdered his first wife.

I did my best to staunch his bleeding. I did my best to save him.

But there's nothing else left for him inside me. Not now. Not here.

I need to get out of this city. I can't be here when Elio arrives.

Stay exactly where you fucking are , my cousin said.

I won't. I can't.

I can't submit to Titone men any longer. I'm going to lose my mind – lose myself – if I have to obey one more command. If I let one more person choose my future for me.

There's no one guarding me for once. No men at the door, no men at the windows. Everyone's been too dispersed in the chaos, being questioned by police or getting treated in hospital.

I'm alone, and through the heavy haze of trauma and blood that dulls my senses, I think I can taste freedom.

I walk out the door and I leave my phone behind.

I stop at the bottom of the steps outside the townhouse, waiting for someone with an Italian name and a gun to stop me. But no one does. No one's out here except for the

occasional car driving by and an older woman walking her tiny dog.

I start walking, slowly at first, but gaining speed with every step.

Anxiety jangles in my nerves as I head towards a busier intersection.

There's an ATM there. When I reach it, I shove in one of my credit cards and withdraw as much as the ATM will allow, which turns out to be one thousand dollars.

I'm not sure a thousand bucks is going get me that far in the grand scheme of things, but it's a start.

I can find another ATM tomorrow. Ultimately, I'll need to rely on cash more than credit cards, otherwise Elio will have no trouble tracking my financial transactions and locations once he discovers that I'm missing.

Missing. My insides squeeze with sudden guilt. To them, I will be missing. Mamma, who's already in rough shape, is going to be hysterical.

But I can't keep making decisions for other people's benefit. At some point, it has to be enough. Sal's gruesome death has provided me an opportunity I might never get again as long as I live. The chance to make a choice for myself.

What that choice will be, I'm not entirely sure yet. I doubt I can just disappear forever and make a new life for myself somewhere. Elio and Curse would find me eventually.

But, at least for now...

For now, I can choose my own path.

A white and red vehicle approaches on the road, the telltale colours of a Montréal

taxi. I practically run into the busy street to hail it. It stops, and when I get in the driver asks, first in French, then in English, where I want to go.

Where I want to go?

Fucking anywhere. Anywhere but here.

“The airport,” I reply, closing the car door behind me.

I pay the driver in cash when he drops me off at the international departures area of the Montréal airport.

Inside, I’m able to use a different credit card at an ATM to withdraw another thousand dollars.

I try to do it somewhat furtively, stuffing the bills into my bag and hoping no one notices.

I don’t plan on getting mugged in the middle of a busy Canadian airport, but I don’t think there’s anywhere on Earth that it’s truly safe to brandish big wads of bills like the one’s I’m carrying.

Next, I manoeuvre through the various throngs of people to the closest Canadian airline desk. When I tell the polished woman behind the desk I want to get on the next flight, she scans her screen then says, “We have a flight to London in thirty-seven minutes.”

“London, England, right?” I press. “Not London, Ontario?”

The last thing I need is to think I’ve gotten on some international flight only to land back in my own damn province. But the agent smiles and nods.

“Yes, that’s correct. It’s headed for the United Kingdom.”

“Great,” I say, dropping my bag heavily at my feet and blowing a strand of still-damp hair out of my eyes. “I’ll be paying for that in cash.”

Her nicely groomed eyebrows rise at that, but she processes the transaction anyway. My bag is small enough that I can take it as a carry-on, so I don’t need to linger at the desk once she’s printed out my boarding pass. I’ll have to hustle through security and find my gate, though.

But before I get there, I hear the woman’s voice, raised to get my attention.

“Miss! Excuse me!”

I almost want to ignore her. I’m worried that something’s gone wrong with my booking, or my passport. I was literally just at a crime scene today. Could the Montréal police have put some kind of stop-order on me leaving the country?

She calls again. I halt and turn to see her running after me, her cute, sensible heels clacking on the airport tiles.

“There was an issue with your boarding pass,” she says. Her cheeks are very red now. Maybe from running after me. “I’ve printed you another one.”

Before I can ask any follow up questions, she plucks the original boarding pass out of its bookmark-style position in my passport and slides the new one inside.

“The gate has changed, and the flight has been moved up by fifteen minutes.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

“Will I even make it through security that fast?” I cry.

“You will if you hurry! Look for gate one hundred eighteen!”

I clutch my passport and boarding pass and nod. “Thank you,” I say. Then I hitch my bag up higher on my shoulder and run.

Security takes longer than anticipated, part of the slowness being my own damn fault, because I had liquids loose in my bag that didn’t follow the 100 millilitre rule.

By the time the security agents throw away my bottles of moisturizer and perfume, I’ve only got minutes to spare.

Everything becomes a hot, harried blur as I sprint through the airport.

The announcements – even the ones involving my own gate – pass through my head unrecognized and unheeded.

I just keep looking for gate one hundred eighteen.

I can’t afford to miss this flight. It’s not just a financial thing, having used a good portion of my cash on the ticket.

It’s also a time thing. If Mamma has tried to contact me and hasn’t gotten through, she might have alerted Elio.

Already, he could have tracked my credit card usage to the ATM at this airport.

If I want to go, it has to be now.

But by some miracle, I make it. I flash my passport and boarding pass for the agent at

the gate and rush onto the plane moments before they close everything up.

A male flight attendant with a nice haircut and an even nicer smile checks my pass and directs me to where I should sit.

Looks like I've managed to snag a window seat.

I wince and apologize to the two people in the row who now have to stand up for me to sit there, one of whom is a lady who looks like she's got to be at least eighty years old.

But they're both friendly about it. The lady has a lovely accent.

I wonder if she's from somewhere in Newfoundland.

The guy who was sitting in the aisle seat even puts my carry-on bag in the storage compartment for me.

The kindness of these two other passengers in my row leaves me feeling strangely soothed.

I squeeze over to my seat and flop down.

Once I've done up my seatbelt, relief and exhaustion hit me, one after the other.

A heavy one-two punch that has my eyelids sliding instantly down over my eyes.

I cross my arms and lean against the window.

I'm asleep before we even leave the ground.

When I wake up again, there's light pouring in from the window, and someone is trying to get my attention.

"Sorry?" I rasp groggily.

"They're coming 'round with the food. Your choice of pasta or chicken pot pie, love," the older lady from the seat beside me says kindly.

My stomach grumbles.

"Chicken pot pie, please," I say as the flight attendant reaches our row.

Anything that doesn't resemble food that might be served at an Italian wedding is aces with me.

I struggle to sit up straighter, my neck and back aching after sleeping all hunched over to the side for...

How long has it been? The sunlight doesn't mean much when we're flying into a timezone ahead of Montréal's. And I've never flown economy like this.

"Are we almost there?" I ask as the flight attendant hands me the steaming tray.

"Yes," he says. "We'll be landing in Dublin in less than an hour."

I nearly drop the tray onto my lap.

"Oh, let me help you with that," the lady beside me says. Her knobby, wrinkled hands make surprisingly short work of undoing the latch and lowering the tray on the back of the seat ahead of me. "There, now."

That accent.

It's Irish.

I put the food down slowly. Some might even say calmly, though I'm anything but. Once the food is secure, I pull my passport out of my pocket. Prying the pages apart, I rapidly scan my boarding pass.

Seat: 23F

Gate: 118

Destination: Dublin

This makes no sense. This can't be happening! I booked a flight to London. The agent at the desk assured me it was England! London, England!

The agent at the desk...

The same one who practically ran me down after I bought my ticket. Who shoved this new boarding pass into my passport and sent me sprinting for security before I could even have a chance to notice what had changed.

My stomach curdles. My pulse ratchets up.

Someone got to her. In those miniscule moments between me leaving her desk and her trying to call me back, someone talked to her. Bribeed her. Threatened her. Someone who already knew I was there.

Someone who'd bend every truth, break every rule, to trap me.

Someone who wants me in Dublin.

The ring on my left hand glitters before I yank it off and slam my passport shut.

Darragh

“ M essy,” Amos says, his eyes flicking over Jim Shaw’s fingerless, eyeless, tongueless body.

“Rowan will sort it,” I growl.

“No need,” he replies, his voice all smooth smoke. “I’ll have my people deal with it. A show of respect for you. For this city. And for the working relationship I hope we can have going forward.”

I don’t know what relationship he’s expecting to have with me considering all the businesses I was meant to inherit are now suddenly being held just out of reach.

I won’t even be in Dublin tomorrow. I’ll be in Montréal, putting Vincenzo Titone’s head on a fucking spike. Followed by Salvatore Di Mauro.

I guess her name is Valentina Di Mauro now.

I throw my knife, a violent snap of my wrist. The blade thunks into Shaw’s lifeless chest, just below his sternum.

He never told us why he did it. Never told us who hired him.

When I find out, I’ll come back and cut their fucking guts out.

But first, I have to go to Canada.

“What’s Tommy said? Any updates?”

“Nothing new,” Rowan says, checking his phone. “The last update was still the one from a few hours ago, saying that she was at that restaurant with Salvatore and her parents and the other guests for what looked like the reception.”

I grind my molars. Tommy is supposed to be keeping me updated. What she eats for her entrée? I want to know. She stops to blow her cute little fucking nose? I want to know that, too.

She goes home with her new husband?

I need that fucking address.

“What time is it?” I ask. I’ve been slicing my way through a blood-red haze. I could have been here for hours or days. I’m covered in blood, absolutely stinking with it.

“It’s a little after two in the morning,” Rowan replies. “Nine in the evening in Montréal.”

“Call him,” I growl. Rowan nods. But before he has the chance to do it, the phone lights up.

“It’s Tommy.”

“Give it to me.”

Rowan eyes my bloody hands, but knows better than to argue. I snatch it from him, leaving a crimson smear on the screen when I accept the call.

“Where the fuck have you been?”

“Sorry, boss,” Tommy says. “I only narrowly avoided getting nabbed by the cops. I’ve had to keep clear of the area for a bit. There was an incident. Bikers showed up. Crashed the reception.”

Bikers. I know they’ve been giving Vinny trouble lately. They’ve been making moves on the streets and at the port. It’s why he wanted Halifax.

If they showed up...

“What happened?” I don’t recognize my own voice. “Where is she?”

I should never have left her.

“Right now, she’s in a cab. I’m following. She’s unharmed.”

Relief, like sweet whiskey, pours through my veins. I breathe in and out, in and out, not knowing how badly I needed to hear those words. She’s unharmed.

She never should have been in fucking Montréal.

And I never should have been here.

“Can’t say the same for her da, though,” Tommy is saying now. “He took a hit. Looked like it was right to the fucking heart. The Di Mauro boss got hit in the head. Curse Titone took two bikers down. Then the sirens started up and everybody scattered.”

Her father and her husband both got shot, probably fatally. She must have been sitting with them. Maybe even between them.

The first time I saw her on the rooftop, when I realized who she was, when I realized

she was choking, I remember briefly thinking, What a goddamn miracle. I get to watch a Titone die tonight.

Now, I think it's a miracle she's still alive. Salvatore took a shot to the head...

One wrong move, one minute misfire, the slightest shift of fate, and Valentina would be the one with a bullet in her brain right now.

The mere thought makes me feel like my very inner being is being unspooled. Like someone's taken hold of my spine and is unwinding it nerve by nerve. Until there's nothing left.

"Where is she going? Who is she with?" I ask, forcing myself to focus on reality. The reality where she's alive, but her husband isn't...

"She's alone in the cab," Tommy says. "Her mother is at the hospital. Curse and a bunch of others are with the cops."

My pet, alone and unprotected in the city. My little lamb. Lost in a labyrinth.

But then again, Valentina's never been a lamb.

"We're pulling up to the airport. She's going inside. I'll follow."

The airport?

Fuck.

She could end up anywhere.

"Don't let her out of your fucking sight," I hiss into the phone. "I'll be on the next

flight to Montréal.”

But the flight is almost seven hours long.

She’ll be long gone by then.

“She’s at one of the desks. Looks like she’s booking a flight. I’ll get closer.”

No fucking shit, she’s booking a flight. Why the hell else would she have gone to the airport?

My clever Valentina saw an opportunity, what with her daddy and her husband dead as fucking doornails and me out of the country.

She’s going to goddamn run.

“Shit. I thought maybe she was getting on that flight to Dublin,” Tommy says. “It leaves in less than half an hour. But she booked a flight to London.”

London. I could be there to meet her. I’d arrive before she did.

But no...

I have a better idea.

“She’s not going to London, Tommy.” I say it with a silken sort of certainty. “She’s coming to Dublin. And you’re going to be the one to get her on that flight.”

“How-”

“I don’t give a fuck how you make it happen,” I interrupt him viciously. “But if

Valentina isn't on that goddamn plane when it lands here, then you'd better start running now and you'd better never fucking stop. Because you have no idea what I will do to you if you lose her on me."

A shaky inhale. Then, "Understood."

The line goes dead.

The next time Tommy updates me, it's to let me know Valentina has successfully boarded the Dublin flight.

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Valentina

After disembarking the plane, I consider trying to make another run for it. I watch some of my fellow passengers head for the connections area and wonder if I can get a second flight from here. But I don't have that much cash left to burn through.

And let's face it. I'm in his domain now.

I'm in the city that spawned Darragh Gowan.

If he could get me to Dublin against my own fucking will, there's no way he'll let me leave it.

He's probably got contacts at this very airport.

Every time the eye of a staff member or security guard lands on me, I flinch as if it's Darragh's fingers trailing down the back of my neck.

I follow the flow of people towards the customs and arrivals area.

It's almost comically bizarre, to stand in line with all these people living their mundane lives.

Going home or to school or arriving here for a vacation.

I spot the pink cardigan of the older woman who was sitting beside me on the plane.

She's a bit ahead of me in the line. She makes it to the counter, speaks a few words with the agent there, then hobbles to the doors beyond.

Those doors lead outside. I can see brilliant, mid-morning sunshine spilling in.

It's almost my turn.

When I'm called forward, I robotically produce my passport. I blandly say that I'm a tourist when I'm asked about why I'm here. I kick myself afterwards. I should have said something stupid. Something that would prevent me from walking out those doors.

But then again, if I'm not allowed through the doors, I'd just get sent back to Canada. Back to Montréal, with its shot-up restaurants and its bleeding men and the tatters of my fucking life.

I wonder if Papà made it through his surgery.

I wonder if Darragh is already here.

It's easier than it should be to get past the agent at the desk. Clutching the strap of my bag, I walk slowly towards the doors. My mouth tastes like someone's stuck a penny beneath my tongue.

What do they call a penny in Dublin? Do they even have them? Or did they stop producing them, like Canada did?

I jolt, then swear to myself. I haven't even converted any of my Canadian money to euros. I don't see an ATM in this narrow stretch between the agents and the doors. Maybe there will be one outside... But then I'd have to use my credit card...

I exit the airport and can't stop myself from tilting my chin up to feel the sun.

For the briefest of moments, I close my eyes and try to relax.

But the sunlight turns the insides of my eyelids red.

Red like wine splattered all over my dress.

Red like Papà's blood seeping endlessly through my fingers.

I gasp and wrench my eyes open, dragging my gaze down from the sky.

But there's still red. The dark, rust red of hair I've buried my fingers in. The sun gleams on it, painting each strand with loving spangles of copper. So bright.

But the eyes below are dark.

"Hello, pet," Darragh murmurs. Something steely, something savage, shifts in his gaze, and his next words somehow both caress and cut me. "Or should I call you Mrs. Di Mauro now?"

I have a thousand biting replies on the tip of my tongue.

Not one of them makes it out of my mouth.

I'm really here.

And so is he.

I should be running. I should be screaming.

I should be spitting at him and scratching him, just like I did the last time I saw him.

The last time I saw him...

It feels like a lifetime ago. And yet he's so fucking familiar. Those faded blue jeans. Tight T-shirt. Tattoos. Those hands that have held me. Saved me. Taken from me. Trapped me.

I want to slap him.

I want to bury my face in his chest.

I want to feel him inside me again. Even though I said that it could only happen once.

I want to pretend we never met. Pretend that I'm still just me and he's still just him. Two entities existing around each other and never quite colliding.

My throat aches. I think I say something.

Maybe mouth his name.

But all I hear is a sob. My bag hits the ground.

My knees will be next. It's going to hurt. They're raw from kneeling among the glass at Sofia's. I brace for the pain even if I know there's nothing I can do to stop it.

His scent. His heat. It's all around me. His hands are on my upper arms, squeezing through the fabric of my thin sweater. My legs are completely devoid of strength. They hang limp, suspended like a puppet with its strings cut.

A frisson of energy goes through Darragh.

I feel his fingers give a violent twitch around my arms. Through gathering tears, I see the muscles of his biceps and chest jump.

When I dare a look at his face, I realize it's not just energy – it's emotion.

Probably a bad one. Anger. Jealousy. Hatred.

He already despised my entire family, and that was before they trundled me off to marry somebody else.

Whatever that seething emotion is, it's carved into his fucking face. His jaw is stone-hard, his eyes red-rimmed and hungry, scouring like they're searching for something to use against me.

"You're crying," he rasps. I feel the tears escaping, running down my cheeks. I press my lips together, refusing to let another pathetic sob come out. I already nearly collapsed in front of him. I don't need to show any other weakness right now.

A cruel smirk tugs at one side of his mouth. "That terrible to be with me again, pet? That you have to weep at the sorry sight of me?"

A sorry sight. As if Darragh Gowan could be anything close to that. But he does look bad. Beautiful... But bad. He looks even more exhausted than when I saw him a week ago in Toronto. His face is gaunt and paler than I remember.

I wonder if he's eating.

I wonder if he's sleeping.

I am crying at the sight of him. But not because of fear or even anger at this point. It's like I saw him, and my entire body just... let go. I looked at him, standing in a

country I've never set foot in before, and some stupid, crazy part of me said, Home.

Another spasm rocks Darragh's frame. He's still got me by my upper arms. Our chests are brushing, but not fully touching. My treacherous body wants to sink into him. I wonder if he's fighting a similar urge. The urge to draw me hard against him and hold me.

But Darragh Gowan isn't one for hugs at the best of times.

And not a single fucking soul on Earth could say that this moment qualifies as the best of times.

I don't answer his question. I don't want to tell him that it is terrible to be with him. Not for the reasons he implied, but because this haunting desire I feel for him, this poisonous sense of homecoming, is so wrong.

Instead, a question of my own bubbles out, bursting between gasped breaths.

"What are you going to do to me?"

There's a chance that he could kill me yet. He's bloodthirsty and vengeful. I already knew this about him before I went and married someone else. And isn't that what he always said? I won't kill you tonight.

Maybe tonight is the night that will finally change.

"Why do you think I'm going to do something to you?" Darragh asks. He's leaning closer to me now. I feel his voice against my mouth and shiver in his hold.

Because I married someone else. Because even though it's irrational and unfair, I still feel like somehow I've betrayed you.

“Because I took off the ring.”

I’ve still got it, though. It’s in my bag.

I don’t tell him that part.

Unpredictable as ever, Darragh doesn’t exhibit displeasure at that pronouncement. He merely laughs. A quiet, merciless scrape of sound.

“Stubborn little Titone.”

I try to stop it, but a part of me preens with wicked pleasure at his response. He’s called me his little Titone before. When he says it now, it feels like the past eight days have never happened.

But they have happened. He’s trapped me twice. First with the engagement, and now with the flight. If I don’t make some sort of stand against him now, I’m worried that I never will.

I steel my voice, lift my chin, and say, “I thought you said that you were going to call me Mrs. Di Mauro now.”

Something writhes in the back of his gaze. Something hostile. Hateful.

“I will never,” he says with venom in his voice, “call you by the name of some Sicilian piece of shit who wasn’t even man enough to survive his own fucking wedding to you.

” His jaw ticks. “Tell me,” he says, the words going suddenly ragged, his fingers squeezing.

“Tell me he got hit because he threw his useless shit-sack of a body in front of yours.”

Now it's my turn to laugh. The idea that Salvatore Di Mauro would have died protecting me is patently absurd.

“Because if he didn't,” Darragh goes on darkly, “if he didn't use his own skull as your personal fucking shield, then he deserved a far worse death than a bullet to the head.”

A bullet to the head. Sal's broken face, bleeding and horrific, is burned into my brain. My body reacts as if I'm back there. I panic, pulling in Darragh's hold.

“I have to go,” I gasp.

“Go where?” he demands, tightening his hold on me.

Go with him.

Go home to Toronto.

Go to some quiet corner of the world where no one knows my name and everyone is good.

But if everyone there is good...

They'd never let me in.

“I'm not supposed to be here!”

It's not a real answer to his question, but it's all my feverish mind can put into words.

And technically, it's true. I'm really not supposed to be here.

But clearly, Darragh disagrees.

“You're supposed to be with me .” His mouth is at my temple, his lips hot urgency against my skin and hair. “So you can cry about it all you want, pet. Cry. Even though it fucking splits me open.”

He releases one of my arms and swings his hand, scythe-like, downwards. Hoisting up my bag, he pulls me away from the tourists and taxis towards another car.

“You can sob, and rage, and try to run,” he says when we reach it. “But you're not stepping one foot outside this city so long as I'm still here.”

