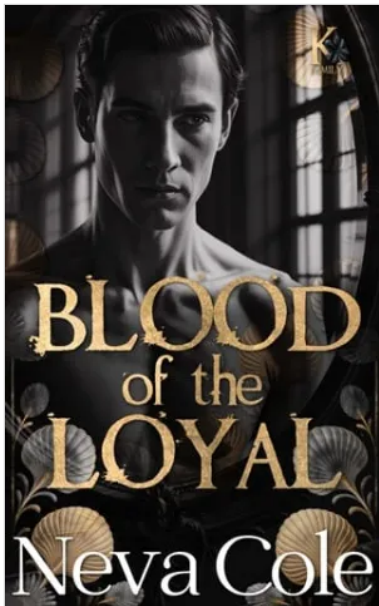




Blood of the Loyal (The Kavanagh Crime Family #2)

Author: *Neva Cole*

Category: Romance

Description: Hes the enforcer with blood on his hands.

Shes the federal agent sent to destroy him.

Eamon Kavanagh lives in the shadows, carrying out his familys darkest orders without question.

Haunted by past sins and the ghosts of those hes killed, hes convinced hes beyond redemption—until a beautiful bartender catches his eye and threatens to unravel everything he thought he knew about loyalty and love.

Sorcha Quinn has one mission: infiltrate the Kavanagh organization and gather evidence for a federal RICO case.

Going undercover in their world should be simple for a trained agent.

What she doesnt expect is to be assigned a bodyguard—especially not the dangerously attractive enforcer who sees through her lies with unnerving precision.

When rival families threaten to tear Boston apart, Eamon and Sorcha find themselves caught between their duties and their desires.

As bullets fly and secrets unravel, they must decide what matters more: the oaths they swore or the passion burning between them.

But in a world where betrayal means death, loving the enemy might be the most dangerous gamble of all.

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CHAPTER

TWO

The whiskey glass shatters against the brick wall, amber liquid spraying across faded Guinness posters. I don't flinch as shards rain down near my feet, just keep polishing the bar like I've been doing this job for years instead of three hours.

"Fucking useless," the drunk mutters, swaying toward me. "Can't even pour a proper drink."

I bite back my real response—that his "proper drink" request involved grabbing my ass while ordering. Instead, I give him Sarah Murphy's nervous smile.

"Sorry about that. Let me get you another."

The pub reeks of stale beer and old wood, exactly what you'd expect from a Southie dive. What you wouldn't expect is the security camera hidden in the shamrock decoration above the register, or the fact that half the "regulars" carry guns under their leather jackets.

Finnegan's Pub serves as the Kavanagh family's unofficial headquarters, and I've been behind this bar for exactly three hours and seventeen minutes. Long enough to catalog twelve different ways someone could kill me without the other patrons noticing.

The drunk reaches for me again. This time I step back, bumping into solid muscle.

"Problem here, Murphy?"

The voice rumbles through me like thunder, Irish accent thick enough to drown in. I turn and look up—way up—into the most dangerous blue eyes I've ever seen.

Eamon Kavanagh.

Every cell in my body screams at me to run. This man has killed federal agents. Tortured information from enemies. Made people disappear without a trace. He stands close enough that I smell his cologne mixed with something darker—gunpowder, maybe. Violence.

"No problem," I manage, voice steady despite my racing pulse. "Just explaining our selection."

Eamon's gaze moves from me to the drunk, who's now trying to blend into the bar itself. Smart man.

"Selection's fine," Eamon says, never taking his eyes off the other man. "Quality of customer could use work."

The drunk throws money on the bar and flees. Smart choice.

I'm alone with the most lethal member of Boston's deadliest crime family, wearing a wire that could get me killed and a cover story thin enough to shred. Agent Byrne's warnings echo in my head— Eamon Kavanagh will kill you without hesitation if he suspects deception.

But he's not looking at me like a threat. His blue eyes track from my face down my body and back up, assessment that feels more personal than professional. Heat spreads through me despite every rational thought screaming danger.

"You're new," he says. Not a question.

"Started today. Sarah Murphy." I extend my hand, hoping he doesn't notice the slight tremor.

His palm engulfs mine, callused and warm. He holds the contact longer than necessary, thumb brushing over my knuckles. The touch sends electricity up my arm.

"Eamon." He releases my hand but doesn't step back. "Where'd Flanagan find you?"

I launch into my rehearsed backstory—recent divorce, moved from Chicago, needed work fast. All lies wrapped around carefully constructed truths. His eyes never leave my face, cataloging every expression.

"Chicago," he repeats. "Rough city for a woman alone."

"I can handle myself."

Something flickers in his expression. Amusement? Interest? "Can you now?"

Before I can answer, the pub door slams open. Three men enter like they own the place—which, considering the Kavanagh connection, they probably do. Their leather jackets can't hide the weapons underneath.

"Eamon!" The leader calls out. "We need to talk."

Eamon's jaw tightens, but he doesn't turn around. "Later, Connie."

"Now." Connie's voice carries threat. "About the shipment."

The temperature in the room drops ten degrees. I feel it in my bones—violence

gathering like a storm. Other patrons sense it too, conversations dying as men position themselves.

Eamon finally turns, putting his back to me. Mistake. In my real life, I'd use the opening to assess threats, plan escape routes. But Sarah Murphy would cower behind the bar.

Instead, I find myself studying the breadth of his shoulders, the way his dark hair curls at his collar. This man is my enemy. My target. The person I'm here to destroy.

So why does my body respond to him like he's salvation instead of damnation?

"The shipment arrived intact," Eamon says, voice deadly quiet. "Your boys damaged three crates fighting over territory."

"Territory that ain't yours anymore."

The pub goes silent. Even the jukebox seems to hold its breath. I've read the files on Kavanagh territorial disputes. They end in blood and body bags.

Eamon takes a step toward Connie. Just one. But the threat radiates from him like heat from a flame.

"Wanna repeat that?" His accent thickens when angry. "Because I might have misheard you."

Connie's hand moves toward his jacket. His companions spread out, flanking positions. I count weapons, escape routes, wonder if my backup team is close enough to matter.

Then Eamon smiles.

It's the most terrifying expression I've ever seen. Not angry or wild—coldly pleased, like a predator spotting wounded prey.

"Outside," he says. "Now."

They file out like obedient dogs. Through the window, I watch Eamon speak quietly to Connie while his men surround the group. Whatever he says makes Connie's face go white.

Two minutes later, the rival crew drives away. Fast.

Eamon returns, straightening his jacket like he just stepped out for air instead of delivering death threats.

"Sorry about that," he says, resuming his position at the bar. "Business."

"Exciting business." My voice sounds breathless. Not from fear—from adrenaline. From watching him dominate through pure presence.