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:20 am

Darragh

I drive Valentina to the townhouse I've started renting.

I'm not going to have her in my grandda's house – the house I won't even own or control if I marry her.

There isn't a bed for her in Callum's place.

I've been sleeping, if you can call it that, in his office this entire time, unwilling to lie down in either my old bed or his.

This townhouse is on the very same road, though, and stands facing the fenced-in grass and gardens of St. Stephen's Green. There's nowhere to park immediately at the building, so I take the car to the nearest parking garage. When we emerge on foot, there still isn't a cloud in the goddamn sky.

Should have fucking known she'd bring the sun with her.

I'm half-blinded. Starved for light and slayed by it at the exact same time.

"It's beautiful here," she admits in a low voice as we pass under the Fusilier's Arch, a great stone entrance to St. Stephen's green. Trees spring up all around us, like a forest that's somehow been forgotten in the middle of the city.

You're beautiful here.

I would have sworn that I hadn't – could never have – forgotten how terribly beautiful she is.

But having her here in my reality is an acrid reminder that half-dreams and tortured sessions of longing don't do her any sort of justice.

Even with her newly blonde hair in a loosely-tied mess, no makeup on her heart-shaped face, she's the most painfully perfect thing I've ever been witness to in my entire putrid fucking life.

"Almost makes me want to forgive you for bringing me here against my will," she goes on, tipping her head back to admire the tree branches and leaves above while I admire the dappled caress of light on her face.

"Never asked for your forgiveness."

"Your kind never does."

"My kind?" I stop walking and grab her hand, pulling her into the shadowy place behind the thick trunk of an ancient sycamore tree.

The trunk is easily twice the span of Valentina's shoulders as she leans back against it and crosses her arms over her chest. Tourists and photographers mill along the paths, but I ignore them, solely focused on Valentina.

"Your kind. The kind of man you are," she explains, annoyed, like I'm an errant child who should understand this by now. "You're all the same. You and my cousins and..."

"And your daddy?"

I watch her throat work at the mention of her father. She breaks eye contact and looks down at roots that have broken through the grassy ground. Her eyes are shiny.

Fuck no. She can cry about the fact she's here with me if she wants to. But I will not watch her shed tears for her piece of shit progenitor. Not after everything he's done.

"But I'm not like them, am I, pet?" I ask, softening the harshest edges of my voice until my words slide like silken malice.

My right hand goes to her throat, palming the exquisite flutter of her heartbeat.

My thumb presses – and none too gently – to the throbbing place below her jaw.

"Doubt your cousins or your daddy have ever done what I've done with you.

I doubt they've ever seen you with your legs spread and-

"Shut up!" Her hand smashes against mine, smacking it away from her neck with surprising force. "Just... Just shut up, Darragh!"

I catch her hand out of the air, sliding my grip down until I hold her wrist. She's shaking. It makes me want to hurt somebody. Makes me want another Jim Shaw strapped to a chair in a warehouse.

"You had to know that I would come for you."

She violently yanks her hand from my hold. I release her, otherwise I think she'll keep on pulling and pulling until she breaks her own wrist.

"But you didn't come," she hisses, her brows drawing together. "Did you?"

“Didn’t exactly receive an invitation to your special day with Sal, now did I?” I spit in reply. My head throbs. So does my chest. And my dick. “You lot waited until I was out of the fucking country to put on that lovely little ceremony.”

“I still thought...” She bites off her words and looks away.

“Thought what?”

“Thought you’d come. Thought you’d stop it.”

Everything slants. Like someone’s punched my centre of gravity and left me dazed and reeling.

What? She thought I’d show up and fucking save her? If I’d gotten there in time to stop the wedding, she wouldn’t have been watching bikers kill her husband and her father.

She would have been watching me.

I wouldn’t have stopped just to spare her feelings. I would have torn the place apart. And then I would have carried her wailing away through the carnage, stepping over corpses as I went.

“I told you once,” I remind her grimly, “that heroes don’t exist in our world. I’ve always been the villain in your story.”

“A hero takes the high road for the good of everyone,” she replies.

A breeze makes the leaves above her ripple, sending golden light dancing across her skin, her lips and eyelashes.

For the first time in my life, I want to taste sunlight.

“A villain would do whatever it takes to protect what’s theirs. ”

“Are you admitting that you’re mine?”

“I’m saying I was never supposed to be his.”

His. Salvatore Di Mauro’s.

“Did he touch you?” I’m holding her again without even realizing I’ve raised my hands to do it. I cup her jaw, my thumbs stroking the places her tears have dried, fusing my gaze to her face. “Did he hurt you? Kiss you? Try to fuck you?”

So help me God, I will dig up his goddamn corpse if he has. Just so I can fucking defile it in her name.

“No. But he might have hurt me eventually. His first wife died recently by falling down the stairs.”

She flicks and bends her fingers in the air, making little quotation mark gestures around the word “falling.”

“So that’s who Vinny chose to replace me?” I ask, incredulous and so fucking angry that I can barely think. “That’s who he married you off to in my absence?” My eyes narrow. “That’s who you married? You willingly walked down the aisle knowing this shit?”

“It wasn’t willing! I didn’t have a choice!”

“Please. You didn’t have a choice? What happened to the bold little negotiator who

played chess with me in Toronto?

Where's that stubborn Titone spirit?" I move closer, shoving my thigh between both of hers.

I drink down her muted gasp like it's water in the desert.

Like it's heaven. "Or maybe you're only that manipulative and defiant when you're dealing with me."

"What can I say?" she replies, forcing firmness into her voice even as colour floods her cheeks at the placement of my thigh against her clit. "Maybe you bring out the worst in me."

"And you bring out the weakest in me."

She has no idea how vulnerable I am now that she's got her claws in me. Not a fucking clue in that pretty head of hers. If she could comprehend it, if she could feel even of a fraction of what I feel...

She wouldn't be marrying other men and then running off to London, that's for goddamn sure.

But even if I can't seize her fucking soul, I know I can at least have some effect on her body. I drop my right hand, sliding it between us until it finds the waistband of her leggings and dips inside.

"Darragh!"

I ignore the way she says my name, half plea, half outrage, and let my fingers skim down to the softest, secret parts of her.

My middle finger finds her clit swollen and needy, and the place below is hot and wet.

I suppress a groan, grinding my teeth together and pressing my forehead to the top of her head.

“Not here!”

“Yes, here.”

Yes, here. Here, between her legs. Here, at the junction of holy wonder and hateful lust. Here, where I would get down on my knees, renounce myself, and fucking worship.

But of course, that isn't what she means. She means, not here in public. In the open. In this pretty wooded place where someone could see that I'm making her fall apart. But this tree is in a bit of a sheltered corner, and my body blocks both her and the movements of my hand from view.

“Worried someone's going to see me making you come like this?” I rasp against the fragrant warmth of her hair. “You'll be fine. If you can keep your voice down, that is.”

I plunge my middle finger into her, and just about collapse at the sensation. The molten suck of her flesh. The silken quivers building with her arousal. I curl my finger, start to stroke her from the inside, and feel her entire body shudder in glorious response.

She may have married someone else. She may have tried to run away. But she will never be able to escape what I can make her body do.

What I can make her want.

My dick throbs. Tension radiates up and down my spine.

I need her to admit it. Need to break down that Titone pride, let it crack and shatter like glass, and force her to kneel among the pieces while she comes.

Need to know that at least some small, toxic part of her still wants me.

I still my hand.

“Ride me.”

Valentina’s eyes fly open. Both her hands shoot to my wrist, grabbing tightly.

“What?” she pants.

“You heard me. Ride my fucking hand.”

“Are you crazy?!”

“Yes,” I mutter. “Next question.”

But I guess she doesn’t have any questions left for me now.

All she has left is her will, and it is buckling.

I can literally feel it happening. I can feel the rhythmic twitching of her swollen inner walls.

Her tongue darts out to wet her lips, and I make a rough, involuntary sound of need.

As if worried someone's heard me, her eyes skitter away, scanning and vigilant.

"Don't look at them," I groan. "Don't look at anything but me."

She closes her eyes, the stubborn little thing.

But then, with a nearly shy sort of subtlety, she rocks her hips against me. She inhales softly at the same moment that I let out a haggard breath.

"More," I demand, skimming my lips along the edge of her ear. "You can do better than that."

Her head tilts back against the bark of the trunk. Sun slides between branches. She's all gold and brown and pink. Cheeks and lashes and lips. She looks like some sweet forest nymph or glittering fae. Are there Sicilian faeries?

I guess so. Because I'm looking at one. I've got my finger inside one, and she's starting to rub herself on me more greedily now. I refuse to move my hand, refuse to help her in any way as she slowly fucks herself onto me.

"Oh!" she suddenly gasps. "No! I-"

She tries to stop, tries to pull my hand away, but it's too late. Her fingers lose all force at my wrist as she comes.

Jesus fuck. Holy Mary, mother of God.

My whole body lights up like I've just taken a hit of the most potent shit in the universe. So profoundly perfect, and so fucking addictive, that no one could cook this sensation up in a lab even if they tried. Valentina's in my veins without so much as a syringe to do it.

This is what I should be trying to escape. The spasmodic nirvana of her hold on me. The caustic clarity she brings me. Vicious fucking bliss.

Valentina's got her hands over her face. For a moment – a moment that feels like a blow – I think she's crying again. But when she speaks through her fingers, her voice is croaky with exhaustion, not teary.

“I'm so fucking tired.”

You and me both.

I haven't slept properly since before Halifax. More than three weeks now.

She probably slept like a baby this entire time. Knowing I was gone.

The agony of absence – this destructive withdrawal – is pain that only goes one way.

I need Valentina rehab. I need some fancy fucking program with steps and sponsors and someone to save me.

But as I pull my fingers from between her legs and lick them clean, feeling both savage and serene under the clear light of St. Stephen's Green, I don't think I actually want to be saved.

I want to be damned.

So long as she's the one to do it.

So long as I get to drag her down with me.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:20 am

Valentina

D arragh takes me through the gorgeous area of greenery, water, and trees to a street of nice buildings on the other side.

The buildings are all attached, like townhouses, with beautiful red and grey bricks and wrought-iron fencing between them and the sidewalk.

The doors are painted bright, fresh colours that remind me of sweet things.

Like hard candies or Easter eggs. Leaf green and robin egg blue.

An especially wide grey building with rows upon rows of large windows and steps leading up to its doors has fluttering banners outside that say MoLI – Museum of Literature Ireland.

It looks like a nice museum. I wonder if I'll get the chance to go inside...

Yeah. Like I'm some happy-go-lucky tourist who gets to actually decide her itinerary.

I didn't even decide the destination of my flight.

And I don't have a clue where we're going now, either. I hope it's not much further. I don't think my legs will hold out, no matter how much my pride might beg them to. I was already sore and exhausted. Getting finger-fucked like that has left my strength in tatters.

I can't believe he did that.

No, I can believe he did that.

I can't believe I let him.

All those people on the green. Everyone who might have noticed...

"We're here."

Darragh unlocks a bright red door. He lets it swing inwards, then stops it on its rebound with a big hand, holding it open and waiting for me to enter.

I have some cash left. I could book a hotel room. But that would only last for a night or two.

And I'm so exhausted. I just want to collapse into a bed somewhere, and somewhere soon.

Even if it's his bed?

My stomach tightens at the question. Darragh is watching me with a keen predator's stare. But there's something else in his gaze. A searching quality that while it doesn't exactly make him look vulnerable – because could he ever be? – it does make him look less certain.

He's waiting to see what I do.

If I run, he'll grab me, chase me, hunt me down. I'll lose even more of my own power in the process.

I hold my head high and stride through the open doorway.

“Is this your place?” I ask, surprised by the interior design choices.

It’s an absolute delight in here. Cottagey without being kitschy.

Creamy floral wallpaper and glossy dark hardwood floors greet us in a cozy sitting room ahead.

Beyond, and up a few steps on a higher half-level, is a clean, bright kitchen with a door that leads into a lush yard with a garden.

“I’m renting it for now,” Darragh answers. The door closes behind him. I hear him turn the lock, and then the rattle of a chain as he does up the one at the top.

“I thought you’d be staying...”

“At my grandda’s?” He double checks the locks as I take off my shoes. My God, does it ever feel good to remove them. Between my mad dash to the airport, the flight, coming here... It must have been at least eight hours. I can’t wait to shower it all off of me.

“His nearest property is a townhouse on this very street,” Darragh goes on. “I’ve been spending some time there. But once Tommy got you on that plane, I made alternate arrangements for us.”

Us .

I shove away the oddly squeezing sort of comfort that word imparts, focusing instead on anger.

“Tommy. Is that who got to that booking agent lady at the airport? She was all good to go to book me in on the flight to London, then boom, new boarding pass, new gate.”

I still cannot believe I got on that plane without even realizing. I’ll have to blame it on the trauma and the stress, because I’m too ashamed to confront the fact I’d actually do something that stupid.

“Yeah. Tommy was my man in Montréal this week.” His head tilts sardonically. “I’m a little offended that, in your haste to leave the country, you didn’t choose Dublin as your destination.”

“I might have,” I shoot back instantly, “if you weren’t here.”

It’s the only mode of protection I have. This shield of rage. These barbed remarks. I stare him down, expecting anger in return, but all he does is smirk.

“I figured as much.” The smirk fades. His gaze coasts along my face. “But still. If you want to go to London, pet, I’ll take you.”

He turns abruptly away from me before I can fully analyze the rasping softness that just entered his voice.

“Come on,” he says more sternly now as he heads up a narrow set of stairs with a beautifully carved balustrade.

We pass multiple bedrooms as we ascend beyond the second floor and onto the third. The fourth and final floor has one massive primary bedroom with an attached bathroom. It looks pristine in here, the blue and green quilt perfectly smooth atop the bed, nothing on the bedside tables.

Either Darragh's got a cleaning lady lined up, or he hasn't actually been sleeping here.

The bed is smaller than expected for a room so grand – probably a queen at most – but it has these four exquisite wooden posts, one at each corner of the bed, nearly touching the ceiling and giving it an imposing, almost fairytale quality.

A sage and cream-coloured rug lends warmth to the smooth hardwood, and there are big, dark green armchairs by a fireplace.

A glass door leads onto a tiny-but-charming balcony that overlooks the garden, and another door at the other end, nearer the bed, leads into the bathroom.

"It's nice," I say mildly, turning around in the space. "Doesn't look like you've been sleeping here, though."

He gives a brutal bark of a laugh.

"I haven't been sleeping at all."

I don't want to feel such concern for him, but I do. I press my lips together and run my fingers gently along the stitching of the bed's quilt, trying to distract myself from the desire to touch him with something close to tenderness. He doesn't deserve it.

And neither do I.

But even so, even with my fingers focused on the quilt, my mouth moves of its own accord.

"How are you? How have... How have things been?"

He doesn't answer for a moment. I risk a glance at him and find him studying me with something that almost looks like wariness. Like he's not used to anyone asking how he's doing, and having me of all people ask the question now has got alarm bells going off in his head.

"You just told me you were tired," he reminds me at length. "You really want to ask me how my week has been right now?"

I shrug, because apparently, I do.

"Well, I sliced up the greasy bastard who killed my grandda," he says, a violent, joyless grin contorting his face. "Does that count?"

"He was murdered? Your grandfather?"

I didn't know that. I only knew his grandfather had died...

"Of course he was murdered," Darragh scoffs. "Nothing but violence could have cut Callum Gowan down. He probably would have lived for fucking ever if Jim Shaw hadn't caved the back of his head in then pushed him into The Liffey."

I know just what he means. I always felt the same way about my own papà. That nothing could really touch him unless...

Unless it was a bullet sunk straight into his chest.

My hands are wet. I can feel the blood on them.

"I'm gonna puke," I announce feebly.

"In the toilet, if you can manage it, pet," Darragh drawls even as I sprint for the

bathroom. “I haven’t given anyone else the key to come and clean the place yet.”

I do manage, thank you very fucking much.

I fall heavily to my knees in front of the toilet, wincing at the pain.

As I bend over the bowl, my hair tie chooses that exact moment to give out, and all my hair comes tumbling down around my sweaty face.

Feebly, I try to hold the nausea back just long enough to scrape my hair out of the way.

But suddenly, there’s no hair to scrape. My fingers brush rough knuckles instead. Darragh fists the thick strands, holding it all neatly at the back of my head.

Is this some small act of mercy? I wasn’t sure he was capable of such a thing. He certainly didn’t have mercy for me outside earlier.

Ride my hand.

Vomit comes rushing up my throat. I let it out, sweating, gripping the cool seat of the toilet as my stomach knots and empties over and over.

When I’m finished, I spit weakly into the toilet. Before I rise, I become briefly aware of Darragh’s other hand between my shoulder blades, like he’s been rubbing my back but I was too busy puking my guts up to notice.

But almost as soon as I feel his hand there, it falls away. Darragh reaches past me to close the toilet’s lid and flush. I rise on shaking legs and feel the swish of my hair against my neck as he lets go.

Even though he's not touching it, he's staring at my hair as I go wash my hands and face and rinse my mouth at the sink. As I pat my face dry with a small towel, he catches an especially brightly highlighted strand and rubs it between his fingers and thumb.

"I bought you hair dye," he says.

I drop the towel on the counter.

"What?"

"Bought you all kinds of shit." He reaches down, his arm brushing my hip as he pulls open the door of the cupboard beneath the counter.

Below, I see various bottles of cosmetics.

Shampoo, conditioner, toothpaste, facial cleanser.

There's even a jar of my favourite fig and Sicilian lemon-scented moisturizer, the exact same one I have sitting on my bedside table in my room in Toronto.

It seems unlikely he could know I actually use this product.

Maybe he saw "Sicilian" on the label and thought of me.

And there, behind the jar, are boxes of hair dye.

I reach for one box and pull it out, examining the apple-cheeked, dark-haired model on the front.

"Box dye?" I ask, plunking it down on the counter. "With all these highlights, this is

probably just going to turn my hair green if I put it on top.”

“Green would be a vast improvement.”

I hate that his flatly uttered statement stings. I guess I’ve gotten too used to his declarations back in Canada. Declarations about how beautiful I am when I come.

Fuck you for being so fucking flawless.

“You think I look that bad as a blonde?” I snipe, slamming the cupboard door shut with my knee. I sound pathetic. I know I do.

“I think you could have no hair at all and still be a fucking masterpiece,” Darragh counters without hesitation. I catch his gaze in the mirror, and he looks pissed, like he’s resentful of that fact.

“Then what’s with the hair dye?”

He’s not looking at my hair now, but at my eyes in the mirror. But then he grimaces, grabs my shoulders, and spins me around to face him fully.

“Whenever you’re blonde,” he says quietly, one hand gripping my chin, the other remaining on my shoulder, “you seem to always be either engaged or getting married to other men. It’s rather infuriating.”

He’s right. Last time it was Dario. This most recent time, Sal.

“But you and me... When I think of us together, I think of darkness.” His hand slides from my chin to the back of my head, his fingers sinking into the strands. Tingles erupt along my scalp, prickling down my spine.

“Dark nights,” he goes on, his breath ghosting across my face.

“Dark water. Dark hair.” His mouth twitches.

“I’m not eloquent when I’m this fucking sleep-deprived.

But what it comes down to is that, when I see you with your hair like this, I see you in that photo, in that wedding dress, arm in arm with that Di Mauro fucker. And that photo just about-”

He cuts himself off, ripping his hands away from me.

“What photo?”

Without speaking, and without really even looking at it, he pulls a phone from his back pocket and swipes at the screen. Then he hands it to me.

“Didn’t know about the Di Mauro engagement until I saw this,” Darragh says.
“Didn’t know about the wedding until it was already done.”

It takes me a moment to realize what I’m looking at.

What I’m looking at is me .

That’s my wedding dress, before the wine and the blood and the hacking of the seams behind the bar of Sofia’s . Sal is beside me, his face still intact. Papà is behind us both, chest whole, suit unsullied.

I can’t look at either of them. So I look at myself.

Blonde tresses, perfect makeup, heavy but beautiful dress.

The picture has been taken from a bit of a distance.

Maybe from across the street. I zoom in on my own face, and though the features are undoubtedly my own, I barely recognize myself.

Under the blush and bronzer, I look pale.

My face shows no signs of bridal bliss. Only numb resignation.

“Must be something about this fucking city,” Darragh mutters cryptically. “Dublin is the only place I’ve ever cried.”

I place the phone screen-down atop the counter. My tired brain is having trouble keeping up with Darragh’s rapid subject change. A moment ago we were talking about photos and hair dye and now he’s mentioning something about crying?

He must be back on the subject of Callum again.

I can’t imagine Darragh shedding tears. It’s like trying to picture him holding a kitten, or blowing up a balloon for a child’s birthday.

It literally just does not compute. But I don’t see why he’d lie about such a thing. And he did just bury his grandfather.

“At the funeral?” I ask, figuring that’s the only event that could have forced a tear from his heterochromatic eyes.

Those eyes show confusion now. “Grandda’s funeral? I wouldn’t know much about that. I didn’t go.”

“You didn’t go?” I echo in disbelief. “You flew all the way back here so fast, like a

bat out of freaking hell, and you didn't even attend the funeral?"

"What do you care whether I attended or not? What do you care if I flew back here right away?" he asks.

His tone tightens to a vicious point. "Weren't you the one with all that 'we can never see each other again' bullshit in the deal you tried to make with me?"

Whether it was for a funeral or for a fancy cruise through the goddamn Caribbean, what do you care why I left, when you were so eager to see the back of me?"

Because you fucked me then left me bleeding and alone with nothing but a ring! You left me to get married off to Sal Di Mauro!

You left me.

All at once, I'm back at that masquerade. And I'm running.

Running through the crowds. Running after him.

But he's already gone.

"It doesn't matter," I say. "I'm going to have a shower."

I get inside the glass shower, fully clothed, and slam the door.

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Valentina

I don't get undressed until I see Darragh leave the bathroom.

At first, I think he won't. I think he'll stay planted in the middle of the room, staring at me intently through the glass.

But after a tense moment that feels like a soundless stand-off, he turns and walks out. He leaves the bathroom door open.

I step back out of the shower and slam that door, too.

I lock it in protest, a reclaiming of a little bit of my own privacy, even though I know he could knock the door down without even breaking a sweat if he wanted to.

He probably wouldn't even have to knock it down.

I'd bet my left boob that Darragh Gowan could pick any lock, anywhere.

He doesn't bother doing it now, though. I don't hear anything directly on the other side of the door or beyond it, even though I press my ear up against the wood in a vain attempt.

Whatever. I don't care where he's gone or what he's doing. I'm the one who closed this door.

I strip quickly, sighing as the sweaty clothes I've been wearing all night fall into a

yucky heap.

Swiping some of the shampoo, conditioner, and soap from beneath the sink, I return to the shower and wash every inch of myself.

I stand under the hot water much longer than is necessary.

Every time I stop scrubbing myself, my eyes start pulling vicious tricks on me, showing me streaks of blood where there are none.

When I'm clean enough – enough, because I'm not sure I'll ever be clean entirely – I leave the shower and wrap myself in a towel.

It's only then that I realize that I don't have my bag.

It's back in the car, parked in the garage.

I have no clothes.

Well, I do have clothes, but the thought of putting the same leggings and sweater I had on before makes me feel like I'm going to throw up again.

My head pounds. My mouth feels gummy and sour.

When was the last time I ate? I didn't have a single bite of that chicken pot pie. And I haven't slept enough.

Tying the towel more firmly around my chest so that my arms are free, I take a spare toothbrush, the tube of paste, and brush my teeth as vigorously as I have the energy to.

I doubt I do it for the full two minutes.

My arm feels like it's been replaced with a limb made of lead.

Plus, my gag reflex has decided that it just doesn't want to quit.

Every time I swipe the bristles too far back on my tongue, my throat contracts and my stomach flips ominously.

I rinse the toothbrush, then my mouth again, and venture out into the bedroom. It's so silent in here when I open the door that I think Darragh really must have left. But as my eyes make a cautious sweep of the room, I see him.

He's stripped down, too, to a pair of tight, silky black boxers. He's wearing nothing else, the tautly muscled and tattooed expanse of him on full display, which sends a treacherous shock through my exhausted body.

He must be exhausted, too.

Because he's fast asleep. On his back on the bed, his strong legs are splayed. One hand rests behind his head – a head that's turned towards the bathroom door. His other arm, his right one, is stretched out across the bed, the tips of his fingers aimed at the door I've just come through.

Aimed right at me.

But he's definitely asleep. I don't think I've ever seen his face so peaceful. It's almost jarring, how smoothed-out his expression has become. While I can't say that I truly know the waking Darragh, sleep has turned him into a stranger.

It's like coming across a hibernating animal. Something massive, something

dangerous, something that could kill you with a mere swipe of its claws...

Something beautiful.

My God, he really is gorgeous. The sun has moved around the building, tossing velvety beams of gold over the marvel of Darragh's body, the hard planes and long limbs, that dark russet hair and the darker lines of his tattoos.

I'm at the side of the bed before I feel my own feet move.

I've never seen him quite this exposed. Usually he's at least got a shirt, or jeans, or something. Even when we had sex, all he did was take off his suit jacket and unzip his pants. The rest of his clothing stayed on.

Tentatively, I reach out, brushing my fingers along a thorny vine of ink that traverses his shoulder.

His deep and even breathing doesn't stutter, shift, or halt.

So I keep going, stealing a quiet moment with this placid, unknown Darragh.

My fingers eventually find that scattered constellation of nail marks made permanent by ink.

I shift my grip, pressing my fingers and thumb against the tattooed dots.

A perfect fit. I don't know why that's surprising. I don't know why it feels like we shouldn't fit together this way anymore.

But we do.

Darragh makes a noise in his sleep. A tightness enters his jaw. Is he dreaming? He said that when he was in Halifax, he dreamed of me.

I wonder if sleep makes me a stranger to him, too.

I pull my hand from his forearm, letting my fingertips whisper up his arm once more to his shoulder, then to his chest, feeling the curling bronze hair there.

There are dice inked into his side, along his ribs and waist. One die has a skull drawn on its side.

I trace the fleshless face with the smooth oval tip of my fingernail, still painted a demure ivory-pink for the wedding.

Darragh's abdomen contracts against my touch, making the hardened outlines of his muscles come into stark, sunlit focus. His hips shift, and despite the water evaporating from my skin, I go achingly hot at the unmistakeable jerk of his flesh beneath the thin black fabric.

I shouldn't be touching him like this. I can't be.

He isn't mine. And I never wanted him to be.

I pull my hand away, but Darragh suddenly rolls, catching my wrist in his grip.

I gasp and feel my cheeks flush, like I've been caught doing something wrong.

But I still don't think he's really awake.

His eyes remain closed as he pulls me so hard that my towel comes loose and I go tumbling, naked, onto the bed.

I fall heavily, half on top of him, but even that doesn't wake him up.

He just rolls again, taking me with him, until we're lying on our sides, front to front.

His left hand is still resting beneath his head, only now my own head is cushioned on his arm.

His other arm is locked around me, his hand a hot, possessive stamp across my lower back.

He groans a little bit, then his hand slides down to my hip.

He grips my thigh and hikes my leg up over his waist, shoving his own thigh between my legs.

Almost every part of me is touching him. My breasts brush his chest, my nipples tingling with every one of his inhales. My bare pussy is plastered against the hard claim of his thigh. The flesh of his cock is hot and swollen against my belly.

He slumbers on. I watch him for as long as I can keep my eyes open.

I keep telling myself that I'll get up in one more minute.

One more minute, and then I'll leave. One more minute, and then I'll go look for another bed to sleep in, picking my way through the house like Goldilocks until I find one that doesn't have a bear in it.

One more minute.

Just... Just one...

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Darragh

She's here with me in dreams. So vivid that I can feel her hair beneath my lips. Hear the soft rustle of her breathing. I don't want to wake up.

Because when I wake up, she'll be gone.

I sink into the dream, the sensation of her body against mine, her back pressed to my front.

Lust thickens in my veins, and I don't know if it's my dream dick or my real dick but I am harder than I've ever been.

I roll my hips, then thrust desperately against her, until my cock is nestled tightly between her thighs.

She gives a sleepy moan. I can feel myself waking more now. And I fight it with everything I have. If the dredges of dreams are all I'll get of her, I'll hold on to them with everything I've got.

Fighting wakefulness, fighting time, I grip her hip and adjust myself.

I pull myself free of my underwear and then draw back until my cock isn't shoved forward between her thighs, but primed at the entrance to her pussy.

I drag my leaking tip along her slit, then nudge myself inside.

Hot. Tight. Not very wet yet, which only makes her even tighter.

I'm already on the verge of coming with the pathetic immediacy and thrilling intensity of a teenage wet dream.

"Darragh!" A strangled gasp. "Wait!"

Sleep is deserting me. But strangely, Valentina isn't.

The more I wake up, the more visceral each sensation becomes.

The clamping heat of her pussy on the tip of my cock.

The miserably perfect plushness of her hip beneath my fingers.

When my eyes flicker open, it's not the black hair I always see when I'm asleep, but wild and wavy strands, some brown, but most of them blonde, looking nearly silver in the darkness.

She's here. She's real.

I'm awake. And I have fucking got her.

Possessiveness sweeps through me with the force of a monsoon. My hand abandons her hip for the exquisitely warm, soft hood of her swollen clit. I rub her hard, demanding and relentless, until she cries out and her cunt begins to weep around me.

Then, with a movement that comes more from primal instinct than thought, I slam myself all the way in.

She cries out again, an agonized sound. But I don't think that she's in pain. Or if she

is, it isn't only pain she's feeling. If she's suffering, then she's suffering sweetly, her molten fucking channel already twitching and tightening around me. Trying to draw me in deeper.

I would have liked the first time I fucked her raw to have been a little slower. I would have liked to have her writhing and begging and hatefucking me with her eyes before I brought my dick within ten centimetres of her slick pussy.

But this violent collision between us, half-real and half-dreamed, feels inevitable. I don't think I could have stopped it if I tried.

Don't think I could have stopped it even if she begged me.

She hasn't said anything else, hasn't told me to wait again.

She's too lost in the throes of my body moving inside hers, her voice rising and falling in ever-louder moans.

Then the moans suddenly cease, like she's stopped breathing entirely.

Until her breath explodes out of her in a hoarse sob at the same moment that her cunt constricts.

She comes, and it is holy ecstasy. Dark elation. Sacred and electric and... And I don't fucking know, because I'm not a fucking poet, and if there's ever been a time that words have failed me, it is now.

But I don't need words. All I need is her.

Heat throbs, a demanding drumbeat in my groin. I hear myself groan as scalding pressure – and pleasure – take over.

And then, the catastrophic release. My entire body locks up tight as I explode, bare and unprotected, coming over and over with my tip jammed up against the sucking softness of her cervix.

It's only then, when I'm shuddering and spasming and spilling everything I have inside her, that Valentina finally finds her voice again to tell me, "No!"

"No?" I hiss against her ear, sliding my fingers back and forth over her clit, her flesh now slippery with her wetness and mine. "You're going to tell me no while your greedy cunt is milking me like this? You're squeezing the living fucking daylights out of my dick."

She whimpers and arches her spine, her cunt giving another trembling spasm that steals my breath, steals another shivery jet of my come, and nearly steals my consciousness.

"You can't come inside," she mewls. She fists the bedding, as if she's going to use it as some sort of anchor to haul herself away from me. "I'm not on the pill!"

I've never had any interest in spawning a squalling brat. Something about seeing your own dead da's neck snapped inside its noose makes the idea of fatherhood infinitely unappealing.

No kids. That's always been one of my rules. Never thought I'd have to enforce it, though. I never thought things would get this far with anyone.

"It's too late, pet," I pant. I'm fully spent inside her now. There's no taking it back.

I could stay like this forever, with my softening dick held so sweetly inside her. I'm not sure I've ever felt relief like this in my entire life. Sleep is already pulling at me once again. I press my nose into her hair, inhale deeply, and close my eyes.

But Valentina is wiggling. Grunting and moving and pulling herself away from me. Before I can grip her hip to hold her here, she's scooted herself across the bed. My dick slides out. The air is cold without her.

"What are you doing?" I ask her, sitting up and watching as she gingerly places her feet upon the ground and stands.

"I have to go deal with this," she snaps without looking at me. Her back is to me. Her hair has been cut as well as bleached, but it's still pretty long, falling in a messy tumble down her back in the darkness of the room.

"Deal with it, how?"

"Go get a morning after pill or something."

I glance at the clock on the bedside table.

"It's not even six in the morning," I tell her, blearily registering the time. Jesus. We must have slept all afternoon, and then all the way through the night after that. I don't think I've ever slept that long unless I was recovering from a Callum-inflicted concussion.

"Fine," she says. "Then for now I'll just shower and try to rinse as much of your come out of me that I can."

"Don't you fucking dare."

Before she can react, I've got her, dragging her by the shoulders back into the bed.

She falls onto her back on the mattress, her perfect, pillowy tits bouncing, her lips parting with indignant surprise.

I hold her in place with one hand, using the other to flick on the bedside lamp.

She's thrown into dim, golden focus, suffused with breathless colour.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asks as I kneel over her and force her legs apart.

Oh, fuck me. There it is. There's the sight I'm after. I spread her wide and watch my thick, wet come dribble out.

Then I rub my fingers in the mess...

And push it all back in.

Valentina gasps at the sudden intrusion of my fingers. But she doesn't fight me. Doesn't kick me or scratch me or scream. Her gaze goes half-lidded as I curl my fingers deep inside.

"You'll get your pill," I rasp. "I'll take you to the pharmacy myself."

I'll get her whatever she needs so that I can fuck her bare forever. I slide my fingers deeper, my dick already hardening with the thought that I'll be inside her again soon.

"It's not just about the pills, Darragh."

My fingers still. I give her a questioning look.

Her gaze hardens. "How many women have you slept with?"

"How many?" I snort. What an absurd thing to ask me when I'm swirling my own come inside her. "I couldn't tell you how many even with a gun to my goddamn head. Same way I couldn't tell you a single one of their names."

None of them made a lasting impression.

Because none of them were her.

Contempt, or disgust, or both, wrinkle her nose. “Charming. Do you just hate women then?”

“I suppose,” I say, tenderly stroking her from the inside until her hips give an adorable, involuntary twitch. “But then again, I basically hate everyone.”

“Even me?”

I press the heel of my hand to her clit.

“There have been times when you were the one I hated most,” I tell her plainly as I grind her most sensitive place.

I don’t need to protect her from the toxic truth of what’s between us. Because I know that she can take it. And I know she’s felt the same.

“But I’m learning,” I go on as I feel her tightening helplessly around my fingers, “that the line separating hate and love is as thin as the blade of a very sharp knife. When it comes to you, I’m never quite sure which side I’ll land on.” I watch her throat work as she swallows down a cry.

She’s trembling violently. Her insides are swelling. Squeezing me.

“Except for the moments when I land exactly in the middle,” I add. “Those are the moments that make me bleed.”

Or cry.

But I don't say that part out loud.

I've probably said too much already.

I shut my trap. Valentina makes a tiny sound.

She's going to come again.

At the last second, I tear my hand away and replace it with my cock. I slide inside so fucking easily this time. There's nothing she can do to keep me out.

"And just so you know," I growl as I take up a merciless rhythm, claiming her even deeper than before. Even deeper than I would have thought possible. "I did get tested recently. The results came back all clear."

I got the results the day before I met with Vinny to make a deal for Valentina's hand.

I wanted the paperwork ready, just in case.

I was half expecting him to accuse me of having syphilis or some shit.

Half expecting him to tell me not to come back until I had a goddamn doctor's note proving I was worthy of sticking my dick in his daughter.

But he didn't ask. All he asked about was Halifax, and manpower, and how he knew that he could trust me. Because all of that was more important to him than she was.

"You'll get your pill," I promise her again. My words devolve into a ragged moan as she comes helplessly on my cock.

And I go tumbling just as helplessly after her.

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Valentina

I suppose I have to give him some credit.

Darragh keeps his promise about the pill.

It's eight in the morning and we're now standing in line at a pharmacy within walking distance of the townhouse.

Even though he eventually did let me go shower, the place between my legs still feels sensitive and sticky.

I'm wearing my leggings without underwear, since I fell asleep without having the presence of mind to wash my panties yesterday.

And if there is one thing that could make standing in this harsh fluorescent lighting waiting for my turn in the line to ask for emergency contraception worse, it would be doing all this shit while wearing yesterday's dirty thong.

I make a mental note to remind Darragh that I want to retrieve my bag from his car on the way back.

I would have asked him right then, but the pharmacist, a young, pretty woman with smooth brown skin and pink glasses, is calling me forward.

I step up, expecting to go alone, but Darragh comes right along with me.

“I need the morning after pill, please,” I tell her.

“Alright.” Her gaze slides to Darragh, and he has the usual effect on people when they see his hulking, tattooed frame and his hard-jawed face with its different coloured irises for the first time. Her eyes widen slightly, but she remains professional, returning her attention to me.

“Have you got a medical card? There’s no cost if you do.”

I’ve got an OHIP card, but it’s in Darragh’s car. And I don’t think it would make any difference, anyway, since it was issued by Ontario and not Ireland.

“I’m paying.” Darragh flashes a shiny black credit card at the pharmacist.

“I have cash I can give you,” I respond as the pharmacist turns away to fetch the pill. Darragh acts as if he doesn’t hear me.

“Have you ever taken this medication before?” she asks when she comes back to the counter.

“No.”

“This is a one-step pill. You should take it as soon as possible after having unprotected sex,” she explains. “There may be some side effects. Cramping and nausea. You might experience some mood changes with the hormonal shifts.”

Great. Sounds fucking peachy.

But then again, I’d experience all of that and more if I were pregnant. So maybe I should just shut up and count my meagre blessings.

“I understand,” I reply as she passes over the package. “Thank you.”

Darragh taps his card and murmurs, “You’re welcome.”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” I mutter as we walk away from the counter.

“I know.”

But despite my lack of gratitude towards him, Darragh still buys me a drink in the retail part of the drugstore so that I can take the pill right away.

I’m too nervous to wait even until getting back to the townhouse.

I open the package and pop the pill, swallowing it down with a big swig of some sort of way-too-sweet iced coffee in a bottle.

But it helps the pill go down, and the caffeine surely won’t hurt.

So I’ll take what I can get. As I nurse my sort of gross drink, I watch Darragh stalk through the store’s aisles.

He’s grabbing all kinds of stuff. He pays for it all and brings it back in a plastic bag.

“What’s all that?” I ask, giving up on the coffee drink and screwing on the lid. He opens the bag for my curious eyes. Inside, I glimpse a box of ginger tea, anti-nausea pills, digestive cookies, and painkillers.

It’s all for me.

I shove back on that. I don’t want to feel like he’s taking care of me.

I don't want to be happy about anything he does.

"Got a tummy ache?" I ask, tossing my unfinished coffee in the trash.

"If I did," he answers in a clipped tone, "I still wouldn't be taking any of this shit. Maybe the tea. Although I generally think that ginger tastes like ass."

Shit. I knew that about him. Deirdre told me that Darragh never takes any medications. Not even over the counter painkillers. Because his mother overdosed.

And then his father killed himself.

And Darragh came home to find them both.

After everything he's done, I shouldn't feel guilty. But I look at the bag filled with thoughtful things that he would never dream of using for himself, and I do. I feel tiny and mean and unfair.

"Darragh," I begin, my hand reaching for him. But his long legs have already brought him to the door.

"Let's go," he says. "I have shit to do today."

Darragh's "shit to do" involves visiting his grandfather's house.

Callum Gowan's townhouse really is just down the street from the place he's renting.

The sky is slate grey, but luckily the rain holds off until we get there.

This townhouse, though not dissimilar in layout from the place we're staying, has a completely different vibe.

Darker paint and wood dominates the space. Not a floral motif to be seen.

What is to be seen, though?

Another man. I startle at the sight of him, panic pricking in every nerve. Because Darragh's grandfather was recently murdered, and what if someone has now come for us? But Darragh isn't fazed. He nods and grunts a greeting at the huge man with the ginger beard and red ponytail.

"Rowan. This is Valentina."

Rowan gives Darragh a bit of an odd look. Probably because he already knows exactly who I am. But points to Darragh for being somewhat polite, I guess.

"Hi," I say, giving him a thin smile.

He nods at me, but doesn't answer. Man of few words, I guess.

After all the time I've spent with Elio and Curse, I can't say I'm not used to that.

When Rowan does speak again, it's only to Darragh, and I have a feeling he's being extra cryptic due to the audience. The audience being me.

"I finally got in."

In where? Rowan doesn't say. But tension enters Darragh's frame at once. A current of energy drawing his spine straighter, his jaw tighter.

"We have some work to do in the office," Darragh tells me. He hands me the bag of stuff from the drugstore. "You can do whatever you want until then."

“Whatever I want?” I ask, raising my brows at him.

“You know what I mean. No crazy shit. You can watch TV. Have a shower. Take a nap. No rooms are off limits.” He takes my chin in his hand, forcing my face up to his. “But do not try to leave this house without me. I will know. And I will come for you.”

“Please,” I mutter, smacking his hand away from my face. His touch leaves an echo of heat behind. “Where would I go? What would I even do? We still haven’t even gone to get my bag.”

I once again forgot to remind him after the drugstore, and by the time I remembered, we were already nearly here.

“I’ve got new clothes coming to the house for you today.” His eyes narrow to suspicious slits. “What are you so concerned about getting your bag back for?”

Because that ring is in it , I want to scream, and it’s probably worth fifty fucking grand!

“Your passport,” he suddenly growls, even though that thought hadn’t even crossed my mind, “isn’t going to do you any good now. I think I’ve already made that pretty clear.”

“Crystal,” I bite out. I squeeze the bag in my hands, feeling the thin plastic scrunch as I flounce angrily away.

As Rowan and Darragh close themselves off in Callum’s office, I find myself in the kitchen.

It’s simple, small, and clean, with charcoal-grey stone floors and butcher block

countertops.

I still haven't eaten, unless you count the sky-high sugar content in that awful coffee drink.