This is wrong. I'm a federal agent. He's a criminal. I should be disgusted by his violence, not aroused by his power.

His eyes find mine, and I see he caught my reaction. One eyebrow raises slightly.

"You don't scare easy."

"Takes more than posturing to rattle me."

"Posturing?" He leans across the bar, close enough that I feel his breath against my cheek. "That wasn't posturing, love. That was mercy."

Love. The endearment shouldn't make my stomach flutter. Shouldn't make me want to lean closer instead of backing away.

"My mistake," I whisper.

"Aye. Best not make another."

It's a warning wrapped in silk, delivered close enough to be a caress. Every instinct tells me to retreat. Instead, I hold his stare.

"I'll remember that."

He studies my face for a long moment, searching for something. Then he places a twenty on the bar.

"For the whiskey I never got."

"I never poured you whiskey."

"No. But you will." He turns to leave, then pauses. "Sarah Murphy from Chicago. Welcome to Boston."

He walks out, leaving me alone behind the bar with shaking hands and a racing heart. I pour myself water, trying to process what just happened.

I came here to destroy Eamon Kavanagh. To gather evidence that will put him in prison for life. To get justice for Patricia Reeves and countless other victims.

But standing in the lingering heat of his presence, breathing air that still carries his scent, I face a terrifying truth.

The most dangerous thing about this assignment isn't that he might kill me.

It's that he might make me want him to.

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CHAPTER

THREE

Blood still stains my knuckles when I push through Finnegan's door. The Murphy crew won't be moving drugs through our territory again—not after tonight's lesson in boundaries.

Every head turns when I enter. Respect earned through violence commands attention in ways money never could. The new bartender doesn't look up from wiping glasses, auburn hair catching light from the Guinness sign above her head.

Interesting.

"Evening, Mr. Kavanagh," Mickey calls from behind the bar.

I nod, eyes fixed on the woman beside him. She moves with purpose—no wasted motion, no nervous energy. Her body language screams competence wrapped in civilian clothes.

"Jameson. Neat." I lean against the scarred wood, studying her profile.

She reaches for the bottle without hesitation, pours two fingers with hands that don't shake. Most people get nervous around me. She seems bored.

"Eight dollars."

I drop a twenty, watching her add it to tips without the usual gratitude show. No batting eyelashes or leaning forward to display cleavage. Just quiet efficiency that raises every alarm in my head.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Sorcha." She meets my eyes directly. No fear, no flirtation. Just assessment.

Green eyes like broken glass—beautiful and dangerous. My cock responds before my brain catches up, blood rushing south despite every instinct warning me she's trouble.

"Irish," I observe.

"So is half of Boston." She returns to her work, dismissing me.

The challenge sends heat through my veins. Women don't dismiss Eamon Kavanagh. They submit, seduce, or run. This one does none of those things.

My phone buzzes with territory updates, but I ignore it. Watching her navigate the crowd provides better entertainment than business reports. She tracks every customer while appearing focused on drink orders—professional-level awareness disguised as bartender charm.

A drunk dock worker grabs her wrist. "How about some personal service, sweetheart?"

Her stance shifts subtly. Weight balanced, ready to strike. "Let go."

"Just being friendly?—"

She applies pressure that makes him release with a pained grunt. No scene, no drama.

Just controlled violence delivered with a smile.

My dick throbs at the display. A woman who handles herself appeals to parts of me I thought were dead. The warrior recognizing another warrior.

"Problem?" I ask, moving closer.

"Handled," she replies, wiping down the bar like nothing happened.

The dock worker rubs his hand, confused. Smart enough not to try again.

I spend the next hour watching her work. Every movement calculated, every response measured. She commands respect through competence rather than vulnerability—a predator hiding among sheep.

When trouble walks through the door Saturday night, I'm ready for it.

Three Murphy enforcers swagger in like they own the place. My territory, my rules. Time to remind them why that's a bad idea.

They order whiskey but keep scanning the room. Hunting, not drinking. The leader—Tommy "The Knife" Brennan—spots a regular customer's girlfriend sitting alone.

"Why don't you drink with real men?" he says, sliding into her booth.

Her boyfriend stands on shaking legs. "She's with me."

"Not anymore." Tommy's hand rests on the table, fingers drumming. "Walk away, boy. Before someone bleeds."

I start moving, hand inside my jacket.

Sorcha appears beside their table carrying empty glasses. "Excuse me. I need to clear this."

Tommy looks up, grinning. "Busy right now, gorgeous."

"House policy." Her voice stays pleasant while her eyes turn arctic. "Tables get cleared every hour."

"Or what? You'll report me to management?" He laughs, standing to tower over her. "I am management now."

"No." She sets down her tray with deliberate care. "You're a dead man who doesn't know it yet."

The threat hangs in the air like smoke. Every conversation stops as twenty pairs of eyes focus on this small woman facing down a killer with nothing but attitude.

Tommy reaches for her. Fatal mistake.

Sorcha moves like death itself. Her elbow drives into his throat while her knee finds his groin. He collapses, gasping for air through his crushed windpipe.

His partners rush forward. She grabs a beer bottle, breaks it against the table, and faces them with the calm of a professional killer.

"Gentlemen," she purrs, holding jagged glass like a scalpel. "Time to bleed."

My cock hardens watching her work. This is no bartender—this is a predator unleashed.

The second enforcer pulls a knife. She throws the bottle fragment with sniper precision, opening his wrist to bone. While he screams, she vaults the table and drives her knee into the third man's temple.

Three professional killers unconscious in under thirty seconds. One woman standing over them without breathing hard.

The pub erupts in cheers. Sorcha smiles and returns to collecting glasses like she just served drinks instead of dispensing violence.

I approach while she washes blood from her hands. The sight of crimson swirling down the drain makes my dick pulse with want.

"Impressive display," I say.

She doesn't look up. "Just doing my job."

"Your job involves killing people?"

"My job involves protecting customers." She dries her hands, meeting my gaze. "Those men threatened innocents in my territory."

Territory. Not section or area. She thinks like a soldier.

"Where did you learn to fight?"

A pause. "Ex-boyfriend. Former Special Forces. Said a woman alone needed skills."

Plausible but practiced. Her movements showed training beyond civilian instruction—military precision disguised as self-defense.

"Must have been quite a teacher."

"He had his moments." Her tongue darts across her lower lip, and I imagine that mouth doing other things. "Will there be anything else?"

Using my name without introduction. Another detail that doesn't fit.

"Call me Eamon."

"Eamon." She tastes the sound, and I want to taste her. "Strong name. Suits you."

Heat builds between us—predator recognizing predator, violence leading to other hungers.

"What brought you to Boston, Sorcha?"

"Opportunity. Fresh start."

"From where?"

"Chicago. Southside."

Every answer precise but vague. Professional evasion wrapped in casual conversation.

"Big change."

"I adapt." Her eyes hold mine. "To whatever the situation requires."

The double meaning sends blood rushing to my cock. This woman radiates danger and sex in equal measure—exactly what my twisted soul craves.

"Everyone hides something," I observe.

"What are you hiding?" she challenges.

"The urge to bend you over this bar and find out what you're really hiding."

Color floods her cheeks, but she doesn't back down. "That would be unprofessional."

"I don't do professional when it comes to women who kill for sport."

"Who says I kill for sport?"

"Your eyes." I lean closer, close enough to smell her skin. "They're the eyes of someone who's taken life and enjoyed it."

Her pupils dilate. "And if they are?"

"Then we have more in common than you think."

The air crackles with violent attraction. Two killers circling each other, testing boundaries and finding mutual recognition.

"The Murphy crew won't forget tonight," I tell her. "They'll want blood for the humiliation."

"Let them come." No fear, just anticipation.

"They will. With guns, not fists." I straighten, decision made. "Which is why you're under my protection now."

"I don't need?—"

"You're getting it anyway. My territory, my rules."

Her chin lifts in defiance that makes me want to grab her throat and show her who's really in charge here.

"Is that an order?"

"Call it professional interest." I drop money on the bar. "I'll be in touch, Sorcha from Chicago."

Walking away requires effort when every instinct screams to stay and claim what I want. But anticipation makes everything sweeter.

Tomorrow I'll discover what secrets she's hiding. Tonight, I'll imagine all the ways I plan to break her careful control.

Because women who fight like angels of death don't randomly appear in my territory without cause.

And I intend to uncover every dangerous, deadly inch of her.

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CHAPTER

FOUR

I wake to wrongness. Three years of undercover work taught me to trust my gut, and every instinct screams danger. The apartment feels violated.

Someone's been here.

The evidence shows in details others would miss. My coffee mug sits askew when I placed it parallel to the counter. Books pushed back wrong on shelves. The bathroom door cracked open when I always shut it tight.

Professional work. Too careful for thieves, too skilled for amateurs. This was a search—methodical and thorough.

I check my hidden security devices. Two are missing. Whoever did this knows their business.

My secure phone buzzes: Emergency meet. Roosevelt Park. One hour.

Byrne's timing feels deliberate. Either he knows about the break-in or someone's watching us both.

Neither option offers comfort.

Roosevelt Park provides multiple exits and decent cover—why we use it for

emergency contacts. I arrive early, feeding ducks while scanning for threats.

Byrne shows up looking like hell. Wrinkled suit, bloodshot eyes, nervous energy that sets my teeth on edge.

"We have a problem," he says, dropping beside me on the bench.

"Someone searched my place last night."

His head jerks toward me. "When?"

"Professional job. Disabled my security measures, found my hiding spots." I watch his reaction carefully. "They were hunting for something specific."

"Undercover work creates paranoia. You're imagining?—"

"I'm not imagining missing equipment." My voice hardens. "Someone burned my safe house."

"Which you shouldn't have equipped without clearance." He stands, pacing. "The real issue is results. Weeks in position with nothing substantial to show."

I study his profile, noting how he avoids my eyes. Wrong reaction for a handler whose agent faced compromise.

"Intelligence development takes time. I can't just ask about criminal operations."

"Time we don't have. The task force wants results or reassignment." He checks his watch with sharp movements. "Get closer to the targets. Use every advantage."

"Meaning?"

"You're an attractive woman around dangerous men. Work with what you have."

The suggestion hits like a slap. "You want me to sleep with them for information?"

"I want progress. How you achieve it..." He shrugs. "Forty-eight hours, Quinn. Produce something substantial or this ends."

He walks away without backward glance, leaving me with growing suspicions about my handler's true agenda.

Finnegan's pub sits empty when I arrive two hours early. I need space to think without watchful eyes tracking every movement.

The back door opens with deliberate sound. No attempt at stealth.

Eamon Kavanagh fills the doorway, raw masculinity and barely leashed violence in perfect combination. He moves like a predator claiming territory.

Heat floods my body despite every rational thought. This man represents everything I should fear, yet my pulse quickens at his presence.

"Early today," he observes, closing the door with finality.

"I prefer being ready." I continue wiping tables, projecting calm while attraction wars with training.

He approaches with measured steps, hands visible but threat implied. "Ready for what, exactly?"

"Work."

"Work." His mouth curves without warmth. "Tell me about Montana."

Ice replaces the heat in my veins. Montana anchored my cover story—childhood in ranch country that should resist verification.

"What about it?"

"Funny thing about small towns. They remember everyone." He stops close enough that his scent invades my space—leather and danger and pure male heat. "Called every school in your county. No Sorcha Quinn in their records."

The cover cracks in real time. Professional identity work, but someone made mistakes only deep investigation would reveal.

"Records get lost?—"

"The ranch you claimed to live on?" He steps closer, crowding me against the bar. "Sold to developers before you were born."

My back hits polished wood. He braces one hand beside my head, caging me with his body. The position screams dominance while my treacherous nervous system responds to his proximity.

"Maybe I misremembered?—"

"Maybe you're lying." His voice drops low, intimate despite the accusation. "Question is why."

His free hand traces my jaw with deceptive gentleness. The touch sends electric shocks down my spine even as my mind catalogs the threat he represents.

"Careful," I warn, though my voice lacks conviction.

"I'm never careful." His thumb brushes my lower lip. "Makes life more interesting."

The front door chimes, shattering the moment. Eamon steps back as an older man enters—silver hair, expensive coat, presence that commands instant respect.

Tiernan Kavanagh. The patriarch himself.

"Eamon." Authority resonates in his voice. "Introduce me."

"Sorcha Quinn," Eamon replies, tension radiating from his frame. "Temporary help."

Tiernan approaches with predatory grace. His assessment makes my skin crawl—not sexual, but calculating. Like examining merchandise.

"Ms. Quinn. Finding our establishment... educational?"

"The work suits me." I force steadiness into my voice.

"Work serves many purposes." He tastes each word. "We all pursue different objectives."

Both men watch my reactions with hunter's focus. The conversation carries currents I struggle to navigate.

"Which brings me here," Tiernan continues. "The Moran family has issued threats against our people. Particularly attractive employees who might overhear sensitive discussions."

Dread pools in my stomach. Direct targeting by rivals.

"What kind of threats?"

"The fatal kind." His smile never reaches cold eyes. "Eamon will provide protection."

"That's unnecessary?—"

"It's decided." Steel enters his tone. "You belong to us now. We guard what's ours."