I'm not feeling any nauseating effects of the contraceptive yet, but I figure that making sure there's something in my stomach before that happens is probably a good idea.

I open cupboards and the fridge. There isn't much, but I do find a package of something called biscuits that look like what I would call cookies. I pause as I open the box, wondering if this is... well, weird. Standing in the kitchen of Darragh Gowan's dead grandfather and casually eating his food.

But it's got to be better than standing in the kitchen of Salvatore Di Mauro's dead wife.

So I shrug and take a cookie – biscuit – from the box.

It's not half-bad. Gingery and sweet. Which makes me snort, remembering Darragh's deadpan comment earlier that he thinks ginger tastes like ass.

Unfortunately, that snort makes a tiny chunk of biscuit go straight to the back of my throat, and I immediately begin to cough violently, hacking away until tears gather in my eyes.

Somewhere in the house, a door slams open. The rapid-fire thunder of running footsteps gets louder and louder until Darragh is before me, his body blurred by my watery gaze.

“What is it?” he asks, quick and urgent. “What the fuck are you choking on?”

Suddenly, his face is right in front of mine, his hands caging in the sides of my jaw. “If I have to perform the Heimlich on you again, Valentina, so help me God...”

“It’s fine,” I wheeze. “It’s just a crumb.”

He swears under his breath and shoves himself away from me. When he returns to my side, my coughing has mostly subsided. He’s holding a glass of water.

“Drink this.”

“Really?” I rasp with sweetly feigned surprise. “You want me to drink it? I never would have guessed.”

He’s not amused by my sarcasm.

“Shut the fuck up and drink it, pet.” He shoves the water against me and releases it. I scramble to grab hold of the glass before it spills all over me or worse – falls and shatters on the floor.

“Don’t choke on anything else,” he orders me as he leaves the kitchen. As if I did it on purpose. “It’s extremely fucking distracting for me when I think that you’re about to die.”

But he didn’t run here like he was distracted.

He ran here like he was worried.

I don’t reply as he disappears around a corner. I hear the office door close once more.

I drink the water, because despite my desire to rebel against his rather crass order to do so, it is a good idea. I eat a few more cookies, too, with no more coughing fits.

There's a small sitting room beside the kitchen, and I consider flopping down on one of the chairs or the couch in there.

But a part of me is itching to explore. And if I simply sit down in the quiet of this dead man's house...

I'm going to think about other dead men.

My own husband with his gruesome hole for a face.

And my papà...

Though Papà might still be alive. He was in surgery when I left, but how that surgery ended? I don't have a clue, and I don't have an easy way to find out. Mamma must be a mess. Or she's drinking and sleeping non-stop and letting Elio handle everything.

Even though she went along with everything Papà did, I still feel loneliness catch beneath my ribs when I think of her.

I do miss her. And guilt plucks at me with poisonous claws when I think of how she must have reacted to the news that I am missing.

I wonder if Elio has made it to Montréal. If he's gotten Curse out.

If my feeble fingers were enough to keep Papà alive.

Yeah. This is why I need to do something instead of just sitting around and thinking.

I leave the box of biscuits and my glass of water in the kitchen as I wander.

There isn't much else to see on the first floor, so I mount a dark and narrow set of

stairs to the second.

There's a small library up here that I'll likely return to if Darragh takes a long time downstairs.

There's also a bathroom with vintage-looking black and white tiles. And another room with the door closed.

I reach for the handle, then hesitate.

It doesn't feel right to open this door. I can't say why. It's an instinct I don't have a name for. The ghosting whisper of dread on the back of my neck. The sudden rise of goosebumps beneath my sleeves.

Darragh told me no rooms were off limits. Surely, if Callum had some torture chamber here, or a room full of dead bodies, Darragh would have warned me. Right?

I'm being stupid. I huff out a breath, grasp the handle in a suddenly sweaty hand, then open the door.

Well. That's rather anticlimactic. My instincts must be total shit when it comes to this sort of thing.

Because there's nothing on the other side of the door but a small bedroom with pale blue walls.

I step inside the space and slowly turn in a circle, taking in a single bed, a wooden dresser, a rickety desk in the corner with a few pens in a plastic cup, and a small framed poster of a quote that says, Always forgive your enemies. Nothing annoys them so much.

Above the desk is a shelf built into the wall and lined with plastic gold trophies. They're the kind of trophies you might see in a kid's room, if that kid participated in a sport.

A sport like boxing.

My stomach flips. The goosebumps are back.

Because suddenly, I know exactly where I am.

This was Darragh's room.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:20 am

Darragh

Rowan's finally managed to get us into Grandda's laptop. "There's a lot to go through," he says. "I've had a go at it already. But this is what I wanted to show you first."

He clicks open on a file – a video – and pushes play. I go very still as I watch a tiny, two-dimensional version of myself throw Dario Fabbri off that Toronto condo building roof.

"Where the fuck did he get this?" I ask. I don't recognize the video. Don't recognize the angle. It looks like it's been taken from inside an apartment, the camera aimed out a window that faces the Fabbri's condo building.

"From what I can gather, the apartment this was filmed from isn't occupied," Rowan answer. "It's owned by an investor who resides in Hong Kong. They have a number of security cameras running inside the unit at all times. Including this one."

"So, what then? Some rich fucker in Hong Kong was reviewing the footage one day and saw this? And sent it to my grandda, to, what? Fucking tell on me?"

"A good man would have sent that footage to the police," Rowan says. "A smart one would have looked for a better deal first."

"Callum paid him off to destroy the footage?"

"It looks that way."

“Why’d he keep the fucking file himself?” I mutter. I push play again, getting a smug little thrill at the sight of Dario going sailing over that safety barrier. That thrill gets hot in my belly when I remember that Valentina was there. In this video, I’m not even aware of her yet.

Not aware of the fact that she’s about to split my skin with her nails.

And in turn, split open the entire careful chaos of my world.

“But here’s something else,” Rowan says. He switches from the video player to what looks like an email provider’s page open in a browser. “Not only did Callum not delete that file, he sent it to someone.”

“Who?” I demand, already scanning the sent folder. Rowan selects a message with a subject line that reads “we need to talk.” There’s nothing in the body of the email but the attached video file.

“It’s an email address I recognized,” Rowan says. “It’s linked to the corporation that owns the cottage beside the one you purchased.”

But that cottage belongs to...

“Callum sent this video to Vincenzo Titone.”

“When?” I ask, even though my eyes have already found the date at the top of the email. It was sent after I arrived in Halifax.

After I told Grandda that I was marrying Valentina.

So not only did he cut me out of his will, but he went to my future father-in-law with this shit, to destroy my chance at a marriage to Valentina before it even began.

Dario may have been a slimy piece of shit not fit for the bottom of Valentina's shoe, but despite his lies and betrayals, he was still the son of one of Vinny's most loyal allies.

Vinny had hard evidence that I not only killed Dario, but that Valentina and I both lied about it.

Which normally, I wouldn't give a fuck about. I'd lie to Vinny Titone as soon as I'd shake his fucking hand.

But this had consequences. My engagement to Valentina ruined, and an engagement to Sal Di Mauro slapped together, all in the span of two fucking weeks.

"What the hell did they talk about?" I ask. My temples ache. There's no reply to this email. No more clues.

"I don't know," Rowan says. "There's no other correspondence between them that I can find. But Callum didn't change his will until after he sent this video."

"So they cooked this shit up together. To keep Valentina and me apart."

"Probably."

It takes everything in me not to pick up the fucking laptop and hurl it across the room.

But we might need that later, so instead I turn to the shelf of booze.

I throw bottle after bottle against the walls, the floor, revelling in the symphonic violence of the sound, the glittering flight of broken glass like the ocean's spray.

Or the spray of Georgian Bay.

I don't smash the last one – a bottle of very fine whiskey indeed. Instead, I open it up and take a gulp, letting the liquid burn me all the way down.

But I don't really want to drink right now.

Not when there are much better drugs in this house.

“Valentina!” I shout her name as I storm from the office.

“Hello?” comes her faint response from upstairs. Sweet relief at the sound of her voice, gushing fast and hot as blood. She's still here.

I take the stairs two at a time. She's not looking at the books, and she isn't in the bathroom. Maybe she's on the third floor.

But the door to my old bedroom stands slightly ajar. And as if every instinct I've got is primed to sense exactly where she is, I know that's where she's ended up.

I go inside.

She's lying on my bed. On her back, with her hands folded demurely across her belly.

Like a nun.

Or a corpse.

“What are you doing in my bed?” I ask between harsh breaths. I'm breathing much harder than I should be.

I told her she could take a nap, sure. But I figured she would do it on the couch or something.

“Is it alright?” She’s looking at me, and she seems sincere enough in her question. Yet she makes no move to rise.

“It’s alright,” I reply. It’s just bizarre to see her there. I don’t think anyone’s touched that bed in close to fifteen years. And now, Valentina’s in it. My past and my present are melting together. There’s something almost eerie about it. Like it’s happening in a dream.

“I just wasn’t expecting to find you here,” I go on. “You’re reminding me of that old story. The one about the bears who come home to find a pretty young girl asleep in their bed.”

She looks startled, her mouth dropping open.

And then that perfect fucking mouth forms itself into a perfect fucking smile, and Jesus fucking Christ, someone needs to shoot me in the head.

Put me out of this lovesick fucking misery.

Because I don’t know how I’ll ever get over this.

Get over seeing her in the bed my grandda built me, smiling at me like...

Like she likes me.

“What are you smiling at me like that for?”

“I’m smiling because I had that exact same thought last night!” she says. She shakes her head as if she just can’t believe it, still holding onto the dreamy delight of her smile. “Goldilocks. I felt like Goldilocks.”

“That’s the one.”

“I was lying in bed beside you,” she says. “And I kept thinking that I needed to get up and find another bed. One without a bear in it.”

“And did you?” I ask, jerking my chin to indicate the bed she’s occupying now. She slides her shoulders up and down on the mattress, the lying-down version of a shrug.

“I guess I just thought that I wanted to see the world through a young Darragh Gowan’s eyes.”

The sound that crawls out of me then can’t quite be called a laugh.

“Not a pretty sight, I’m afraid.”

Not unless I’m looking at her.

“Yeah. I figured,” she says. The smile is gone now. “I remember you once told me that you were never a child.”

“That’s because I wasn’t.”

She rolls her eyes. “You expect me to believe that you were born a fully-formed man?”

“I was born addicted to opioids.”

She sits up at once.

“I didn’t know that.”

“How would you?”

The only people who ever knew about it before are dead now.

My mammy, who lost custody of me for a good long while.

My da, who maintained custody, and who was supposed to stay away from her, but didn't.

My grandda, estranged from his only son, who couldn't do a fucking thing to help me until he eventually found me sleeping rough just before my fifteenth birthday, nearly a year after their deaths.

Most people think I avoid drugs because of the way my parents died.

But it has just as much to do with how I was born.

“Darragh...” Her eyes are searching my face. There's sorrow in them.

And, fucking hell, there's pity.

And the pity isn't even the worst part. The worst part is the way I want to submit to it. The way I want to get down on my knees before her and lay my fucking head in her lap like a dog.

Or a child.

If I did it now, would she push me away? Or would she stroke her fingers through my hair? Let those long nails of hers scratch – so fucking gently – against my skin?

I want it. I want it so much it leaves me terrified and searching for something safer.

Something that doesn't make me feel like I've actually got a heart, and it is breaking.

Something like her anger.

"We need to find out what's happened to Vinny," I say abruptly, my voice cold. Cruel.

The sad softness in her gaze vanishes.

"What do you mean?" she asks warily.

I think of the video. The wedding. The will.

I'm full of vengeful rage once more. And I've never felt more at home.

"Because I haven't seen a single announcement or article anywhere actually saying that he's dead," I reply. "And if he's not, then I have got some goddamn work to do."

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Valentina

Darragh seems to grow more agitated as the day goes on.

He doesn't threaten to kill Papà again, but I know he's thinking about it, because I can hear him talking to Rowan about getting some updates from Tommy.

At one point, Darragh steps into the small courtyard to make a call.

I see him out there as I head into the kitchen for something else to eat.

Rowan is in there, evidently with the same thought I had. He's holding the fridge open with a massive, meaty hand, but at the sight of me, he lets it fall shut.

"Hi again," I say.

"Is there something I can do for you?" He says it stiffly.

Grudgingly. Like the only reason he speaks to me at all is because of his boss just on the other side of the glass door at the back of the house.

We've been here all day at this point. The sun is setting, brushing Darragh with strokes of indigo and bronze while inky shadows pool at his feet.

He's got his phone against his ear. He isn't moving. His back is to me.

"Is he talking to Tommy?" I watch Rowan's wary look, and flap my hand at him.

“Darragh already told me Tommy’s his man in Montréal right now. Is he calling for information on my papà?”

My mouth goes chalky and dry at the question.

I can’t decide if I even want to know what’s happened to papà or not.

Right now, I can exist in a floating sort of limbo.

Nothing’s certain. No decisions have to be made.

A nice little protective cloak of bubble wrap, inflated with ignorance instead of air.

Rowan gives me a slight nod.

I nod back, much more enthusiastically.

“Tommy’s the one who got me on that plane, too, right? And sent Darragh that wedding photo? Ha! To be a fly on the wall when Darragh saw that.”

I’m rambling. I know I am. But I can’t seem to make it stop. Rowan watches me with a flat expression, his eyes flinty.

“What did Darragh do when he saw my wedding photo?” I ask, because suddenly, I have to know.

My abdomen is cramping with the intensity of it.

I squeeze my hands together in front of my belly.

“Did he smash the phone? Or did he do that thing where you expect him to be really

mad, but then he laughs?”

“He cried.”

For a second, I think that Rowan’s joking. That he’s throwing out an answer so nonsensical, so absolutely ludicrous, that its whole purpose is to stun me into shutting up. But one look at his face tells me that this is not a man who jokes. Not when it comes to his boss.

“I don’t believe you,” I whisper, even as the memory of Darragh’s earlier words come back to me with painfully breathtaking force.

Dublin is the only place I’ve ever cried.

“Doesn’t really matter if you do,” Rowan says, facing back towards the fridge, dismissing me both with his tone and the turn of his rock-like shoulder. “You asked a question. I answered it.” He opens the fridge, as clear a signal as any that this conversation is over.

Saliva floods my mouth. The bag of stuff Darragh bought me is still in here where I left it. I snatch it from the counter and go rooting around for the painkillers and anti-nausea meds. That’s how Darragh finds me when he comes back in the door.

“Feeling unwell?”

My head snaps up at the sound of his voice. I give a jerky nod.

“We’re done here for the day.” Darragh says it to Rowan, but his eyes don’t ever leave me as I pop an anti-nausea pill and dry swallow it.

He plucks the bag from my grip and then brushes his hand along my lower back

before pressing the whole of his palm and fingers there.

His hand is so hot. Like having a heating pad. It feels so hatefully good.

Keeping his hand on my back, Darragh leads me to the front door.

I don't fight him or argue. At this point, I just want to go lie down.

Outside, the sky at the front of the house is thick with bruise-coloured clouds.

When we reach the sidewalk and start walking, the air shifts suddenly cooler.

There's a low rumble overhead, then the sky splits open like a punctured water balloon.

I hiss a curse under my breath, scrunching up my face and lifting one of my hands to try to protect myself from the soaking onslaught. Beside me, Darragh's movements catch in the corner of my eye. Still holding the bag, he's wrenching off his shirt one-handed.

"Do you really need to be doing that right now?" I shout over the sound of the rain. It's so loud it sounds like glass marbles dropping all around us and colliding. I shiver, my shoes already drenched and cold. "Let's just go!"

Once Darragh's got his shirt off to apparently enjoy the Dublin rain bare-chested, he forces me to take the drugstore bag.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." I take it and start walking ahead without him. He's the one with the key to the townhouse, but at least there's a little overhang above the door that I can try to stand under while he catches up.

But on those long legs, he catches up immediately. And suddenly, I don't feel the rain anymore.

I blink water from my lashes and look up to see Darragh's white T-shirt held taut above my head, like the top of a tent or a tarp.

But instead of posts or poles holding it in place, it's the inked strength of Darragh's hands.

He has to walk very close beside me to hold his shirt over my head with both arms like this.

He's getting absolutely soaked. His hair is nearly black, falling in dripping spikes into his eyes.

His jeans cling to him, heavy from the rain and sliding dangerously low on his hips.

He's still so fucking big, but his skin looks tighter to his muscles than it should.

Striations of veins make his tattoos buckle and roll on his forearms and biceps.

It only then occurs to me that I haven't seen him eating once since I've arrived here.

"Darragh, stop!" I shout. Even though I'm the one who actually stops.

My legs halt, and I stand to face him on the sidewalk.

Between the rainclouds and the sun setting, it's gotten much darker already.

Streetlights send their missives out into the night.

They illuminate Darragh, every beautiful, damaged, rain-splattered part of him.

“Put your shirt back on!” I say. My throat catches. I blink and pretend it’s the rain. Even though I can’t feel the rain on my face right now, because he’s keeping it away. “You’re getting all wet!”

“It’s fine, pet,” he says. “I’m not made of sugar.”

Not made of sugar. No, I suppose someone like Darragh Gowan could never claim he was.

But even so, there’s a dark and dangerous sort of sweetness in him. In this. In the way he silently holds his own shirt above my head, no regard at all for himself.

He has to bend his tall frame quite low to hold the shirt in place above me, so despite the height difference between us, his face is very close to mine.

Rain glistens in his hair, rolling down his temples, the crooked bridge of his nose, his jaw.

A streetlight is directly behind him. A halo for my devil.

Angel. Evil. Enemy. Protector.

What the hell is Darragh to me now?

He’s trapped me. He’s fought with me. He’s threatened to kill my father in front of me.

And yet, here he is, soaked from the rain, giving me the literal shirt off his back. I want to cry. Or hit him. Or beg him to stop, because I can’t take these moments of

softness. Not from him.

I want to taste the rain on his skin.

It's that last, immediate desire that obliterates all the rest. I push the handles of the bag up over my wrist so that my hands are free.

My fingers slowly rise. They brush Darragh's jaw, silken water contrasting with the gentle scrape of stubble there.

Shirtless as he is, I see the way every part of Darragh's chest, abdomen, and arms go harrowingly taut at my touch.

"What are you doing?" he asks gruffly. I've confused him. Knocked him off guard. It doesn't happen often. His eyes search my face with something close to desperation.

"I just wanted to see if it was true," I say.

"If what was true?"

"That you weren't really made of sugar."

Before he can reply, I slide my hands down to his neck, rise up on my toes.

And kiss him.

Apart from the way I feel the tendons in his neck snap and bulge with a suddenly terrible tension, Darragh doesn't react to my kiss at all. Not at first. He remains unmoving as I explore the still shape of his mouth with my own, tasting water and whiskey and him.

But when my tongue dares to nudge the seam of his closed lips, he shudders, pulls back a little, then growls, “I know you’re not feeling well, pet.

But if you keep this up...” His eyes are dark and ravenous.

Like his very gaze would swallow me whole if it could.

“Then I am going to fuck you anyway. Whether you’re in pain or not. Whether you complain or not.”

It’s a warning I should heed. A chance to run.

Someone sensible would grab it with both hands.

I grab him instead.

This time, his mouth is hot and hungry and open. His tongue invades my mouth, and desire for him hits my bloodstream like a drug.

What is wrong with me? What has he done to me?

To make me want him this badly?

Rain pummels me anew as Darragh drops his shirt. His hands go to my ribs, my waist, my hips, his touch terrible and urgent. When his hands reach my ass, he squeezes, then hoists me up against the soaking wall of his body.

Instinctively, my legs spread as I’m held aloft.

My thighs lock around his waist, my pussy throbbing at his belly.

Despite Mamma's near constant comments about me needing to drop a few pounds, Darragh holds me as if I weigh nothing at all, his arms like iron around me.

He never takes his mouth from mine as he walks us towards the door.

I close my eyes and focus entirely on the molten claiming of his kiss, because even though I know he could drop me on my ass in a puddle at any moment, I don't think he will.

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Somehow Darragh manages to keep me held up against his body with one arm while his other hand fishes keys from his pocket.

He leans me against the door as he unlocks it, trapping me between the wood and him.

I think the door is unlocked now, but he doesn't open it yet.

He takes a moment to keep me pinned there, adjusting our positioning so that his crotch is aligned with mine.

Oh, God. He's so hard. He groans into my mouth and grinds against me.

Heat, and a fresh wave of cramping, grip my pelvis.

I'm not sure if it's only from the medication, or...

Or if I want him so badly it's making me hurt.

The door swings open, and I gasp, swinging with it. But Darragh's still got me. He elbows the door shut behind us both. Just before it closes, I catch a glimpse of his white shirt on the pavement. Abandoned in the rain.

There are boxes in the doorway. Dimly, I remember Darragh saying something about new clothes. He sets me down between the cardboard cubes and for some bizarre reason starts dumping out their contents. Sweaters and dresses and makeup and shoes fall like the rain outside.

My stomach drops. He has enemies here as surely as he does in Toronto. There could be anything inside one of those boxes.

“Are you...” I’m shivering. “Are you looking for a bomb?”

At that same moment, he seizes on something from the pile and yanks it out.

It’s not an explosive device.

It’s a box of condoms.

“You think I would let any of this shit into the house if it hadn’t been thoroughly checked first?” he asks, like he’s shocked I’d even suggest it. “I sent Rowan over with the key earlier to check everything. How the hell do you think this stuff was already inside before we got home?”

“Well, I don’t know,” I reply. I frown and cross my arms over my chest, embarrassed. I didn’t realize Rowan had left Callum’s house for part of the day.

Darragh’s gaze slits, then he smirks.

“Oh, don’t go getting all pouty on me now, pet.

Not when you were the one throwing your arms around me and kissing me like that.

And look what I’ve bought specially for you.

” He gives the box a meaningful shake, making the packaged condoms rattle around inside.

“There are birth control pills, too. But I know those will take a few days to kick in.

Even though you'll start taking them tonight. ”

“You got me birth control? Without me going to the doctor for a prescription?” I ask, focusing on the logistics of the act instead of the imperious “You'll start taking them tonight” bit.

He crosses the floor to me, stepping over mini mountains of satin and wool.

“I told you once,” he murmurs, “that there was nothing in this world that I could not provide.” Then, he presses the box of condoms into my hands, orders me to, “Hold this,” then drops to his knees.

He hooks his fingers beneath the waistband of my leggings, groaning low in his throat when he pulls them down and sees that I am bare beneath them.

Darragh's mouth is scorching velvet on my clit.

I suck in a breath so hard that I'm certain my belly button just about touches my spine.

The corners of the box poke into the flesh of my chest, the cardboard threatening to give out as I clutch it.

It's like I'm trying to clutch onto some sort of control, a tether to myself.

But that tether is fraying. Already, my legs are trembling, my pussy clenching uncontrollably as Darragh drags his lips and teeth and tongue across my most sensitive point of throbbing desire.

“You don't know,” Darragh rasps between greedy, merciless licks and sucks, “how much I've fucking missed the taste of you.

” He grips my pelvis, his thumbs digging into my groin and spreading me wide.

“I’ve been in fucking pain, Valentina,” he says between bruising kisses. “I think I’ve been fucking pining.”

That’s it. That does it. That throws me over the edge.

The thought of Darragh missing me. The thought of him pining.

My abdomen cramps. My pussy contracts. I drop the box, my hands flying blindly to grasp at Darragh’s shoulders and head as I double over with the force of the climax. I’m bent over him, practically hugging him, rubbing myself helplessly against his mouth as I come and shake and moan.

Darragh doesn’t carry me away to some soft bed then. He slides a condom over the jutting, swollen flesh of his cock, and fucks me right there on the floor. Right there, between all the beautiful things that he’s bought me and the door that he’s locked me behind.

He fucks me like he loves me. Like he hates me. Like he’s running out of time.

And maybe he is running out of time.

Maybe we both are.

We can’t stay together like this in Dublin forever. Soon, he’ll have to face the reality of his disinheritance and decide if he will let me go. Soon, we’ll find out what’s happened to my papà.

Soon, we’ll have to go back to Toronto. Back to our worlds that have shifted – shattered – and might never overlap in quite the same way again.

But for now, there is time. Time to feel the cool wood beneath me, Darragh's heat above me and inside me. Time to hear the way he groans my name, like it's a prayer, a broken fucking plea, when he comes.

Valentina

O ver the next few days, we fall into some semblance of a rhythm together.

During the day, Darragh continues to work with Rowan, trying to decipher the reasons behind his grandfather's death. In the evening, I cook dinner for him – for both of us – and watch as sleep and food help to slowly soften the starkest angles of his jaw and cheekbones.

At night, he fucks me, usually more than once. And then he falls into a deep sleep beside me. Sometimes, when he's asleep, I lie awake and trace his tattoos with my eyes, my fingertips, my lips. He almost never stirs.

Other times, when he's asleep, I creep away to another bed, just to try to find some distance from him. But whenever I do that, I wake up in that other room with his long limbs locked around me.

I don't ever hear him when he comes. Sometimes, in the morning after those nights, he seems as confused to wake up in another room as I am to wake up with him beside me in the bed.

It makes me wonder if he sleepwalks.

After a week of this, I decide that I'm as sick of my blonde hair as Darragh is.

I take the afternoon to dye it darker. Luckily, Darragh bought enough dye for me to fully colour my thick hair twice.

The result is a dense, uniform shade the colour of dark roast coffee.

Not a strand of green to be seen, thank goodness.

I put time and care into blowing my hair out in big, shiny waves, then put on a short, slinky black dress and do my makeup.

I observe the results, alone in this bathroom that isn't mine, in the city I've never visited until now, and feel more like myself than I have in weeks.

When Darragh sees me that evening he stares at me in silence for so long that I start to feel a little self-conscious.

"What is it?" I run my hands down the silky front of my dress. Darragh's throat bobs, his eyes tracking the movement.

"In the future, I'd appreciate a warning," he finally says.

"A warning for what?"

"For the next time you plan to come before me looking like my own personal wet dream come to life."

I smirk, feeling a rush of giddiness, because this is the only way I'll ever have power over Darragh, and it's a heady fucking feeling.

I'm about to make a cutesy remark about how warning him would have taken all the fun out of this, but before I can even open my mouth, he's with me, his hands at my hips, his nose thrust against my throat.

"Love your hair like this," he growls, his lips brushing my earlobe before he nips it.

“Have you eaten yet?”

“No. I was going to make some pasta.”

“Leave it.” He draws back and runs his thumb along my chin, just below my lower lip. “I want to take you out.”

Now I’m the one who needs a warning. The only place Darragh’s taken me so far was that pharmacy for the morning after pill.

“You want to... to take me on a date?”

I can’t imagine Darragh ever doing a thing like that, and his next words only hammer that feeling home.

“Don’t know. I’ve never been on a date,” he says with a shrug. “But if that’s what you want to call it, then that’s what it is.”

It seems strange to consider anything we do now a first date. Not after all the things we’ve done and seen. But I feel a stupid little niggle of excitement at the idea anyway.

“Where?” I ask.

“I have a place in mind.”

He tells me it’s not far, so we walk. The air is cool and crisp, the sky unusually clear as night takes hold.

I think this is the coldest it’s gotten here so far.

I haven't looked at my phone, read a newspaper, or even been listening to the radio.

After I do some quick mental math, I realize that today is the first day of October. I'm briefly stunned by that.

Being in Dublin with Darragh...

It almost made me believe that time was standing still.

A chill sweeps through me. My bare arms prick with goosebumps. I don't do anything to draw attention to the fact I'm cold. I don't cross my arms or rub at them or complain.

But Darragh notices. Because of course he does. In a wordless, casual movement, he drapes his leather jacket over my shoulders. His hand coasts down the leather, then touches beneath it, his knuckles brushing the exposed part of my upper spine.

As darkness falls and the lights come to prismatic life, I think that maybe my eyes are beginning to play tricks on me. It looks like the lights are reflecting on...

"Is that water?" I ask, gaping at the dark span of river ahead. I don't know why I'm so surprised to see it here. It's not like Toronto doesn't have rivers.

"That's The Liffey."

The Liffey...

That's the water they pulled his grandfather's body from.

Tourists and locals mill along the banks, laughing and taking selfies, completely innocent to what this water has done to Darragh.

When we reach the fencing that separates the river from the land, I risk a glance up at his face.

I only see him in profile, but he doesn't look upset.

He looks like he doesn't feel anything at all as his eyes – one brown, one hazel-green, both dark – gaze blankly upon the water's rippling surface.

He's let his hand drop away from my back. It hangs at his side. And then it curls into a fist.

That fist never touches me. It hurts me anyway.

I grab it with both hands. Darragh flinches, as if I've woken him from a deep sleep, then turns to me.

As I work to pry his fingers from the clenched fist, he watches me with faint bemusement, like I'm a small, wild animal who's crawled my way into his house and he's trying to figure out how I've gotten there.

He lets me pull his fingers apart. I slide my own between his and squeeze.

We're holding hands.

It's weird that it isn't weird at all.

I was standing on Darragh's right side, so it's my left hand interlocked with his. He raises our hands together in the air, observing the way our fingers fit together. His gaze snags on my bare ring finger.

He hasn't said anything about the ring since Toronto.

Hasn't told me to put it on, or, if he thinks that I don't have it anymore, told me that he'll buy me another.

Sal got shot in the head. While we don't know for sure about Papà, there's no reality where I'm not a widow right now.

There's nothing really standing in his way.

Except the will.

It should be a relief. A relief that, while Darragh obviously wants to keep me with him for now, he no longer seems to consider us engaged.

So somebody fucking tell me why it's not? Why, instead of relief, instead of feeling like there's freedom ahead of me, if I can only survive long enough to get there, I've only got this empty ache of loss?

Darragh distracts me from the question, tugging me along by the hand.

"Come on," he says. "We're nearly there."

He takes me across an elegantly curving bridge – apparently called the Ha'Penny Bridge – and once we're on the other side it's a short walk past old stone buildings to Darragh's intended destination.

It's a pub, and when Darragh opens the door for me, the smell of beer, meat, and warm bread hit me at the same moment that a fiddle song stops.

Clapping and cheering breaks out, and a young server with a moustache hustles over to me.

“I’m sorry!” he shouts over the sound of the applause and cheering. “We don’t have any tables available! It’ll be about a forty minute wait. We’re always really busy on our live music nights, and-”

His words die in his throat as his eyes rise with almost comical slowness to something – or someone – behind me.

“You were saying?” Darragh asks.

The poor server looks like he’s about to piss himself.

“I’ll show you to your table, Mr. Gowan!”

The table is actually a booth raised a little off the main floor. Darragh motions for me to sit, and I slide onto the bench that faces outwards towards the rest of the restaurant. From here I’ve got a view of the bar, the musical duo with their fiddle and drum, and the lower tables.

“I feel a little overdressed,” I say as I hand Darragh his jacket, exposing my cleavage and dress.

“Something tells me that you look precisely the way you want to right now,” Darragh says.

It’s annoying how right he is. How much I feel like myself again with this hair, this dress, the high heels, and the makeup. I expect Darragh to sit across from me in the booth, but I should have known he wouldn’t. He sits beside me, sliding over until I’m trapped between the wall and his body.

“You’re supposed to sit on the other side, you know,” I tell him primly, even as my body reacts with pure pleasure at his nearness.

“And how would you know that, pet?” he asks silkily.

“When you’ve never even been on a date yourself.

” He grins, his straight white teeth giving a wolfish gleam.

“Unless you count that time I crashed your fancy rooftop dinner with fucking Fabbri.” He touches the front of my throat.

“That time I ended one life. And claimed another for my own.”

If I save your life, he said to me as I choked in his arms, that life becomes mine.

His grin has faded. His eyes fall to my mouth. His fingers crawl their way to the back of my neck, gripping the base of my skull. My lips part involuntarily, like my body is inviting him in before my brain can catch up.

And even once my brain catches up, I don’t try to stop it.

His kiss is slow, languorous. But there’s nothing lazy about it. It’s a thorough unravelling of my senses, leaving me so hot and dizzy that when he slides his hand beneath my dress, toying with my clit through my panties, I whimper and welcome the touch.

Until the band starts up a new song. And I remember where the hell we are.

I snap my eyes open and try to flee. But the wall is in the way and there’s nowhere to go.

Darragh keeps his hand where it is, stroking idly over my quivering flesh, but he straightens up and leans back, watching the music like he isn’t about to make me

come under the table.

The server chooses that moment to return to the table. I squeeze my thighs together so hard I probably cut off blood supply to Darragh's fingers. I see him smirk in response just before he slides his hand a little further down, letting it come to rest on my knee as he orders himself a Guinness.

"Red wine, please," I croak. I clear my throat. "And some water. And some food. Whatever you recommend."

"She'll have shepherd's pie," Darragh says.

"I was asking what he recommended," I say, quirking a brow at Darragh as the server leaves. "You know, the guy who actually works here?"

"How about you eat what I recommend," Darragh says, pinching my knee. "You know, the guy who spent years here?"

"I know you grew up in Dublin, but-

"No. Here ." He sweeps his other hand through the air, indicating the entire space. "Callum owned this pub. It was the first business he ever bought. When I wasn't at school once he got me re-enrolled, or boxing, I was here."

I look at the pub with new eyes, taking in the beautiful wooden bar, the tables that look handcrafted, the thick, dark beams that run across the ceiling.

"How old is this place?" I ask.

"At least five hundred years old. Maybe more."

I contemplate the weight of that fact as the server brings our drinks. I take a sip of my red wine. Five hundred years. All that history.

And not just history in a broad sense, but Darragh's history. From the sounds of it, he spent a good portion of his teenage years here.

This is the sort of thing he'd be losing by marrying me. Not just money, which he's already got ungodly amounts of. But places like this. Places like that townhouse, with his old bed and his trophies and his memories.

It's not just about a will. It's not just about what he feels entitled to as Callum's heir.

It's about having every good part of his old life in Ireland ripped away from him. It's about carving a big, gaping hole in his past and trying to patch up that hole with, what? A marriage to me?

What could I even offer him, what have I ever offered him, besides some toxic combination of my lust and my fury? When he gave me that ring in Toronto, I told him that I hated him.

And then I went and married someone else.

I chug my wine, trying to drown out these feelings. This inadequacy. This grief.

When the shepherd's pie comes, I eat it because he tells me to.

It's so good. Warm and filling. I think of Darragh, young and angry and orphaned, eating the exact same thing in the exact same place more than a decade ago. I think of him now, never being able to eat this here again, unless he comes in and orders it as a regular customer, as a stranger...

And I know, in that moment, that I can never keep him.

Darragh

Valentina's pretty quiet on the walk back. But she holds my hand. And I guess that's something.

I've never held hands with a woman before. Never held hands with anyone.

"Oh! I recognize this place," she says as we approach the Fusilier's Arch of St. Stephen's Green. "We parked the car around here, right? I want to go get my bag."

Again with the fucking bag. But we really are close to the car. At this point, I don't see why not. I don't think she poses quite as much of a flight risk as she once did. And I can always confiscate her cash and passport and just let her have the rest of the shit she clearly wants so badly.

I lead her to the alley entrance to the underground car park. We take the dingy elevator down to the level where I parked the rented vehicle. We're the only ones here right now. Valentina's heels, and my heavier footsteps, echo dully through the concrete building.

"Which one is it?" she asks, scanning the parking spaces. "I can't tell cars apart to save my life."

"There," I say. I don't bother pointing.

We're still holding hands. So as I walk towards it, she follows.

I unlock the vehicle and open the door to the backseat.

Valentina audibly sighs with relief at the sight of her shiny black bag.

Then, she pulls her fingers from mine so she can grab it with both hands.

And that really fucking bothers me, though I don't want to admit it. I scowl at the bag like it's somehow responsible for Valentina disentangling her fingers from mine.

"What the fuck," I ask pointedly, "is so important in there?"

"Nothing," she mumbles. But even so, she unzips it, digging around as if to make sure something is still there.

And it can't be the passport, or her wallet, because both of those things were on top and clearly visible.

I'm about to press her on it, about to dump the entire collection of the bag's contents on the fucking floor until she tells me what's going on, when my phone buzzes in my back pocket.

It's Amos.

Watching Valentina continue to search through her bag, I accept the call.

"What is it?"

"Good evening to you too," he says with a low chuckle. "I have some information for you."

"Well then?"

He laughs again.

“I only knew Callum Gowan for a brief time. But you really do remind me of him. It’s a compliment,” he adds when I don’t immediately reply.

“But as requested, this is the information I’ve got for you.

A bank account registered to a Sam Jaw, which perhaps obviously is one of Jim Shaw’s aliases, recently received an international payment for ten thousand euros. ”

Ten thousand euros. A man like Callum Gowan dead for that paltry fucking amount. It should be impossible. Should violate some fundamental law of the universe.

“The timing of the payment makes me think,” Amos goes on, “that he indeed was hired to assassinate Callum Gowan.”

“No shit, he was hired.” I figured that out myself. If that’s all the information Amos has got...

“There’s more,” he says.

A little divot is forming between Valentina’s brows. Her lips are pursed with focus. I want to kiss her.

“I was able to finally uncover details of the payment’s path. It appears to have come through a complex series of shell corporations.”

“And?”

Idly, I catch a lock of Valentina’s dark hair between my fingers, rubbing the strands as she practically sticks her whole fucking head in the bag.

“And the origin of the payment came from Toronto. From a corporation registered to Vincenzo Titone.”

I release Valentina’s hair like it’s fucking burned me.

She doesn’t even notice.

“I’ll kill him.”

“Kill Vincenzo?” Amos asks. “They’ve just started sharing the news in the Canadian media.”

“The news that I am going to rip his fucking guts out for this?”

“The news that Vincenzo Titone is already dead.”

I hang up immediately, pulling up a search engine, my pulse like an assault rifle in my temples.

Multiple news articles have populated now.

And they all say the same thing. That Vincenzo Titone, the fourth gunshot wound victim from the Montréal shooting – the first three being two bikers and Sal Di Mauro – has died.

“Who was that?” Valentina asks belatedly. And distractedly. She’s still looking in her bag, scraping her nails along the bottom like some little black squirrel who can’t remember where it stored its nuts for the winter.

“Your daddy is dead.”

Finally, she lifts her face. Her eyes are wide, and extra bright with gold, as colour drains from the rest of her face.

“What?”

“The media has just started reporting on it.” I spin my phone so she can see the most recent article I’ve landed on.

She drops the bag, letting half the shit spill out, so she can snatch the phone from my grip. I let her take it. As she frantically scans the text, her eyelashes fluttering rapidly, the phone begins to shake.

Her breath rushes in and out. She pants more than speaks the next words. “I have to go to Toronto.”

“Like hell, you do.” I take the phone back, as if she’s going to use it to book a flight right now. “You’re staying right here. You’re staying with me.”

“But... But my mamma, and-”

“Fuck your mammy,” I hiss. “And fuck your daddy, too.”

He killed my grandda.

And then he had the nerve to fucking die before I could go and kill him. There will be no closure, no vengeance. Nothing for me but this ouroboros of anger and pain, always feeding on itself.

“I’m going,” Valentina says. Her eyes are shiny. But I can see that she’s replacing sorrow with combativeness. “With or without you. I have to be with my mamma. I’ll find a way.”

I grip her wrists and drag her to me. The phone falls, and I wouldn't give two fucks about that normally, but it lands beside something that draws my eye like metal to a magnet.

Something yellow and gold. Something sparkly.

"You kept it."

"What?" Valentina gasps, writhing and wriggling in my hold, trying to get free.

"The ring." I wrench my gaze from the floor to her face. "Why didn't you tell me you still had it? Why didn't you tell me that you brought it here?"

She kept it. All this time. She might not have been wearing it...

But she still brought it all the way across the ocean anyway.

Maybe she only kept it to pawn it.

No. I don't think that's the case. She's got all kinds of expensive shit she could have sold instead. And in her haste to get out of the country, when she was packing, she chose this.

"Is this what you were looking for?" I demand, grabbing the ring with one hand and keeping her held fast with the other. "Is this what you were fucking digging for in that bag?"

She doesn't answer, but I can see in the way that her teary eyes flash that my instinct is correct.

It wasn't the passport. It wasn't the cash.

It was this. This was what she wanted.

This ring, with a diamond the precise colour of the lightest parts of her irises, such a perfect match that I literally stopped breathing for a second when I first saw it. It used to be an oval. I had it specially cut like this. Shaped like the tears she's cried.

The tears that fucking ruin me.

And that's what we are to each other, after all. Isn't it? Utter fucking ruin.

My grandda would still be alive if I had never seen her.

If I had never saved her.

So I kiss her, because I can't think of what the hell else to do.

Because if I don't, I think I'm to lose my mind.

I back her up against the car, my mouth working powerfully over hers until she opens to my tongue with a harried gasp.

Intoxicating sweetness, my Valentina. Poison so sweet I swallow it down willingly.

Even the pain is sweet. The berry brightness of her nails on my face, scratching. Pushing me away.

"Stop, Darragh!" she shouts. It echoes, coming back to me tenfold. I'm clutching the ring so hard in my fist I think my palm is bleeding. My face definitely is.

"Just stop," she says, more quietly this time, but just as fiercely. "My papà is dead. My mamma needs me. I can't do this anymore."

“Can’t do what?”

“Can’t hide away with you here, like the rest of the world doesn’t exist!”

“You’re not leaving me.” There’s a clawing desperation in my voice that I don’t recognize and don’t want to claim.

But I’m not begging. I’m stating a fucking fact. She tries to leave me, then I will tie her up to keep her if I have to.

We’re both breathing hard. Adrenaline and lust and hate and need and every moment we’ve ever shared, every secret, every sin, coursing between us like a river that might drown us both.

“You’re not leaving me.” I don’t even realize I’ve repeated the words until something goes agonizingly tender in her fire-gold gaze.

“Come with me then,” she whispers.

And just like that, I’m powerless. Just like that, she’s snared me. Same way she did on that rooftop. Same way she’s done it a thousand times since then.