The possessive phrasing makes my flesh crawl, but I nod acceptance. Refusal would escalate suspicion.

"Excellent." He checks an expensive watch. "Eamon, escort Ms. Quinn home. Review her security situation thoroughly."

He exits as abruptly as he arrived, leaving expensive cologne and implied menace in his wake.

Eamon and I face each other across charged silence.

"This is unnecessary," I tell him.

"Tell the Morans that." He moves toward the exit. "Car's outside."

"I handle my own security."

"Not anymore."

His Mercedes purrs through Boston traffic while tension builds between us. Eamon drives with controlled aggression, taking corners too fast while his jaw stays locked.

Every instinct screams danger, but not from external threats. The real risk sits

eighteen inches away, radiating lethal appeal that my body refuses to ignore.

"This doesn't change anything," I say finally.

"Doesn't it?" His eyes flick to mine before returning to the road.

"You still suspect me."

"Suspicion and protection aren't mutually exclusive." His voice carries dark promise.

"I can guard you while deciding whether to trust you."

"How reassuring."

"I'm not here for your comfort."

We stop outside my building—converted warehouse in a neighborhood gentrification forgot. Eamon studies the street with professional disgust.

"No security. Multiple access points. Perfect for ambush." He shakes his head.

"Whoever chose this place wanted you vulnerable."

"It was affordable."

"Cheap gets you killed."

He insists on escorting me upstairs, cataloging every weakness. Narrow hallway. Poor lighting. Fire escape leading to empty alley.

At my door, I hesitate. Allowing him inside crosses boundaries I can't uncross.

"Keys," he commands, extending his hand.

"What?"

"Security inspection. Keys or I pick the lock."

I surrender them, watching him move through my space with efficient authority. He checks windows, tests locks, examines potential sniper positions.

His presence transforms my sanctuary into something smaller, more intimate. Every surface he touches seems to burn with residual heat.

"You live like you're planning to run," he observes, noting sparse furnishings.

"I don't accumulate things."

"Or you don't plan on staying." He turns from the window, pinning me with intense scrutiny. "Which is it, Sorcha?"

The way he says my name—like a caress and threat combined—makes my breath catch. We stand too close in my small space, electricity crackling between us.

"I stay where I'm wanted."

"And if you're not wanted?" He steps closer, crowding me against the wall. "What then?"

His body radiates heat, masculine power that makes rational thought impossible. I should push him away, maintain boundaries, remember my mission.

Instead, I meet his stare with defiant challenge.

"Then I make myself indispensable."

His pupils dilate at my words. For a moment, the hunter's mask slips, revealing raw hunger underneath. His hand rises toward my face before he catches himself.

"Dead bolts aren't enough," he says, voice rougher than before. "You need reinforced windows. Motion sensors. Safe room."

"This isn't a fortress."

"It is now." He moves toward the door, distance returning with visible effort.

"Upgrades start tomorrow. Until then, you don't go anywhere alone."

"And if I do?"

He pauses at the threshold, looking back with promise in his eyes.

"Then you'll discover what Kavanagh protection really means."

The door closes with finality, leaving me breathless and aching. His scent lingers—leather and danger and pure temptation.

My phone buzzes: Progress report. Now.

I stare at Byrne's message, thinking about violated apartments and missing handlers. About protection that feels like possession. About attraction to a man who could destroy everything.

Forty-eight hours to produce results or face career termination.

But standing in my empty apartment, skin still tingling from Eamon's proximity, I wonder if my heart might surrender first.

The game just became infinitely more dangerous.

And I'm no longer certain who's hunting whom.

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CHAPTER

FIVE

I watch Sorcha wipe down the last table at Finnegan's, her movements efficient despite the late hour. Three days since the warehouse incident, and I can't shake the feeling we're being watched.

My phone buzzes. Connor at the docks.

"Moran's people asking questions about the redhead," he says. "Asking by name."

My blood turns cold. "What kind of questions?"

"Where she lives. When she works alone. If she's got protection."

"Double security at the pub. I'm handling this personally."

I hang up and cross the empty bar. Sorcha looks up as I approach, reading the tension in my face.

"We need to talk," I say. "Now."

She sets down her rag. "What's wrong?"

"Moran knows about you. You're not safe here anymore."

Her face pales but she nods. Smart woman doesn't argue when death comes calling.

Twenty minutes later, I follow her beat-up Honda to her apartment building. The neighborhood makes my skin crawl— too many blind spots, too many ways for enemies to approach unseen.

Inside her cramped apartment, I check every window while she stands by the door, arms crossed.

"Your security is nonexistent," I say, testing the flimsy deadbolt. "These locks won't stop a determined child, much less Moran's crew."

"It's what I can afford."

I turn to face her. "Pack a bag. You're staying somewhere safe tonight."

"Where?"

"With me."

The words hang between us. Her eyes widen as the implications sink in.

"That's not necessary?—"

"It is." I move closer, backing her against the door. "Moran doesn't make idle threats. He targets what matters to send a message."

"I don't matter to you." Her voice wavers.

"Don't you?" My hand braces against the door beside her head. "Because I seem to remember you stepping between me and a gun without hesitation."

Her breathing quickens. "That was instinct."

"This is instinct too." My thumb traces her jawline. "The need to protect what's mine."

"I'm not yours."

"Aren't you?" I lean closer, my mouth inches from hers. "Then why does the thought of Moran touching you make me want to burn his organization to the ground?"

She stares up at me, pupils dilated. The air between us crackles with electricity.

"Pack your bag, Sorch. We leave in ten minutes."

My apartment sits above the pub in a converted loft space. One bedroom, one bathroom, sparse furniture that serves function over comfort. Military precision meets bachelor living.

Sorch. sets her overnight bag by the door, taking in the space. "Where am I sleeping?"

"My bed." I toss my keys on the kitchen counter. "I'll take the couch."

"You don't have to?—"

"I'm not negotiating this." I pour two glasses of whiskey, offering her one. "Moran wants to hurt me by hurting you. The best way to protect you is to keep you close."

She accepts the drink, our fingers brushing. The contact sends heat up my arm.

"This is just until the threat passes," I add.

"Right. Just temporary."

But the way she looks at me suggests she's thinking the same thing I am—nothing about this feels temporary.

I call my security team while she explores the apartment. Through the bedroom doorway, I watch her run her fingers over my dresser, my bookshelf. Seeing her in my private space does things to me that have nothing to do with protection.

"Full sweep and upgrade," I tell Martinez. "Motion sensors, cameras, reinforced entry points. This location is now classified as high-priority."

After hanging up, I find Sorcha on my balcony overlooking the pub. Boston spreads out below us, city lights reflecting off harbor water.

"Nice view," she says.

"It serves its purpose." I join her at the railing, close enough to smell her shampoo. "Tomorrow I'll take you to meet my family. Sunday dinner is mandatory when you're under Kavanagh protection."

"Your family?"

"My parents. My brother Cillian and his woman Orla." I sip my whiskey. "They'll want to assess you."

"Assess me for what?"

"Whether you're worth the trouble of protecting."

She turns to face me. "And if they decide I'm not?"

"They won't." I meet her eyes. "But if they did, it wouldn't matter. You're under my protection, not theirs."

The intensity in my voice surprises us both. Sorcha's lips part, and I find myself staring at her mouth.

"Eamon..."

"Yeah?"

"Nothing. Just... thank you."

I want to kiss her. Want to back her against the railing and claim her mouth until she moans my name. Instead, I step away.

"Get some sleep. Tomorrow will be complicated enough."

I lie awake on the couch, listening to Sorcha move around my bedroom. Water running in the bathroom. Dresser drawers opening as she searches for something to sleep in. The soft rustle of clothing being removed.

My cock hardens as I imagine her undressing in my space, surrounded by my scent. Sliding between my sheets wearing nothing but?—

"Eamon?" Her voice carries from the bedroom doorway.

I sit up, and my breath catches. She stands there in one of my t-shirts, the fabric falling mid-thigh. Her legs are bare, hair loose around her shoulders.

"I couldn't find pajamas in my bag," she says. "I hope you don't mind."

Mind? I'm fighting every instinct not to cross this room and strip that shirt off her body.

"It's fine," I manage.

She doesn't move. Just stands there watching me with an expression I can't read.

"The bed's too big," she says quietly. "Feels empty."

Dangerous words. Dangerous territory.

"You'll get used to it."

"Will I?" She takes a step closer. "Or is this just another way of protecting me?"

I stand up, closing the distance between us. "What are you asking, Sorcha?"

"I'm asking if you're going to make me sleep alone when we both know neither of us wants that."

My control snaps. I reach for her, one hand tangling in her hair as I back her against the wall. My mouth crashes down on hers, hungry and demanding.

She responds immediately, her arms winding around my neck as she opens for me. I taste whiskey and desire on her tongue, feel her body arch against mine.

"This is a bad idea," I growl against her lips.

"Probably." Her nails dig into my shoulders. "Do it anyway."

I lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her to the bedroom. My

bedroom. My bed. Where she belongs.

I lay her down, following her onto the mattress. My shirt rides up her thighs as I settle between her legs, the thin cotton the only barrier between us.

"Tell me to stop," I say, even as my hands slide under the fabric to find warm skin.

"No." Her hips rock against mine. "Don't stop."

I push the shirt up, exposing her breasts to my hungry gaze. Perfect. Mine.

My mouth finds her nipple, sucking hard enough to make her cry out. Her fingers tangle in my hair, holding me to her as I worship her body with lips and teeth and tongue.

"Eamon," she gasps as I trail kisses down her stomach. "Please."

"Please what?" I hook my fingers in her panties, dragging them down her legs. "Tell me what you want."

"You. I want you."

I settle between her thighs, my tongue finding her center. She tastes like heaven and sin, wet and ready for me. I work her with my mouth until she's trembling, until her thighs shake around my head.

"Come for me," I command against her sensitive flesh. "Come on my tongue."

She shatters with a cry that echoes off the walls, her body arching as pleasure takes her. I don't stop, drawing out her climax until she's boneless beneath me.

Only then do I rise above her, stripping off my clothes before settling back between her legs. My cock presses against her entrance, hard and aching.

"Look at me," I say, gripping her chin. "I want to see your eyes when I claim you."

She meets my gaze as I push inside, both of us groaning at the perfect fit. Tight. Hot. Mine.

"You're mine now," I growl, setting a rhythm that has her gasping. "Mine to protect. Mine to fuck. Mine to keep."

"Yes," she breathes. "Yours."

I take her hard and deep, marking her as mine with every thrust. She meets me stroke for stroke, her nails raking down my back as she claims me in return.

When she comes again, clenching around me like a vise, I follow her over the edge with a roar that comes from somewhere primal and possessive.

After, I gather her against my chest, her head on my shoulder. She fits perfectly in my arms, like she was made for this moment.

"What happens now?" she asks softly.

"Now you're under Kavanagh protection," I say, pressing a kiss to her hair. "And anyone who tries to hurt you dies."

She lifts her head to look at me. "Is that what this was? Protection?"

"No." I cup her face, thumb tracing her swollen lips. "This was me claiming what's mine."

The truth hangs between us, dangerous and undeniable. Whatever game we started tonight, there's no going back.

Sorcha Quinn belongs to me now. And I'll kill anyone who tries to take her away.

CHAPTER

SIX

I follow Eamon through the maze of shipping containers, my pulse racing for reasons that have nothing to do with the mission. He moves with predatory grace, and I can't stop watching the way his shoulders fill out his leather jacket.

Focus, Sorcha. You're here for evidence, not to ogle the target.

"Quality control," Eamon says, his Irish accent rougher today. "We check random shipments to make sure our partners don't try to fuck us over."

I pull out my phone to take notes, using the motion to photograph container numbers. Everything here connects to something larger—weapons, drugs, money. The kind of evidence that builds RICO cases.

Workers scatter as we approach, each one avoiding eye contact with Eamon. They know exactly what he's capable of.

"This one." He stops beside a container marked with Cyrillic text, muscles flexing as he punches the code. "Ukrainian associates. Electronics."

The doors swing open to reveal televisions stacked floor to ceiling. But something's wrong with the weight distribution. These boxes are too heavy for empty packaging.

"Looks legitimate," I say, fighting the urge to investigate further.

Eamon's eyes find mine, intense blue studying my face. "You notice things. I like that."

The approval in his voice sends unwanted heat through me. This is dangerous territory—not the criminal enterprise, but the way my body responds to his attention.

We move deeper into the warehouse where workers handle wooden crates with excessive care. The smell hits me immediately—cosmoline gun oil.

"Antique restoration," Eamon explains, but his mouth curves in a way that says he knows I'm not buying it.

Through gaps in the wood, I spot rifle components. Weapons shipment disguised as furniture. My training screams to document everything, but Eamon's presence beside me is distracting as hell.

"Impressive operation," I manage.

"My family doesn't fuck around."

A worker approaches, whispering urgently in Irish Gaelic. Eamon's entire demeanor shifts—from casual tour guide to lethal enforcer in seconds. The transformation is terrifying and ridiculously attractive.

"Problem?" I ask.

"Stay close to me." His hand finds my lower back, guiding me toward cover. "We've got company."