Four hours later we are on a private plane heading for Toronto.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:20 am

Valentina

This plane ride is about a million times more comfortable than my flight into Dublin.

The crappy thing is that I'm too numb to appreciate it.

Now that the shock of Papà's death has had time to filter through me, I just feel hollow.

I'm not sad. At least, not right now. I can't say I'll be able to maintain that numbness once I see Mamma.

I have a feeling that her grief will be the catalyst to my own.

At least I'm not alone, though I would have come on my own if I had to. But Darragh's here with me. I still can't quite believe it. I thought he'd scoff at my request to come with me to Toronto, laugh in my fucking face, then lock me away and burn my passport.

But instead, he's arranged everything. He lounges on the creamy leather seat across from mine, one elbow on the armrest, his chin atop his hand as he glares grimly at the window.

And I really mean at it, not out it. Because I don't think he registers anything beyond the flat darkness of the glass. Not even his own reflection in it.

My bag sits between my feet on the floor. Darragh chunked the ring into it back in the

parking garage. But he hasn't mentioned it once since then.

And neither have I.

I'm so tired.

I should try to get some sleep.

But instead, I speak, because I can't continue looking at the brutal, regal outlines of Darragh's profile, marred by the scratches I've left. I can't continue sitting here while he keeps his gaze glued to the window instead of me.

"So what happens when we land? I'll go straight to my house?"

Weird how I say "my house." Weird how I don't say "home."

"No."

"No?" I bristle. "We're not flying back to Toronto just so you can hide me away somewhere or hold me prisoner."

"That isn't what I said." Finally, he looks at me.

Only I find I'm not prepared for it. Not prepared for the way his eyes can pin me.

Strip me bare. "We're going to be landing in the middle of the night Toronto-time.

I doubt your mammy will be in a state to receive you.

And we don't even know if she's left Montréal yet or not. "

“OK. All of that is true. But even if she’s still in Montréal, I can go to the house and-”

“You’ll be sleeping at my place.”

I sit up straighter.

“Your place?” I don’t even know where Darragh lives. Besides the cottage beside ours, I’ve never seen any of his properties. “Where is it?”

“Them,” he corrects. “You can take your pick on where we stay. I’ve got houses in Rosedale and Forest Hill. Plus the condo in Yorkville.”

“Not the condo,” I tell him immediately. Even though I’m sure any condo Darragh owns will be spacious and luxurious, I can’t stomach the thought of sleeping in a box in the sky tonight. Not when Papà is in a box of his own now.

Keep it together.

“We’ll go to the Forest Hill house,” he says. “That’s where I usually live.” A faint smile touches his lips. “You look surprised by that statement.”

I can picture him as a teenager in the Dublin townhouse.

But, here, now? This massive, tattooed murderer?

I can’t imagine him doing mundane things like having his morning coffee or brushing his teeth in the same bathroom every night.

Even when we were technically neighbours on Georgian Bay, he came and went like some spirit from a story.

He said he came there to sleep. But I never even saw him do that.

“I just... I don’t know why, but I find it hard to picture you actually living somewhere.”

He laughs. I lean forward, like I can dive into the sound.

“What, pet?” he asks with another low chuckle. “You think when I’m in Toronto, I just crawl through the sewers like a rat? Or is it that you can’t picture me living somewhere, because when I’m not with you, I must not be living at all?”

“I...”

He shakes his head, still smirking.

“I’m not offended. Both those statements have a bit of essential truth to them.”

“It’s true that you’re a sewer rat?”

“And that I’m not really alive without you.”

He tips his head back and closes his eyes. I don’t know if he actually sleeps or not. Be he doesn’t say anything else to me for the rest of the flight.

I don’t sleep on the flight, but I do fall asleep as Darragh drives us to Forest Hill, curled up against the seat heater on the passenger side.

It’s unseasonably chilly for early October, even by Ontario standards, and it feels extra cold compared to Dublin’s milder climate.

It’s distinctly unwelcoming. Like the very air is rejecting us.

Trying to push us back across the ocean.

But the seat heater works just fine, and I lose myself to the world, rocked by the lullaby of wheels on highways and the signs of familiar streets greeting me in a blur every time I blearily open my eyes.

Distantly, I become aware of stillness. The car has stopped. The heat from the seat rapidly recedes. I whimper in complaint, snuggling down closer to the leather, trying to hold on to the last dregs of warmth.

But a sudden gust of frosty wind ruins any hope I have of clinging onto heat. There's a click, and the release of pressure as my seatbelt is undone for me.

For a twisted moment, I half-dream I'm with Papà.

Because for every time he hurt me, or ignored me, or did horrible shit to me, there were also times that he undid my seatbelt for me and carried my small, sleeping body from the car into the house so that I wouldn't have to wake up and walk through the cold on my own.

But this isn't Papà's scent. These aren't his bulky arms. They're stronger, longer, leaner.

Darragh lifts me easily, cradling me gingerly against his chest. He pauses to grab something – my bag, I think – then closes the car door and walks.

I wrap my arms around his neck, nuzzling my nose against his throat. Seeking heat. Seeking him.

Between sleepy blinks, I glimpse the outline of a stunningly huge and even more stunningly beautiful white stone house surrounded by trees. Inside the darkened

foyer, Darragh locks the door behind us, then resets an alarm on a pad on the wall.

Then, he takes me upstairs.

He doesn't turn on a single light. I observe nothing beyond dark halls and then the dark walls of his bedroom. He lays me down on the bed, then straightens as if he means to turn and go.

"Don't leave," I whisper, catching his hand in mine. I can barely see him like this. He's nothing but a shadow. A silhouetted presence in the dark.

But his hand is warm, and his voice is as real as it's ever been when he rasps, "My heart can barely take it when you resist me, Valentina. I don't know how I'll survive you if you beg."

"You'll find a way. Sewer rats always survive."

And so does the wolf in my story. The bear in my bed.

"Please, Darragh. Please stay with me."

I'm being so stupid. There's no way he'd leave me alone in this house. He's probably just going to get a drink of water, or to retrieve his own bag. And here I am acting like he's about to leave me to go off to war or something.

But I'm frantic with the need to keep him with me. In this room, preferably in this bed. I'm suddenly terrified of everything without him. The dark. The strange house. The emptiness opening up in my chest like a wound, sucking everything in.

But not Darragh. He's too big. He's got a gravity field of his own. Maybe, just maybe, he'll keep me from collapsing in on myself entirely.

I sit up, my left hand still holding his.

My right hand goes to the crotch of his jeans.

Darragh is utterly still. The only sound is the slip of the button through its denim loop, the metal zipper sliding down, the rustle of fabric as I pull clothing away from his thick shaft.

It jerks in my hand, velvet and electric.

I lower my head and take his tip into my mouth.

Now he makes a sound. A sharply hissed inhale between clenched teeth.

He throbs in me, and it's a marvel, nearly fucking magical, the way human flesh can grow and stiffen like this.

I feel every lurch of his shaft against my tongue and the sensitive walls of my mouth.

I taste him in a way I've never tasted him before, all strange masculine salt.

I've never done this. I probably don't know what the hell I'm doing.

I worry that I'm terrible, that he's going to roll his eyes and push me away when I start to clumsily suck him.

But he gives a bone-deep groan, gripping the back of my head with his free hand.

His chest heaving above me, he starts fucking into my mouth fully hard, like stone made living flesh.

“I’ve imagined being in your mouth so many times,” he admits between panted breaths. “Never thought you’d do it willingly. Always thought I’d have to pin you down and fuck your throat without permission.”

My pussy clenches at that image. I wonder why he hasn’t tried.

On an especially urgent thrust, my teeth make contact with his flesh, and there I have my answer. It’s not like I haven’t bitten him before. That kiss in the club. I made him bleed.

“Touch yourself.”

I moan around his dick at the harsh command. I slide my hand beneath my sweatpants rubbing my clit fast and hard.

“Good,” he groans, massaging my scalp. “I want you dripping. I want you so fucking messy for me, Valentina.”

I think I already am. Moisture soaks my panties, dampening my fingers through the fabric. I’m going to come already. Somehow, he must sense it. Because he immediately growls, “Not yet,” then fists my hair and pulls my head away.

I cry out at the mingling pain and pleasure, the sharpness at my scalp. He lets go of my hair just long enough to strip me of my clothing. Hoodie, bra, panties and sweatpants get discarded in a heap.

And then he’s standing over me, shoving me by the shoulders until I’m pitched backwards onto the bed.

Darragh grabs my legs and hauls me closer to him, so my ass is right at the edge of the mattress.

It's a high bed. Even with Darragh standing up on those long legs, he doesn't have to bend awkwardly.

As easily as breathing, as automatic as a heartbeat, his cock finds my entrance and plunges inside. Plunges home.

My back bows right off the bed as he fills me completely. He's in me to the hilt on his first thrust, and I am broken. I am whole. I am everything and nothing.

Nothing but his.

Even if I never wanted to be. Even if I fought him every step of the way.

That agonizing truth erupts over me as I climax on Darragh's bare cock. His rhythm hitches in response. So does his breath. And then he's driving harder, spreading my thighs wider as he leans over me, bracketing my head with his forearms.

He presses his forehead to mine when he comes.

And I dig my nails into his back.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:20 am

Darragh

I rise early the next morning, leaving Valentina sleeping in my bed. I shower and get dressed in jeans and a long-sleeve black shirt. Then I put my leather jacket on top.

And beneath the jacket I put my gun.

When I return to the bed, my sleepy little pet doesn't appear to have stirred at all. She's just where I left her, dark locks of her wavy hair spread like strands of seaweed across the pillows. It still feels unfair, even after all this time, how perfect her fucking face is.

In another life, in another time or version of myself, I might have taken pleasure in ruining that face. Breaking it. Scarring it.

But here, now, all I can do is watch in worshipful fucking resentment as the morning light bathes each feature, like even the sun is her own personal attendant.

I will never fucking forget what it was like to have it rain every damn day in Dublin until the morning she stepped foot off that plane.

I could just let her sleep. Pretend we're not in Toronto for any reason in particular. Keep her sleepy and cozy and well-fucked, tucked up in my bed, exactly the way she made me promise that I wouldn't.

I toss my phone onto the pillow beside her. The bouncing weight of it makes her frown in her sleep.

“It’s time to wake up,” I tell her. “And call your mammy.”

She groans and looks like she might ignore me. Until my words fully sink in, bringing reality with them.

With a strangled sound, she opens her eyes and grabs the phone. Then she pauses, her eyes seeking me out, like she thinks this is some kind of trap.

“Go ahead,” I tell her. I touch my phone to unlock it with my fingerprint. “It’s all yours.”

Just like me.

Fuck.

She opens the call app and types in what must be her mother’s cell phone number. Then she holds the phone at the side of her head and waits.

It doesn’t take long.

“Mamma?”

At the sound of her mother’s voice on the other end, she breaks. All the tears she hasn’t cried since learning of her da’s demise come pouring out. Her left hand goes to her mouth, her beautiful face crunching up with the force of her sobs.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Seeing her like this makes me feel like someone’s dragging their teeth down the insides of my ribs. It’s like a nails on a chalkboard sensation, but inside my chest cavity. It makes me want to crawl out of my own miserable skin.

I cannot fucking stand it.

She can mourn him if she must. But I'm not going to stand here and watch her do it.

I leave her in the bedroom and go downstairs to the kitchen.

I should eat before the rest of this god-forsaken day begins.

But as I hunt through the fridge and cupboards, I find myself choosing things Valentina likes instead.

I usually have something simple with protein in the morning, if I eat anything at all.

But instead of cracking a few eggs into a pan, I'm toasting waffles.

Darragh Gowan, Mad Darragh, feared leader of the Irish mob in Toronto. And I'm standing in front of the toaster, waiting for a frozen pastry to cook just right.

Un-fucking-believable.

It kind of makes me want to hurl the entire toaster, waffles and all, out the window.

But all I do is slather butter on them once they pop, and then pour maple syrup on top.

Then, I add water and beans to the coffee machine.

By the time I'm pushing the button so the machine can do its thing, I hear quiet footsteps on the stairs.

"That smells good." Her voice is a little raspy, but steady. Apart from the red eyes, there is no sign of her earlier crying jag. "I didn't know you could cook."

“Does putting a processed, frozen pastry inside a machine count as cooking?” I ask, leaning back against the counter and crossing my arms over my chest.

She shrugs. “It’s more than I’ve ever seen any of the men in my family do.”

“Yeah, well. My parents were high or passed out or not home most of the time. You tend to pick up life skills pretty quick in those conditions.”

“Ah. So you’re a self-taught waffle master, then.”

I feel my brows rise. I’m amused, maybe even pleased, by her little jab of dark humour. It’s so much more enjoyable than her pity.

“You’ll have to be the judge of the mastery.” I plop a fork onto her plate. “Eat. Then tell me what your mammy said.”

She doesn’t take her plate to the table. She just hacks into the waffles with her fork standing right there at the counter.

Right there beside me.

“I’d give this a solid seven out of ten,” she says as she finishes the last bite. “Got a little too crunchy around the edges for my liking.”

“Noted.” I sound flippant, but I’m so gone for this girl that I actually am taking note of her waffle preferences. Like a fucking fool. “What did your mammy say? Is she still in Montréal?”

Valentina shakes her head.

“She’s at home. She was worried that I might try to come home and no one would be

there. So she left Papà-" Her voice cracks. She clears her throat. "She left Papà's body in Montréal and came back on her own."

"Your mammy came back on her own?" I ask in disbelief. "What, like she drove here?"

The woman barely drives and drinks like a fucking fish. And I can't see Carlotta Titone taking a regular public train like the rest of the peasants.

"So, it sounds like Curse is still being held in Montréal," she explains. "Elio is there trying to deal with that. But he's been going back and forth because Deirdre's at home in Toronto and he's not willing to be away from her any longer than is necessary."

Ah, Elio. I used to look down on him for his pathetic obsession with Deirdre. Because I thought it made him weak.

But I can't look down at him for that any more. Because now I'm in the exact same fucking gutter with him.

"So Elio came back to check on Deirdre, and he brought Mamma with him." She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. Her lips mook matte with sticky sugar.

I've never enjoyed maple syrup. The fact we have any here at all is a testament to my shopper's preferences, not mine.

I still want to lick it off her anyway.

"I want to go as soon as possible," she goes on. "Mamma's all alone at the house. Sounds like all the capos and soldiers are either in Montréal right now, or Elio's got them guarding Deirdre. Mamma is all alone. And unprotected."

She stares at me.

“Oh, fuck no,” I say, reading the message in her look. “If you think I’m going to be your mammy’s personal bodyguard, then you must have lost your goddamn mind.” I take the empty plate away. “No more waffles for you. The glycemic load is turning your brain into shit.”

I put the plate and fork in the sink while Valentina huffs behind me.

“Well, I don’t know what else to tell you,” she cries, throwing her hands onto her hips. “I’ll be living at home with her.”

“No. You won’t be. You will be living here. Or in whichever house I am occupying at the time.”

I’m not letting her sleep away from me. Not even for one bloody night.

And I sure as shit am not going to move into Vincenzo Titone’s fucking house, even temporarily.

“But-”

“But nothing. You are mine. You go where I go.”

“I’m yours?” Her gaze sparks. “In what capacity? Because you certainly haven’t called me your fiancée lately, and last time I checked, if you married me, then you’d lose your entire Irish inheritance.”

“You know?”

She nods, her mouth doing that tight, frowny thing she sometimes does before she

cries.

“Papà told me right before my wedding to Sal. He told me... Told me that he and Callum had made the idea of marriage to me very unappealing to you. He told me you’d be disinherited if you went through with it.

” Her voice gets very small. “And that’s why you didn’t come back for me. ”

Her words are in my guts and they are twisting.

“Pet,” I say hoarsely, “Valentina, precious, I didn’t know about Sal.”

“You didn’t know. Yeah. Yeah.” She nods to herself, then suddenly switches gears and angrily shakes her head. “Do you know why Papà got all pissy with me and told me that? Because I was wearing your fucking ring.”

My chest hurts.

“I wore your ring. Just like you told me to. Wore it on the morning of my wedding to somebody else. Papà ripped it off and told me you were never coming back for me.”

A shimmering tear rolls down her perfect cheek. I catch it beneath my thumb. It burns like acid.

“So forgive me,” she snarls, batting my hand away, “if I married someone else with a proverbial gun to my head. Forgive me if I believed him. Because even now, you’re proving Papà right.”

“Proving him right about what?” My voice shakes. I have to fight to keep from shouting in her face.

“That the change in Callum’s will was enough to keep you away.”

“ Keep me away? ”

I lose the battle and shout it after all. She’s not cowed or frightened by my volume. Quite the opposite. She’s always been a passionate fighter. Probably would have made a good boxer. She stands up straighter as I grip the counter on either side of her, caging her in.

“How the hell can you say that something like that kept me away?” I snap, pressing myself against her. My cock is straining for her. “When I brought you home myself, against my own better judgment? When I fucked you in my bed last night? And then made you fucking breakfast this morning?”

I grab her hips and forcefully spin her around. My hand finds the back of her neck. I give a shove, pinning her flat against the counter. Then, with my other hand, I wrench down her stretchy black pants and thong. I shove my fat tip against her cunt – already wet.

“Is this me keeping my distance, pet?” I ask through clenched teeth as I push inside her. “Is this how I stay away?”

I take up a merciless rhythm, and she pushes back against me just as desperately as I thrust forward.

It’s violence between us. It’s vicious. It’s exquisite and terrible, chaotic and painful and perfect.

Valentina’s spine arches needily as I fuck her, her neck bending back towards me.

I fist her hair with one hand, wrenching her head even further back, then press my

other palm to the front of her silken throat.

“I don’t care what the fucking will says,” I hiss against her ear.

“And I don’t need a wedding to make you mine.

You are already mine in all ways. Always.

And just for the fucking record-” My movements grow harder.

I punctuate every word with a brutal drive of my hips.

“I will” – thrust – “always” – thrust – “come” – thrust, thrust, thrust – “back for you.”

No matter who she fucking marries. No matter who her daddy is. No matter what she’s done.

Valentina’s moan splits the air. Her pussy flutters, then contracts on me like a vise. I want to fuck her through it, but I can’t. My balls go tight and then I’m exploding, and it’s all I can do to stay standing.

I’m still inside her when she shakily inhales and says, “Maybe I am yours, Darragh. But I can’t be your fucking goomah. Good Sicilian girls like me can never be mistresses to men like you.”

“A good Sicilian girl,” I grind out, “wouldn’t have my still-twitching cock inside her right now.” I give a small thrust, feeling her silken walls quiver in response. “What are you saying, anyway? Are you saying that you want me to marry you?”

I go still, my cock yet inside her. I don’t breathe as I await her response.

If she told me she wanted me to marry her now...

I'd be powerless. Just like I was powerless when she asked me to come with her back to Toronto.

I'd probably burn my grandda's townhouse down myself if only she'd willingly marry me among the ashes.

"That isn't what I'm saying," she replies flatly. "At all."

Once, when I was sixteen, I took a very hard blow from my grandda to the head. That's what her response feels like. Like a punch that comes very close to killing me.

I don't know why it should stun me. I've always known any marriage to her would have to be forced. Otherwise, I would have gotten down on one knee with that ring, like some normal fucking sap, instead of arranging it all behind her back.

She might reach for my hand – or my cock – when she's lonely or horny or feeling afraid of the dark. She might even beg me to stay with her.

But she won't beg me to marry her.

And when she was free in Montréal, when she had her chance to run, when she could have gone anywhere, done anything...

She booked a flight to London. Not to Dublin.

When she learned of her da's death, she said she'd come back to Toronto with or without me.

She didn't choose me.

As I slide my cock out of her and fix my clothes, I grimly confront the fact that she probably never will.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:20 am

Darragh

The air is cool, the sky almost neon it's so bright and blue. The trees in Toronto are starting to take on the orange hues of autumn. All in all, it's a picture-perfect sort of day. The kind you'd immortalize in a painting and hang on a wall in a boring, generic hotel.

I already hate it.

Because Valentina is in the car beside me and I am driving her to the last place I'd ever want her to be.

I won't leave her there overnight. I don't care what she says or how angry she gets.

We drive from Forest Hill in Midtown, then drive north and east, passing lush parks and golf courses. The green spaces remind me of the first day I had her with me in Dublin, backed up against the trunk of that old tree on St. Stephen's Green.

I glance at Valentina, who is looking out the window in silence. She had a quick shower and got changed before we left, because, despite her haste to go home, she snarkily told me that she refused to stand before her grieving mamma with my come dripping out of her.

So she's all fresh and clean in her seat, with every foul physical trace of me washed off of her.

Her dark hair is damp and tied in a loose braid.

Little stray bits around her temples curl, and I want to tug on them.

Tight jeans hug her shapely legs, and the cropped, knitted sweater she's wearing is a warm rose pink.

When she gives a small sigh, her shoulders shift, which makes the back of the sweater gape for a moment.

Before it settles into place on the back of her neck once more, I glimpse the tag. Made in Ireland.

One of the things I bought for her in Dublin.

My body has a sharply aching response to that. I nearly pull over. Just to hold her.

I don't.