Three men enter through the loading dock. Not employees—everything about them screams threat. Dark jackets, tactical movement, hands near concealed weapons.

Eamon pulls me behind a stack of pallets, his body pressing against mine in the narrow space. Heat radiates off him, and I can smell his cologne mixed with something darker, more dangerous.

"Moran's boys," he whispers against my ear, breath hot on my neck.

I shiver despite myself. "What do they want?"

"Me. Dead, preferably."

His casual tone about death threats shouldn't be arousing. Yet here I am, trapped against his chest, fighting the urge to turn in his arms.

The searchers spread out, voices echoing off concrete. They're hunting Eamon specifically, which means I'm collateral damage if we're caught.

One approaches our hiding spot. Eamon tenses, hand inside his jacket. I count footsteps, calculating distance and angles like academy training taught me.

"This way," I whisper, pointing toward a gap between containers.

He follows without question, trusting my judgment. The confidence he shows in my abilities sends another jolt of unwanted attraction through me.

We slip between containers when gunshots explode behind us. No more hiding—this is open warfare.

"Get behind me," Eamon orders, drawing his weapon.

"Like hell."

I pull out my tactical pen. Not ideal, but I'm trained for close combat. The first attacker rounds the corner at full speed.

Eamon drops him with two precise shots. Professional, efficient, deadly. Watching him work should terrify me. Instead, I'm fighting arousal at his competence.

The second man flanks from our left. I intercept before he can fire, driving my pen into his throat. He crumples, choking.

"Fucking hell," Eamon breathes. "Where did you learn that?"

"Self-defense classes."

The third attacker gains high ground on the containers. Bullets spark off metal as we dive for cover, Eamon's body covering mine.

His weight presses me against concrete, solid muscle and controlled strength. I can feel his heartbeat against my back, steady despite the chaos.

"Suppressing fire," I gasp.

He nods, laying down covering shots while I grab a piece of rebar. The sniper adjusts position to track Eamon. Perfect opportunity.

My throw catches him in the shoulder, spinning him around. His rifle clatters down. Eamon finishes him with one shot.

Silence falls. We're both breathing hard, adrenaline surging. When Eamon helps me up, his hands linger on my arms longer than necessary.

"You're bleeding," I tell him, noting the dark stain spreading across his sleeve.

"Flesh wound."

"You need medical attention."

"No hospitals. Too many questions."

I understand. Gunshot wounds trigger police reports.

"My place isn't far," he says. "You can patch me up."

The suggestion hangs between us, loaded with implications we both recognize.

Eamon's apartment surprises me with its military precision. Everything organized, clean, functional. Not what I expected from the family enforcer.

"Medical supplies are in the bathroom," he says, already pulling off his bloody shirt.

My mouth goes dry. His chest is a roadmap of scars and hard muscle, Celtic tattoos wrapping around his ribs. Evidence of violence mixed with undeniable masculine beauty.

I retrieve the first aid kit, hands shaking slightly. Professional distance, Sorcha. You're treating a wound, not ogling his body.

"Sit," I order, trying to regain control.

He complies, watching as I examine the injury. The bullet carved a furrow through his bicep—painful but not life-threatening.

"Lucky," I murmur, cleaning the wound. "Half inch right and you'd have nerve damage."

"Where did you learn medical training?"

"Required for my last job." True, though I skip mentioning FBI combat medicine.

He doesn't flinch as I work, but his breathing changes when my fingers brush uninjured skin. The contact sends electricity up my arms.

"Military?" I ask, noting old scars.

"Marines. Two tours." His voice roughens. "What about your ex? The one who taught you to fight?"

"He was... thorough in his instruction."

Lies taste bitter, but I can't tell him the truth. That my "ex" was an FBI instructor who taught me seventeen ways to kill with improvised weapons.

I apply antibiotic ointment, hyperaware of his skin under my hands. Warm, scarred, undeniably male. My training never covered fighting attraction to the target.

"Any other injuries?" I ask.

"Just bruised ribs."

I check anyway, fingers skimming over his torso. His muscles tense under my touch, and when I look up, his eyes are burning with something that has nothing to do with pain.

"Sorcha." My name sounds different in his rough voice.

"You'll live," I whisper, securing the bandage.

But I don't pull away. Neither does he. We're too close, breathing the same air, tension crackling between us like live wire.

He reaches up, fingers brushing my cheek. "You saved my life today."

"You saved mine first."

"Did I?" His thumb traces my lower lip. "Or did I drag you into something that could get you killed?"

I should move away. Should maintain professional distance. Instead, I lean into his touch, my body betraying every rational thought.

"Eamon..."

He stands, bringing us even closer. His uninjured arm circles my waist, and I can feel his heartbeat against my chest.

"This is dangerous," I breathe.

"Everything about me is dangerous." His mouth hovers inches from mine. "But you're not running."

Because I can't. Because despite every warning bell in my head, I want this. Want him.

His lips brush mine, soft at first, then demanding when I respond. I taste whiskey and danger and something uniquely him. My hands fist in his hair, pulling him closer.

The kiss turns hungry, desperate. His injured arm doesn't stop him from lifting me onto the kitchen counter, stepping between my thighs. I wrap my legs around his

waist, needing the contact.

"Fuck," he groans against my mouth. "I've wanted this since you walked into that pub."

"Eamon, we can't?—"

"Can't what? Feel this?" His hand slides up my thigh, thumb stroking dangerous territory. "Can't want each other?"

I'm drowning in sensation, in the need he's awakening. This wasn't supposed to happen. I'm here to gather evidence, not fall for the enemy.

But when he looks at me like I'm something precious and dangerous, mission parameters become meaningless.

"Stay tonight," he whispers against my throat. "Let me keep you safe."

The offer comes with complications I can't fully process. But walking away feels impossible now.

"Okay," I breathe. "For tonight."

He carries me to his bedroom, and I realize I've crossed a line I can never uncross. Whatever happens next, it started here—in violence, medical care, and attraction too powerful to resist.

Tomorrow I'll remember I'm FBI. Tonight, I just want to be Sorcha.

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CHAPTER

SEVEN

The apartment shrinks with Sorcha asleep on my couch. I stand in the kitchen doorway, coffee mug forgotten in my hand, watching her sleep. She's curled into herself, one hand tucked under the pillow where I know she keeps a knife.

Smart woman. Beautiful woman. Dangerous woman.

She wakes when I move closer, those gray eyes snapping open with combat alertness that no bartender should possess.

"Morning," she says, sitting up. My t-shirt rides up her thigh, exposing smooth skin that makes my mouth go dry.

"Coffee?" I manage.

"Please."

I pour two mugs, hyperaware of her moving behind me. When I turn, she's stretched like a cat, arms above her head, my shirt pulling tight across her breasts. No bra underneath. My cock responds immediately.

"Sleep well?" I ask, voice rougher than intended.

"Better than I have in months." She accepts the coffee, fingers brushing mine.

Electric. "Thank you. For keeping me safe."

"Job isn't finished yet."

"Is that all this is? A job?" Her eyes hold mine, challenging.

Dangerous territory. I change direction. "Tell me about your father."

She stiffens. "What about him?"

"You mentioned he was a cop. How'd he die?"

The question hits like I intended. She sets down her coffee, walls rising.

"Ambush. Drug dealers he was investigating." Her voice goes flat. "I was fourteen. Found out from the news before anyone came to tell me."

"Fuck. I'm sorry."

"He taught me to fight before he died. Said the world was brutal to women who couldn't protect themselves." She meets my gaze. "He was right."

Something raw in her voice calls to the broken parts of me. "Afghanistan. Lost my unit in an IED attack. Sometimes the dead are the lucky ones."

Understanding passes between us. Shared trauma creates bonds stronger than attraction.

"Is that why you don't sleep?" she asks.

"Among other reasons." I drain my coffee. "I need to handle something. Two hours

max. Stay here. Lock the door. Don't answer it for anyone."

"What if?—"

"No exceptions." I grab my jacket. "There's food in the fridge. Entertainment system has everything. Just stay put."

She nods, but something flickers in her expression. "Be careful."

The concern in her voice stops me cold. When I turn back, she's watching me with an intensity that has nothing to do with self-preservation.

"Always am," I lie.

The meeting with Tiernan's contact drags past three hours. Security concerns at the docks. Rival families testing boundaries. The usual territorial bullshit that keeps our world spinning.

I return to find my apartment empty.

Every muscle tenses. I draw my gun, clearing each room methodically. No signs of struggle. No blood. Her bag remains by the couch, clothes still in the bathroom.

She left voluntarily.

My phone buzzes. Text from unknown number: Had to step out. Back soon. - S

Rage builds in my chest. I gave specific orders. Stay put. Lock the door. She disobeyed, putting herself at risk and undermining my authority.

I'm pacing when she returns twenty minutes later, key turning in the lock like she has

every right to come and go as she pleases.

"Where the hell were you?" I demand before she's through the door.

She jumps, hand moving toward her purse. "Jesus, you scared me."

"Answer the question."

"I needed air. Went for a walk around the block." She hangs up her coat, avoiding my eyes. "I was careful."

"I told you to stay here."

"I'm not a prisoner, Eamon."

"You are exactly that until I say otherwise." I close the distance between us. "You want to know why? Because three people are dead because of last night. Because there's a contract on anyone connected to our business. Because I'm responsible for keeping you alive."

Her chin lifts in defiance. "I can take care of myself."

"Like you did at the warehouse? When you needed me to save your ass?"

Color floods her cheeks. "That was different."

"Was it? Because from where I stand, you're a civilian who keeps making choices that could get you killed." I step closer, forcing her to look up at me. "And for some reason, that bothers me more than it should."

The admission hangs between us. Her lips part, breath coming faster.

"Why?" she whispers.

"Because I want you alive. Not just breathing, but alive. Safe. Here." My hand moves to her face without permission, thumb tracing her cheekbone. "And that's a problem."

"Why is it a problem?"

"Because wanting things gets people killed in my world."

Her eyes darken. "What if I want things too?"

The question hits me like a punch. She moves closer, close enough that I can smell her shampoo, feel the heat radiating off her skin.

"Sorcha." My voice comes out strained.

"What if I want you?"

My control snaps. I back her against the door, hands braced on either side of her head. "You don't know what you're asking for."

"Then show me."

I crash my mouth against hers, claiming rather than asking. She responds instantly, fingers tangling in my hair, pulling me closer. She tastes like coffee and something uniquely her—addictive and dangerous.

Her leg wraps around my hip, pressing her core against my thigh. I groan into her mouth, grinding against her until she gasps.

"Eamon." My name on her lips sounds like a prayer.

I bite her neck, marking her. "You're mine to protect. Mine to keep safe."

"Yes." She arches against me. "Yes."

My hand slides under her shirt, finding bare skin. She's soft and warm and perfect. When I palm her breast, she cries out, head falling back against the door.

"Tell me you want this," I demand against her throat.

"I want this. I want you."

I lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her toward the bedroom. She weighs nothing in my arms, but the way she clings to me makes me feel like I could conquer armies.

We reach my bed when her phone rings.

The sound cuts through our haze like a blade. She stiffens in my arms.

"Ignore it," I growl, capturing her mouth again.

But the damage is done. She pushes against my chest, sliding down until her feet touch the floor.

"I have to take this."

"No, you don't."

She's already reaching for her phone. "It's work. I'm sorry."

The call goes to voicemail. Immediately, it rings again.

"Shit." She looks at the screen, face going pale. "I really have to take this."

Something cold settles in my stomach. "Who is it?"

"My boss. From Chicago. There's a situation at one of our other locations." She's already backing toward the bathroom. "Give me five minutes."

The door closes behind her. I stand in my bedroom, hard as steel and suspicious as hell.

Her voice carries through the thin door—tense, professional. Words like "timeline" and "evidence" and "federal prosecutor."

My blood turns to ice.

I move closer to the door, straining to hear.

"—can't push any harder without blowing my cover?—"

Cover.

"—need more time to build trust?—"

Trust.

"—he's starting to suspect something?—"

Me. She's talking about me.

The call ends. Water runs in the sink. When she emerges, her face is composed, but her hands shake.

"Everything okay?" I ask, voice deadly calm.

"Yes. Just work drama." She forces a smile. "Where were we?"

"You tell me." I cross my arms. "What kind of work emergency requires discussion of cover stories and federal prosecutors?"

Her face goes blank. "I don't know what you mean."

"Sure you do." I step closer. "Just like you knew exactly where to search my apartment while I was gone."

"I didn't search?—"

"My bedroom drawer. The one that sticks. You went through my things while I was protecting you."

Guilt flashes across her face before disappearing. "I was looking for aspirin."

"In my personal effects? Next to my service medals and medication?" I laugh without humor. "Try again."

"Eamon, you're being paranoid."

"Am I? Because right now you look like someone who got caught lying." I move closer until she backs against the wall. "What's your real name, Sorcha? Who sent you?"

Her chin lifts. "You're scaring me."

"Good. You should be scared. Because if you're what I think you are, we have a

serious problem."

"What do you think I am?"

"Federal agent. Maybe FBI. Maybe DEA." I brace my hands on either side of her head. "The question is whether you're hunting me or using me."

Her pulse hammers in her throat. "You're wrong."