We're in the Titones' neighbourhood now. We pass by the property I know belongs to Elio, then turn onto the drive that will take us to Vincenzo's.

"I guess you didn't need any directions," Valentina says as we approach the gate. "I almost forgot you've been here once before"

"It's been more than once."

"Really? You had more than one meeting here?"

"Only one meeting."

"Then how..."

We're nearly at the gate. I don't see a soldier in the booth ahead. Which is good, because it means no one's going to be shooting at us before we even enter the property. I guess Elio really has commandeered all the men for Deirdre and Montréal.

Even more reason not to let Valentina stay here without me.

"Maybe I visited you in a dream."

"A dream?" The flawless arches of her brows draw together over those skeptical golden-brown eyes. "What does that even mean?"

"It means that someone should move the patio furniture below your balcony."

It was always far too easy to climb up to the Titone principessa's tower while she was sleeping.

I know she wants to ask me more, but we're at the gate now, and without a soldier there's no one to open it.

"It's OK," she says, undoing her seatbelt. "I know the code."

"I don't want you going out there." Unease spikes along the back of my neck. "Tell me the code and I'll do it."

She hesitates, then shakes her head. "I can't tell you the code."

Too fucking smart. Even though Vinny's dead, and Valentina's in my car, and there's nothing I want in that house now, she's too clever to willingly give me something that could be used against her family.

She slips out of the car and does a hurried little jog-hop-walk thing that's so fucking

cute it should be illegal. She punches in a number on a security pad. When the gate rolls open, she walks through it instead of coming back to the car.

Instead of coming back to me.

For fuck's sake.

I turn off the engine and abandon the vehicle, stalking through the open gate after her with long, angry strides.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask, catching up to her.

“We should have driven up to the house. That car has bulletproof windows.” I put an arm around her shoulder, drawing her close against my side, as I scan the sunlit property.

Ahead, the house sprawls, big and beige, like a castle.

There are trees, dense around the edge of the property, but they don't offer us any protection where we are now.

We're in the middle of the driveway. Wide fucking open.

“What?” Valentina says, walking ahead once more. “It's not like Mamma's a sniper with the barrel of her gun aimed out the window at us right now.”

Goddamn. I haven't even looked at the windows yet. I do so now, but I don't see anything or anyone. None of the windows appear to be open.

“She's your mammy, and she's survived multiple decades married to your da,” I point out as we reach the top of the drive. “So she's probably capable of just about

anything.”

“Yeah, well. She hates guns. She thinks they’re crass.”

Crass they may be, but guns are what bought her this giant fairytale house.

Now that we’ve nearly reached the steps to the front door, it’s like some invisible leash between Valentina and me snaps. She takes off running up the steps, leaving me there at the bottom. I’ve only got my foot on the first step when the front door opens from the inside.

I don’t see her mammy.

For a moment, I don’t see anyone inside.

Valentina is blocking my view. And she isn’t that tall.

So unless a child answered the fucking door, something is very wrong here.

I don’t see a child’s legs through Valentina’s.

I see the glint of rounded metal and rubber, and a pair of expensive Italian leather shoes hovering a few inches off the ground.

Men’s shoes.

I hear someone bellow Valentina’s name, echoing in at me as if from a great distance. But the voice is mine, the accent shaped by both Dublin and Toronto.

Valentina stumbles backwards, but it’s too late. The man in the wheelchair grabs hold of her.

Valentina falls into her father's lap.

Her living father's lap.

A trap.

I almost want to laugh at how I've fallen into it. I would if it weren't so pathetic, so grim. If Valentina weren't caught in it, too.

She lands awkwardly, one knee going between Vincenzo's thighs, her other foot still planted on the ground. I'm halfway up the steps already. My gun is in my hand.

I promised her if he still lived then I would kill him myself. He stole her from me after he promised me her hand. He orchestrated the death of my grandda.

He used his own death as bait to get her back. He knows that, at her heart, she's loyal. And that even after everything, she loves her family. And that makes her weak.

Not that I can blame her.

I love her. So now I'm fucking weak, too.

My chance is now. Revenge is at hand. I'll watch the light go out in his eyes. Make sure it's real this time.

But I don't have a clear shot. Because even though Valentina struggles, even though Vinny is weakened by his recent brush with that biker's bullet, he's still strong enough to hold her. His thick, hairy forearm is locked around her waist.

If he were holding anyone else...

I'd empty my gun into them both.

But she isn't anyone else. She's Valentina.

My golden-eyed pet, my principessa in the dark, and no matter how much I hate her daddy, no matter how much I've hated her, there is nothing in either this life or the next that would have me risk her just to take my shot.

A bullet in her body is just as good as one inside my own.

Holy fuck. This is it, isn't it? This is what my grandda was protecting me from. This is what he was trying to prevent.

I really have become my own father. In that moment, I know that if anything ever happens to Valentina, I will kill whoever is responsible.

And then I will kill myself.

And just like that, I see how poorly my grandda's methods have failed. Because why would I care about keeping townhouses and pubs and all the many euros in his many bank accounts, when I would blow my fucking brains out over her?

Valentina is the only goal. The only answer. She is everything.

And that makes her the perfect fucking shield for Vinny.

Everything slows. She remains pinned by Vinny's unyielding right arm while his left arm raises a gun and aims it right at me.

I know what's coming. I don't bother looking at the gun, or at the man holding it whom I loathe more than anything in this world. I only look at her.

I want her to be the last thing I see before I die.

But I don't even get that much. The shot drives me backwards.

My body tries to keep me upright, my legs lurching like the jerking pistons of an automaton.

But I'm on the stairs, so I step back into dead air, and then I fall.

The ground slams up to meet me. It knocks the breath from my lungs and the sense from my skull.

There's ringing in my ears. Or maybe screaming.

My neck strains but doesn't move. I can't lift my head to get one final glimpse of her.

As I bleed out on the drive in front of the Titone mansion, all I see is the unrelenting brightness of the clear sky.

Blue.

So sunny.

Always sunny when she's here.

My body is cold, but the light on my face is warm.

I slip away, and pretend the warmth is her.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:20 am

Valentina

Aiming his gun and firing that shot distracts Papà just enough for me to wriggle free of his hold. I don't stop to question him, to scream at him, to ask him how he's managed to bring himself back from the dead. I just give a high scream, then sprint down the stairs.

"Back away from him!" Papà shouts. "I'm going to shoot him again. Make sure he stays fucking dead."

The ground bites my knees. Oh, God, Darragh is bleeding from the side of his neck. I have nothing to fix it. Nothing to offer.

I yank my sweater off from over my head and stuff it against his neck, ignoring everything I know about jugular veins and carotid arteries and bleeding to fucking death.

"Get back!"

"No!" The word tears out of me as Papà bends and grabs my shoulder with one hand, my soaked sweater with the other. He's breathing hard, with anger or maybe exertion, having left his wheelchair behind.

He rips the sweater out of my hands. The pretty pink Irish wool, half scarlet now with Darragh's blood, goes sailing through the air.

And I absolutely lose it. I scream like someone's reached between my ribs and torn

out my heart, because maybe that's what Papà has actually done.

And then I hit him.

I'm not a boxer. It's not a proper punch. More of a wild hammer swing, but the hammer is my fist. I catch Papà beneath his jaw, and while this would never affect him in normal times, he's clearly still recovering from his injuries. He loses his balance and falls.

His face goes purple with rage. He rises, his shadow falling over me like doom.

He might kill me now, too. How fucking tragic, how very Romeo and Juliet of us. For Darragh and I to perish together like this.

I could run. I have time to get up and go before he grabs me. Papà wouldn't be able to catch up to me in his current state.

But I won't leave Darragh. Giving a ragged cry of rage, I reach for the sweater. Papà raises the hand holding his gun. I don't know if he'll hit me with it or shoot me.

But he doesn't do either of those things.

He drops it on the pavement.

Then, he clutches his chest. The colour in his face darkens, then vanishes, like someone's sucked all the blood out from beneath his skin through a straw.

He collapses to his knees.

And then he falls.

He lies on his side, still clutching at his chest.

Like a gong has been rung inside my head, I shudder with the knowledge that he might actually be dying this time. A heart attack, or stroke, or something else going terribly wrong deep inside him.

I stare at my shaking hands. They're covered in blood. Just like they were the last time I tried to save him.

But I only have one set of hands.

I can't help them both. There's no way to do CPR on Papà and try to slow Darragh's bleeding at the same time.

I have to choose.

Before August, I would have done whatever it took to save Papà while Darragh died alone on the ground. Because I was a Titone and I knew my place.

But I'm not a Titone anymore. Papà made me a Di Mauro.

And Darragh made me love him.

I retrieve the sweater and press it as tightly as I can to Darragh's wound.

Then, holding it in place with one hand, I use the other to fish his phone from his pocket and dial 9-1-1.

As sirens wail like demons in the distance, I straddle Darragh's chest and squeeze his neck so hard I feel like I'm strangling him.

And I beg him not to leave.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:20 am

Darragh

I must be dreaming, because I'm with her. I smell her. Hear her voice.

But I'm dead.

Someone must have fucking slipped up big time. Someone left their post and let me steal through Heaven's gate.

Gate...

Like the Titones' gate.

Valentina.

I order my eyes to snap wide, but they only open a tiny crack. I blink heavily, lethargic and sore. My tongue is fused to the roof of my dry mouth. I try to say her name again, but there's no sound.

But somehow, even though I fail to call her, she must hear me. Because suddenly, there she is, a dark-haired vision in the blinding light. Her face hovers indistinctly before mine.

"Darragh?"

My eyes slide shut.

Heaven. I swear it's Heaven.

Or if it's Hell, I never want to leave.

The next time I open my eyes, it's easier. My head is clearer, though my mouth is still dry as fuck and I feel like I got kicked in the head by a horse. And the shoulder. And the back.

Do the Titones have horses? Maybe I got fucking trampled.

I take in the room from my back on a bed. It's a private hospital suite.

But this time, Valentina isn't in it. Panic sluices, because what if I really did just dream her before? And she's trapped somewhere without me? With the putrid ghost of her undead papà?

It's coming back to me in scattered bursts of blood-stained light. Valentina and her daddy and that bright October sky.

I don't remember anything else. Why the hell don't I remember anything else?

I have to find her.

My chest heaves. I try to turn my head but can't. Something's in the way, keeping my neck still. My arms bunch with tension, which draws my gaze to the needles taped there.

Needles. Drugs. Fucking poison . Get it out.

I go to rip out the needles with their plastic tubes and bags, but my hands are so useless, for a moment, I wonder if someone's amputated them. At the ends of my

wrists there are only big, round, gauzy stumps. My arms look like fucking cotton swabs.

But I'm aware of my hands inside the puffy white mittens. I think I can feel all my fingers and my thumbs. Was I burned? They don't hurt.

"You kept trying to rip it all out when you were half-awake."

I hear Rowan, but I can't see him because I still can't turn my fucking head. He steps up to the side of the hospital bed so that he's in my line of vision. He looks just how he always does. Just how he did when I left him in Dublin.

Maybe I am still in Dublin. Maybe the flight, and everything that happened after, was a fucking hallucination.

I need to ask him what happened.

But instead what comes out is, "Where is she?"

Jesus, I sound bad. My voice is like thin wind over gravel. But the words are clear enough.

"She hasn't gone far. Just to the cafeteria. Don't worry, Tommy's with her."

My brain is slow to parse the words. Cafeteria. Tommy. What the hell is happening?

"She finally went to take a piss and get a coffee," he goes on. "She hasn't left your side in more than twelve hours." Rowan suddenly stops and cranks his head to the side. "Speaking of which..."

I don't need him to tell me that she's here. The very air changes with her in it.

“Darragh!” Her fingers find my temples. I groan and let my eyes fall shut for a moment, savouring the blessed touch.

But I’m unwilling to keep them closed for long.

I need to see her. I feel like I could stare at her every fucking second for the rest of my life, another fifty years of Valentina, and it still wouldn’t be enough.

I’d still be begging for a little more time, just so I could gaze upon her face.

“Are you well, pet?” I rasp. I try to touch her, forgetting about my ludicrous marshmallow hands.

“I’m...” She pauses, her mouth quirking downward. “I’m not hurt.”

“But you’re not fine,” I growl. “What happened?”

She sits beside me on the bed, and in halting words, recounts the events. She tells me of her shock to see Vinny alive in the wheelchair at their door, her mammy nowhere to be found. She tells me that he grabbed her, and held her, and aimed his gun at me.

“I heard the shot and I broke free,” she says. “You were bleeding from your neck, and I thought...”

She stops to take a deep breath.

“I thought you were going to bleed out. You lost consciousness so fast.” Her eyes go to my neck, then slide away.

“Now we know the shot didn’t hit any major arteries.

It tore through the top of your trapezius.

And you hit your head. Plus, the doctors say you were pretty dehydrated, and your blood sugar was low.

” Her brows come down heavily over her eyes.

“Why didn’t you eat any stupid waffles?”

What the hell is she asking me about waffles for?

“Don’t like maple syrup,” I grunt. “Keep going.”

“Papà tried to stop me from helping you,” she says, frustration making her words come faster. “He said he was going to shoot you again and that I had to get out of the way. I hit him, and he fell down, and...”

She bites her pretty lip so hard I think that she might make it bleed.

“He got lucky with that shot from the bikers,” Rowan cuts in when it becomes clear Valentina can’t go on. “Apparently it only broke a rib and collapsed his lung. But he wasn’t so lucky this time. Pulmonary embolism.”

I’m pretty sure that’s medical speak for a nice juicy blood clot of the lung.

“Fatal?”

Valentina looks away.

“Yes,” Rowan says. “The clot was bad enough. But it caused a heart attack on top. He died before the ambulances arrived.”

I stare at Valentina. She catches my gaze and nods.

“He died beside me,” she says quietly. Almost meekly.

But then, something goes metal-hard in her gaze and her voice grows louder.

Steadier. “I didn’t do any CPR on him. There was no time.

I had to make a choice.” She touches my cheek.

“Darragh,” she says, and my name in her mouth is like a drug, “I chose you.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:20 am

Valentina

If I thought Darragh could be stubborn and difficult before, it's nothing compared to him during his recovery. He doesn't want to wear the neck brace. Doesn't want to eat the food. He definitely doesn't want any medication.

But when I'm with him, he seems at least somewhat soothed. I'm at the hospital around the clock. I don't know who he's bribed or threatened, but nobody ever kicks me out when visiting hours are through.

Rowan and Tommy, a dark-haired, blue-eyed soldier, are here often as well, along with a few other men in Darragh's circle who drift in and out to talk business.

Between Tommy being back in Toronto for more than a week and the Irish mob's contacts at the hospital, Rowan got wind of what happened to Darragh within the hour and was on the next flight out of Dublin to assist. When Darragh sleeps, he and I exist around each other in this wary but maybe sort of friendly little bubble.

The last time we spoke, in the kitchen of Callum's Dublin townhouse, I got the impression Rowan wasn't too keen on me.

But maybe leaving my own father to die in the dirt and doing what I could to save Darragh instead has warmed him up to me a little.

Because he makes at least some effort to engage in small talk now and then.

And I notice that he's learned my coffee order from the cafeteria, always bringing

one back for me when he goes.

In one moment of oddly thrilling honesty, I ask him what he thinks about what my father did, and he answers.

“He knew that news of his death would bring you back to Toronto,” he says. “And I think he knew that Darragh would follow you. He’d get you back under his thumb and revenge on Darragh for the Fabbri mess all at once.”

“And what about Callum’s murder?” I still don’t understand why Papà bothered with that. Callum never had any interest in Toronto. He was too focused on Dublin.

Rowan shrugs his giant shoulders and takes a sip of his usual drink – black Irish breakfast tea.

“What use would it be to convince Callum to alter his will,” he reasons, “if Callum was left alive to potentially change his mind and take it back?”

Well, he’s not alive now. The will is basically written in stone. I gaze at Darragh’s sleeping face and sometimes wish, for his sake, that we had never met.

The doctors want to keep Darragh in the hospital for a week. But after five days, he finally loses his last vestige of patience and leaves against medical advice. I go with him, because I can’t imagine going anywhere else at this point.

I won’t return to that house. Not now.

Not ever.

Rowan drives us to Darragh’s Forest Hill house. We reach it at dusk. When Rowan asks Darragh in low tones if he needs him to stay, Darragh tells him to go. So he

does.

In the deepening gloom, Darragh and I are truly alone together for the first time in days.

He's already ditched the neck brace and the arm sling that the medical team tried to make him take.

He's dressed in his own clothes, the only sign of what he's gone through being the thick white bandaging protecting the sutures at the junction of his shoulder and his neck.

He looks so good. Strong. Like himself.

"You should get inside," I say. The wind is cold. I want to touch him. But I worry...

I worry that I'm not allowed. That I don't deserve to. Because the only reason he was hurt was because I went back to that house. I fell for the trap. And when I fell, I dragged him down with me.

He didn't want to bring me back here. He didn't want me to go.

He could have died because of me. That knowledge hits me hard, a near-miss of terrible grief. Maybe it shows on my face, because Darragh grabs me with his good arm, his hand seizing my chin.

"What's wrong?"

Tears spring to my eyes.

"I thought I'd lose you." I sniff hard and blink. "And before you make some snide

remark, no, these aren't tears of happiness at the thought."

His touch on my chin gentles. When his mouth brushes mine, it moves with a tender hunger, a searching quality, like he's looking for something. Asking me something.

"We should get you inside," I say, pulling back, all too aware of the cold and the dark and his injuries. I want to hover over him. Make him soup and tuck him into bed.

"Yeah," he says gruffly. He releases my face and runs a rough hand through his hair. "I'm desperate for a shower."

"You can't get that wet," I said, pointing to the bandages on his neck. "Have a bath."

He looks at me like I've told him to go dance naked with a chicken.

"I am not taking a fucking bath," he says. He sounds offended by the very idea.

"What if I take a bath with you?" I don't mean anything by it.

I really do just mean I'll have a bath with him and help him wash his back and stuff.

Plus, I also need to get cleaned up after those stressful days in the hospital.

But when something dark comes to writhing life in his gaze, I know he's taken my comment entirely differently.

"Not like that," I tell him firmly. "You need to rest."

He unlocks, then opens the door. As I pass through it, he says, "No, pet. All I need is you."

The bathroom attached to the primary bedroom has a bathtub separate from the shower.

It's a big, fancy one with claw feet and an undulating profile that makes me think of a jellybean.

I run water into it, testing the temperature, then glance up.

In the mirror, I see Darragh's reflection in profile.

He's watching me. Just watching. Like the mundane act of me filling up a tub with water is the most fascinating thing he's ever witnessed.

My cheeks heat with a self-conscious sort of pleasure.

"Aren't you going to get undressed?" I ask him.

He takes a breath like he's just been woken from sleep. His gaze heavy-lidded, he says, "You first."

Well, fine. If I'm going to bathe, I'll need to be naked whether I strip first or him.

I do it fast, in case he tries to stop me, but he just keeps watching me with that focused fascination.

I abandon my clothes in a heap and climb into the tub.

I face him on my knees, leaning on the side and beckoning to him with one arm. "Come on."

He doesn't take much prodding. He undresses with a quick competence that I can't

help but find immensely attractive. The only thing that gives him any trouble is his T-shirt, but he manages to pull it off, grunting slightly, without disturbing any of his bandages.

When he gets in with me, the tub that seemed so large before suddenly... doesn't. He leans back against his end, draping his arms along the rim, watching me as I dampen a cloth and turn to him.

“Do you want me to start with your back, or...” My question fades away as I'm struck dumb by the unadulterated power of his naked form.

His tattoos are a dark contrast with the white of the tub, his arms long and so lazily draped, belying the power in them.

I'm between his legs now, because he's so tall that, even sitting up as he is, he takes up almost the entire bathtub.

He grabs my wrist and pulls my hand beneath the water.

“I want you to start here.”

Desire flames, licking along my spine, as he leads my fingers to his cock. The flesh is already stiff, and at my touch it jerks in the water.

I try to fight it. I'm supposed to be taking care of him.

But maybe this is a way to take care of him. To take care of us both. To lead us back to each other through the dark and the blood and the trauma that has been the background of every one of our interactions.

I let go of the cloth and take him fully into my hand.

He lets out a satisfied growl and palms my heavy breasts.

His breath punches from his body when my nipples harden needily against his palms. He kneads roughly before sliding his hands to my waist, then to my hips, his fingers a possessive splay over my ass.

He drags me closer, making a tiny tsunami of water slosh over his chest.

“Need your pussy,” he groans against my damp ear. “I’ve fucking needed it for days.”

And I can’t hold out. I can’t pull back. He drags me onto him, and I let him, needing him as badly as he needs me. I brace myself on his shoulders, careful not to press on the bandaged parts, then let myself lower.

But he’s too big to just sink onto him without any effort. I gasp, and rock myself, and then Darragh gives one impatient thrust, and he’s there, right there, all the way inside. A sacred, stretching burn.

As he fucks into me, his breath harsh at my throat, his cock ardent inside, I feel a tumult of emotion rise up in tandem with my pleasure.

“I’m sorry,” I find myself gasping between moans. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I made you go there. I’m so sorry you got hurt.”

“Sick of you saying sorry,” he grunts, thrusting suddenly harder, as if to punish me for the apology. He grips the sides of my face and devours my gaze with his own. “I’d follow you off a goddamn cliff, Valentina. And I’d do it with a fucking smile on my face.”

I think I’m close to crying.

I'm definitely close to coming.

"Just, next time," he groans, grinding so fucking deep, "maybe fucking listen to me when I warn you not to walk so close to the edge."

I come then, breaking apart in his lap, crying out with relief and pain, pleasure and grief.

I collapse onto his chest, my nails digging into his skin, as he grabs my hips and slams into my clenching pussy, over and over again.

He says something then, something I don't understand.

Something in Irish. Something tender and tortured, the words fraying like torn ribbon when he comes.

Valentina

B reathing slow and even, I begin to wake up. Warm light nuzzles my face. I can see morning brightness through the thin skin of my closed eyelids. Inhaling deeply through my nose, I catch scents of Darragh.

His bed.

Without opening my eyes, I stretch, skimming my hand across cool sheets, expecting to come into contact with his heat and not finding it.

My body's reaction is instant and instinctive. A driving panic that jams my heart up into my throat. He isn't here. I've lost him.

"Darragh!" I scramble out of the bed. Shit.

I'm naked. Darragh is gone and I'm not even dressed to go and find him.

He could be bleeding out somewhere! Every second counts.

And I'm painfully aware of every second now, as they pass me by, taunting me as I stand there, frozen with indecision and fear.

My heart is beating so fast it sounds like I've got two pulses. But, no. That second pulse is outside me. Rapid, explosive, getting louder every second.

Darragh bursts into the room like a storm, thunder on his face and a gun in his hand.

His wild eyes scan the space, locking onto me. His strides eat the floor in seconds. He grabs me tightly, his eyes examining every wall, window, and corner.

“What is it?” he asks. “What did you see?”

“No... I didn’t...” God. I am so embarrassing.

I pull myself out of his hold and grab the bedsheet for something to wrap around myself.

Like a shield against my shame. Darragh watches me in cool-eyed silence, which doesn’t help.

“I just woke up,” I stammer, “and when you weren’t here, I panicked. Silly. I know.”

He still hasn’t said anything. He also hasn’t moved.

“What?” I finally mutter, tugging sullenly at my sheet.

There’s an oddly rocky quality to his voice when he replies. A roughened affection.

“That isn’t silly.”

“It absolutely is!” I scoff. “You’re recovering. You shouldn’t have to run up the stairs like that just because I got all freaked out that you weren’t here.”

“Recovering?” He says, raising his brows. “Valentina, I could be half-dead, chained to a wall in a fucking basement somewhere, if you called I would still find a way to come running. Don’t you ever worry about that.”

“OK. Well. Still silly.”

He slides his gun into place at his lower back, then uses both his hands to smooth my hair away from my face.

We tumbled into bed still wet from our bath last night.

I don't even want to think about how my hair dried.

But there's no judgment in his gaze as he strokes the sleep-kinked waves away from my cheeks and forehead.

"The few times I slept in Dublin, it was fucking agony to wake up. Not because I was tired and needed more rest," he says softly.

"But because you weren't there." He tucks a particularly stubborn curl of hair behind my ear.

His fingers linger at the side of my throat.

"So if that makes you silly, I guess I'm silly too.

" He smirks. "And I will have you know that I've never been silly once in my entire fucking life. "

I bite my lip and nod. Then, without thinking, I blurt, "Can I have a hug?"

Oh my God. If I thought I was embarrassing before...

Now I'm just humiliating myself.

But Darragh's arms wrap around me immediately. I feel his chin bump the top of my head as he quietly says, "You can have anything you want."

Well, not anything. Not the one thing I actually want.

To be with Darragh. Not as his mistress, or his nurse, or his prisoner.

As his wife.

I never thought I'd want it. Never thought I'd be the one to crave it. But I nearly lost him once, and now I am terrified of it happening again. I want to be his in all ways. And I want him to be mine, too. Legitimately and legally.

But my actions, my foolish desires, have already put him in grave danger once. I told him what I wanted and he made it happen at terrible cost to himself.

I could never ask him to do it again. Give up everything in Ireland just so that I could be his wife. Not after what I've done. What my family has done.

So I lock my secret love away and pull out of the hug.

The next day, as I wake up, I become aware of a sticky stiffness in the vicinity of my forehead. When I try to move my eyebrows, something tugs uncomfortably. I open my eyes, only to flinch when my eyelashes collide with... Paper?

My fingers fumbling, I rip it off and hold the bright orange square up to my face. There's writing on it, messily scrawled slashes of ink.

Don't panic, pet. I'm in my office downstairs.

It's a fucking sticky note. He put it on my forehead while I was sleeping.

I don't know whether to roll my eyes, laugh, or go all googly-eyed over that. I settle on a small smile, putting the sticky note on the bedside table. An interesting method

of calming my morning nerves, I'll give him that.

But... I kind of love it. I can picture him writing the note while I'm snoozing away, then thinking to himself, Yup. Forehead ought to do it. She'll never miss it there.

I sit up, and a square of hot pink on the blanket immediately catches my eye.

In case the one on your forehead falls off, it reads, I'm downstairs in my office.

This time, I do laugh. And it feels so fucking good to do it.

When was the last time I laughed? Sincerely laughed because something was funny or brought me joy, not out of sarcasm or bitterness? I honestly can't remember. There were times recently when it seemed like I might never laugh again.

And here I am, laughing at something as small as a sticky note.

Just because he left it there for me.

I put the pink sticky note with the orange one, already thinking of places I can keep them permanently.

I don't have a journal or anything like that.

Maybe I should take up scrapbooking. Might be kind of soothing, who knows.

I'll decorate it with ribbons and bows, and spray romantic perfume on the pages. An ode to my memories with Darragh.

I pull on one of Darragh's T-shirts, which is practically a nightie on me, and go padding through the house. I've decided that I really like Darragh's home. It's

spacious and elegant, with dark wood floors and accents of green that for some reason remind me of Dublin.

Darragh's office is on the main floor of the house.

If he's in it, he's probably trying to catch up on business in Toronto, after all his time in Dublin and then in the hospital.

I probably shouldn't disturb him. Papà never let me intrude on him when he was working.

I'd have to resort to pressing my ear up against the door whenever I wanted to have an idea of what was going on.

But...

But Darragh's office door is open.

He told me where he'd be. And then he left the door ajar, as if...

As if he's quietly inviting me in.

Maybe it's a trap.

But what if it's not?

I make my way silently to the door, pausing in the doorway.

Darragh is on the phone with his phone up to his ear.

His office has a large wall of windows that look out onto the backyard with its

gardens and trees.

The morning light has a distinctly autumnal quality to it, illuminating the fiery veins of green and yellow and orange leaves.

My appreciative gaze goes from the vivid spray of the leaves on the branches to Darragh's back.

His substantial shoulders are set in a natural position of confidence.

I don't think I've ever noticed how excellent his posture is before.

His back is broad and straight, his waist taut, his legs slightly apart.

Still listening to whoever's on the phone, he turns around without warning. Our eyes meet from across the room and dark heat snaps between us.

He doesn't tell me to come in.

But he doesn't tell me to leave, either. He just stands there at the window, observing me, waiting to see what I'll do.

I've always been stubborn. Too bold. Going where I shouldn't. I step fully into the room.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm here," he says. "Tell me more about the tax implications on that move."

Tax implications. Riveting stuff. It makes me smile, though, to know that Darragh doesn't spend all his time elbows-deep in blood – other people's or lately, his own. Some boring office work will be good for him for the next little while.

He continues watching me as I wander around the office. His bookshelves are stuffed full, something I approve of. I walk slowly along, tracing titles and spines with my nails.

“What about that capital gains increase? That still happening anytime soon?”

When I’m finished checking out the shelves, I move on to his desk.

There’s a computer, of course, and various papers piled up here and there, some of them in rather haphazard-looking stacks.

Darragh may have his quirks and obsessions, but he certainly isn’t anal about organizing his documents.

Without really thinking about it, I start idly straightening things up.

Not because I care about how clean his desk is. But because I want to help him.

It's something that a wife would do.

Sighing quietly, I abandon the papers and examine the other items on the desk. I can feel Darragh’s eyes drilling into me as I pick up a pair of dice. One is black, one is red. On the side of each die that should have a single dot, they each have a skull instead.

They’re the dice from Darragh’s tattoo.

“They were Callum’s.”

I look up, realizing Darragh is speaking to me now. His phone is no longer in his hand.

“His favourite ones,” Darragh goes on. “He taught me cards. Chess. Dice. He gave me those before I came to Canada.” He tilts his head. “Do you want to play?”

“I don’t know any dice games,” I admit. I roll the dice together in my right hand, enjoying the tactile sensation of the plastic cubes knocking together. “Besides, the last time I played a game with you in Toronto, I was left bleeding and alone at the end of it.”

“Doesn’t have to be any real dice game,” he says. “I’ll even let you make up the rules.”

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“Hmm. Tempting.” I transfer the dice from one hand to the other, thinking. “Alright. How about this? Nothing complicated. We each roll. Whoever rolls a higher number gets to ask the other a question. And the one who rolled lower has to answer it honestly.”

“Sounds like Truth or Dare,” he says.

“Sort of.” I shrug. “We can call it Truth and Dice.”

He holds out his hand. I drop the red die into it.

“You’re red, I’m black. To go with our hair,” I tell him. I toss my die onto a clear area of his desk, then grin triumphantly when it lands with the six side facing up.

“A natural,” Darragh mutters. He tosses down his die. I let out a cackling cheer when he gets the skull.

“Go ahead, then,” he says with an indulgent sigh and a smirk. “Ask away.”

Possibilities run through my head. I didn’t think he’d actually agree to play, let alone that I would win the first round. I settle on something that’s been bugging me for a few days now.

“What did you say to me the other night? In Irish? In the bath?”

His smirk vanishes. Like I’ve pinched my finger and thumb to the candle of it.

“You expect me to remember the shit I say when I’m about to come?” he asks with a bitter sort of bravado. Like he remembers perfectly fine. Like he’s lying.

“Are you afraid?” I challenge. I point at the dice on the desk. “I won this round. Fair and square. You have to answer.”

“Fair and square,” he says sardonically under his breath. “Nothing about the hold you have on me is fair.” A slight pause, then, “I said, ‘ Tá mo chroí istigh ionat .’”

I shiver as the lyrical sounds brush my skin.

“What does it mean?” I ask.

“Oh, no,” he says with a vicious shake of his head. “You only get one question. You’ll have to roll again and win if you want to ask more.”

“You said I was allowed to make up the rules to this game,” I remind him, narrowing my eyes and crossing my arms.

“I’m instituting one of my own,” he growls in return, snatching up his die.

I grab mine, too, and roll again. Four. Not great. Not terrible. Darragh doesn’t toss his die down as carelessly as before. He actually seems to focus on how he rolls. But even so, he only gets a three.

“What does that phrase mean?” I ask immediately, not even trying to pronounce the beautiful words.

Darragh’s cheeks tighten beneath his eyes.

He rubs at his jaw, like he’s trying to bide his time and find his way out of this.

Then he lets his hand fall. And with a flippancy that seems faked, like he's protecting himself against the true meaning of the words, he says, "It means my heart is within you. And considering my cock was inside you at the time, that's pretty much what I was referring to."

My heart is within you.

My throat aches. My heart stutters.

Or is it his?

"Tell me what it really means," I whisper. "Tell me what you actually meant by saying that."

When Darragh doesn't answer right away, my whisper turns to a cry. I stab my finger towards the dice, as if they're my allies in this fight. "I won this round. You have to tell me!"

I sound insane. I'm way more upset than the situation calls for. This is just a game.

But then again, nothing has ever only been a game with Darragh.

Darragh makes a rough sound in his throat. Like a trapped predator snapping its jaws.

He takes a half-step towards the door, like he's about to walk right out of it, then turns savagely on his heel and grabs me by the jaw.

"It means," he says, the words pouring out of him like blood, "that if something happened to you, I'd throw myself off a fucking building."

It means that even though I was homeless for a year in Dublin, the only way I think I

could be homeless now is if I didn't have you.

My heart is within you because you've fucking stolen it. ”

He gives a crazed laugh. His eyes are green and brown fire. Destructive and starving for air.

“And I can't even say you crept in and stole it in the night.

I can't even say you slipped past my defences,” he says, rage and something else – something like agony, something like longing – thick in his voice.

“Because you did it in broad fucking daylight on that rooftop. And now you've got me by the balls.

You've got me by the throat. You've got me by the fucking heart because I love you, Valentina. ”

He's breathing like he's just run kilometres to get to me. Swam across an ocean to reach me with nothing but the strength of his own body. And now he's about to collapse.

I remember what Deirdre told me once about how his father died. And the rules Darragh made for himself as a result. No drugs. No marriage.

No love.

Maybe that's why he looks like someone's just forced poison down his throat. Sweat beads on his brow. His jaw works, and the skin of his face is pale. Like his very life has been put at risk, has been betrayed, by the feelings inside him.

Love.

Darragh's throat contracts as he swallows hard. He slams his hand down on the dice, closing his fingers around them. He pushes the black one roughly into my hand then drops his own onto the desk. He rolls a six.

He doesn't even bother waiting for me to roll and see if I will lose or tie this round. "My turn." He breathes in deeply, dark triumph, drawing his victory around himself like some kind of protective mantel.

"What do you want me to tell you?" I hear myself ask. My mind is far away. Stuck on words he's just said. You've got me by the fucking heart because I love you, Valentina.

"Tell me that you'll marry me."

My brain hammers to a halt. He digs in his pocket, and suddenly yellow and gold brilliance dominates my vision. The ring is before me, the morning light beaming through it from the side, making inside brilliance erupt.

"That isn't a question," I say weakly.

"No," he bites out, "it's a fucking plea. I need you any way I can get you. I knew while I bled out on your daddy's front steps that I would give up anything and everything to keep you."

He puts the ring onto my left ring finger. Holy shit, are his hands shaking?

"But I need to know," he goes on, "that I won't just be Dario Fabbri or Sal Di Mauro to you if I drag you down that aisle. I once thought that having your hatred and your body was enough. But now I know it's not."

There's so much pain in him. I can see it in his face, practically smell it rolling off of him. He's vulnerable, I've made him vulnerable, and he fucking hates it.

"I'll give up Ireland."

The sentence slices between us like a guillotine.

"I'd lose it all to marry you. But I need to know that I won't lose you in the process. Because if I do lose you, pet, then I'm not gonna fucking make it."

I hear the crackle of tears in my voice when I reply.

"But... But what about your grandfather? What about the townhouse? What about the shepherd's pie?"

"The shepherd's pie?" His eyebrows slash down. "What fucking shepherd's pie?"

"The shepherd's pie!" I exclaim. I don't know why this is what I'm latching onto. But some part of my spiralling mind thinks the shepherd's pie is of vital importance right now. "The shepherd's pie that you know so well, in the pub where you said you practically grew up!"

Darragh's hands close over mine.

"Fuck the shepherd's pie," he growls. "Fuck the money and the townhouse. Fuck your daddy and mine. Fuck everything that isn't fucking you." He releases my hand to cup my jaw. "You told me that you wouldn't be my mistress. So tell me that you'll be my fucking wife."

This is it. Everything's come down to this. Rooftops and front steps, bullets and blood. So much pain between us. Revenge. Running. Regret.

He's done so much damage. And so have I.

We'll probably damage each other again. Maybe do it all our lives.

But even broken things can be beautiful. Even wounds can become a work of art when inked on an arm.

"I'll marry you."

Darragh's whole frame shudders, like he's just withstood a tempest. Then, with a feral sound, he crashes his mouth to mine.

He kisses me so hard it hurts.

He kisses me like it's forever.

“ G ood morning, Mrs. Gowan.”

Valentina stirs in my arms, rebellious strands of her dark hair tickling my chin. The sun has risen in Dublin, sending late-October light streaming in through the window. It’s a weak light, greyish and moody.

But there was sun yesterday for the outdoor wedding.

It was a small affair. Very private. Rowan and Amos served as the witnesses.

Valentina didn’t have anyone from her side present.

She’s the only one with Titone blood I can stomach having within ten metres of me at the moment.

She did call Elio on speaker phone before we eloped, though, to inform him of our plans.

I thought, after everything that went down with Elio’s wife Deirdre in the winter, his response would have been an immediate no, to which I would have told him to come and get his cousin, then, so I could finally have a chance to blow his head off.

But instead, he remained quiet for a moment before saying, “I looked for you, Valentina. Until I saw the airport security footage that showed you getting willingly on that plane to Dublin.”

Valentina pursed her lips at that, her gaze flicking to me. Because we both knew she

didn't actually board that flight willingly. But I guess she decided that Elio didn't need to know that part, because she didn't contradict him.

"But you'd told me about the engagement, and once I saw that you went without being taken, being forced, that you wanted to go...

" Another slight pause. " Testarda come un mulo . I knew it would be pointless to try to bring you home. I knew if I tried, one or all three of us likely would have ended up dead."

"Stubborn as a mule," she said. "Mamma always says so." She sighed, holding her left hand up to admire the catch of the shattering light on the yellow diamond. "So that's why Papà did what he did?"

"He didn't let me in on that particular plan before executing it," Elio said. I thought I sensed an edge of disapproval there. "I would have tried to talk him out of it if he did. Not that it would have done any good. You got your stubbornness from him."

"Yeah," she said, not quite sadly. But very softly.

"Zizi wants to see you, you know."

I tensed, about to tell Elio he could shove that idea right up his stupid Sicilian ass. Because the last time Valentina talked to her Mamma, she got so twisted up in Titone lies that we willingly walked right into the range of Vinny's gun. But Valentina was already answering.

"I'm not ready for that right now," she replied in a clipped tone.

"She won't want to miss her only child's wedding," Elio said.

"She lied to me," Valentina exclaimed. "She said she was at home! So I came,

because I thought she needed me! I thought Papà was dead!”

“You lied to her, too. To all of us.” From beyond him, on the other end of the line, I heard a woman’s voice cut in.

“I’m not guilt tripping her,” Elio replied, speaking to someone else. “I’m getting fucking scolded by my wife over here,” he said to Valentina this time. Despite the complaint in his words, his voice had descended into an obnoxiously gooey, affectionate octave that I would have laughed at once.

Not anymore.

“Look,” Elio said, “I’m not going to force you to talk to Zizi. And I won’t drag you to Uncle Vinny’s funeral, either. But after you’re married, and after I get Curse out of Montréal, we need to meet. You, me, and Darragh.”

My hackles rose, snapping to wary attention.

“And Darragh, if you’re listening, which I’m pretty sure you fucking are,” he went on, “then you can fucking relax about what I just said, because I want to talk terms, not traps. You sent a note to me once, calling me your friend in Irish. And while I fully believe that you were just trying to fuck with my head at the time, and that the two of us will never actually be anything close to friends, for better or worse, you’ll be part of the famiglia now.

Valentina’s the closest thing I have to a sister, and I don’t want to live my life wondering when my own brother-in-law is going to put a bomb under my car.

So when the dust settles a bit, let’s sit down and talk like normal fucking human beings. ”

“Neither one of us,” I pointed out darkly, “is a normal human being.”

“Maybe not,” Elio admitted. “But let’s at least do our best to pretend. For Valentina.”

For Valentina. The only one I’d do anything for.

“ Congratulazioni to you both,” is the last thing he said before he hung up.

I draw my fingertips up and down the pearls of my wife’s bare spine as she snoozes in the big Dublin house I’m renting. She’s not ready to wake up yet, and I suppose that I can’t blame her. I kept her up half the night.

I have to get up soon, though. I’ve got a meeting with Amos later.

I’m going to build my own empire in Ireland, and he will be part of the process.

And then, I’m going to investigate the feasibility of buying back some of Grandda’s properties and businesses from the trust. I am officially married and no longer the heir, but maybe I can use the wealth I’ve already acquired in Toronto to find a way to purchase back what I want in Dublin.

Or maybe not. Ultimately, it doesn’t really matter anymore. Because I’ve got everything I need right here in my bed, in my arms, in my dreams.

And my heart is within her.

Thank you so much for reading the conclusion to Darragh and Valentina’s story!

This couple took me on so many twists and turns I did not expect when I first set out to write their story.

They’re both fighters, for better or worse, and it was a thrill to watch them fight for each other, and themselves, as they achieved their happily ever after.

Many readers have asked me about Curse Titone, and I'm so excited to share that Curse and Aurora's duet will be next in the Titans and Tyrants series. You can check out the first book in their duet, *A Monster So Merciless!*

Curse Titone was a friend to me once. The sweet boy who saved me from drowning on Sicilian shores.

But the cherub-faced child I knew more than twenty years ago is gone.

Now, Curse is Toronto's most merciless assassin. A soulless shadow of the innocent boy I once adored.

A monster.

But when I find myself trapped, terrified, with blood pooling at my feet and no one else to turn to...

I know a monster is the only one who can help me.

Even if that monster demands a sacrifice.

Even if that sacrifice is me.