"Then prove it." I lean closer, mouth inches from hers. "Tell me why a bartender knows tactical hand signals. Why you fight like someone with military training. Why your work emergencies sound like law enforcement briefings."

"I don't know what?—"

"Stop lying." My voice drops to a whisper. "I've killed federal agents before, Sorch. What makes you think I won't kill another one?"

Fear flickers in her eyes, but underneath it burns something else. Defiance. Attraction. The same hunger that nearly consumed us minutes ago.

"Because you want me too much," she says.

The truth of it hits like a physical blow. I do want her. More than my next breath. More than safety or sanity or survival.

"That's the problem," I admit. "I want you so much I might let you destroy me."

Her eyes soften. "I'm not here to destroy you."

"Then what are you here for?"

She opens her mouth to answer when my phone explodes with alerts. Emergency notifications from every security system we own.

"Fuck." I grab my gun, checking the messages. "Warehouse hit. Docks compromised. They're moving on all our operations."

"Who?"

"Doesn't matter." I shove ammunition into my pockets. "You're staying here. Lock the door. Don't open it for anyone."

"Eamon, wait?—"

I pause at the door, looking back at her. Standing in my bedroom wearing my shirt, looking like everything I never knew I wanted and can't afford to keep.

"When I get back," I say, "we finish this conversation. All of it."

"And if you don't come back?"

The question stops me cold. "Then you disappear. New name, new city, new life. Whatever you're really after, it dies with me."

I leave her there, surrounded by my things, holding my secrets. Either the most dangerous woman I've ever met or the only one worth dying for.

Time will tell which.

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CHAPTER

EIGHT

The pub closes, but Eamon doesn't leave. He sits at the far end of the bar, nursing whiskey while his eyes track every shadow, every movement outside the windows. Three days since the warehouse attack, and he's appointed himself my personal guardian.

"Time to go," he says, draining his glass.

"I can walk to my car."

"No." He stands, rolling his shoulders beneath his black henley. "You can't."

I grab my purse, hyperaware of how he moves—predatory grace, coiled tension ready to strike. Outside, he scans the street with military precision before nodding toward his BMW.

"This is insane," I say, sliding into the passenger seat. The space feels intimate, his presence overwhelming in the confined area.

"Insane is letting Moran's crew hunt you down." He starts the engine, and I catch the flash of his holstered gun beneath his jacket. "They don't forget faces."

The city blurs past as he drives, one hand on the wheel, the other resting on his thigh. I force myself to look away from those hands, from the way his jeans stretch across

powerful legs.

"Where did you serve?" I ask, noting the anchor tattoo disappearing beneath his sleeve.

His jaw tightens. "What makes you think I served?"

"The way you clear corners. How you carry yourself." I study the ink on his forearm. "Third Battalion Marines, right?"

He glances at me, surprise flickering in those blue eyes. "You know military."

"My father was Navy." Half truth. "Afghanistan?"

"Two tours." His voice goes flat. "Lost half my unit in an ambush. Came home and found out violence makes more sense when it has a purpose."

The raw admission hits something deep in my chest. I know about losing people, about finding purpose in dangerous work.

"I lost someone too," I say before I can stop myself. "Different circumstances, same result."

"Your father?"

"My partner. Car bomb." The truth spills out. "Still wake up thinking I should have seen it coming."

Eamon's hand moves from his thigh to the gear shift, knuckles brushing mine. The contact sends electricity up my arm.

"Survivor guilt's a bitch," he says.

"Yes. It is."

When he parks outside my building, neither of us moves. The car fills with tension, the kind that makes breathing difficult.

"You don't have to babysit me," I say, turning to face him.

Big mistake. His eyes drop to my mouth, then back up. Heat flares between us, unexpected and dangerous.

"Babysit?" His voice drops an octave. "Is that what you think this is?"

"Isn't it?"

He leans closer, and I catch his scent—leather, gunpowder, pure male heat. "Moran's crew is asking questions about the bartender who dropped two of their guys. They want you, Sorcha."

The way he says my name makes my pulse stutter. "So?"

"So you're mine to protect now." His hand moves to my thigh, thumb stroking dangerous circles through my jeans. "And I protect what's mine."

I should pull away. Should maintain professional distance. Instead, I find myself leaning closer.

"Pack a bag," he growls. "You're coming with me."

"Where?"

"Safe house. Isolated. Secure." His thumb presses harder against my leg. "Just you and me."

The promise in his voice makes heat pool low in my belly. This is dangerous territory, but I nod anyway.

"Ten minutes."

He escorts me upstairs, his presence filling my small apartment. I grab clothes while he examines my security setup, moving through my space like he owns it.

"Window access is shit," he says, testing the locks. "Anyone could get in here."

"Good thing I'm leaving then."

When I emerge from the bedroom with my bag, he's standing by the window, silhouetted against the city lights. The sight of him in my space does things to me I can't afford to feel.

"Ready," I say.

The drive takes forty minutes, winding through increasingly isolated roads. Trees close in as civilization disappears. When we finally stop, a cabin sits nestled among pines, lights glowing against the darkness.

"Cozy," I observe, noting the strategic positioning, the hidden cameras.

"Functional." He kills the engine, eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror. "Two bedrooms. Full kitchen. Complete privacy."

Inside, the cabin feels smaller than it looked from outside. Intimate. The fireplace

crackles, casting dancing shadows across exposed beams and comfortable furniture.

"Bedroom's down the hall," Eamon says, setting my bag down. "I'll take the couch."

"You're staying?"

"Someone needs to keep you safe." He moves closer, backing me against the kitchen counter. "Question is, who's going to keep you safe from me?"

My breath catches as he braces his hands on either side of me, caging me in. This close, I can see the flecks of gold in his blue eyes, the scar bisecting his left eyebrow.

"Are you threatening me?" I whisper.

"No, sweetheart." His voice turns rough. "I'm warning you."

"About what?"

"About this." His thumb traces my jawline, and I shiver. "About how much I want you despite every instinct telling me you're dangerous."

"I'm not?—"

"Yes, you are." His other hand settles on my waist, thumb stroking the strip of skin where my shirt rides up. "You're the most dangerous thing I've ever wanted."

Heat radiates from his touch, making it hard to think. This is exactly what I can't let happen, but my body doesn't care about mission parameters.

"Eamon—"

"You handled yourself like a professional at that warehouse," he continues, lips close enough to my ear that his breath makes me tremble. "Makes me wonder what other skills you're hiding."

The question hangs between us, loaded with suspicion and desire in equal measure. His hand slides higher on my waist, and I fight the urge to arch into his touch.

"Everyone has hidden skills," I manage.

"Do they?" His thumb brushes the underside of my breast, and I gasp. "Or are you something more than a bartender playing dress-up?"

The accusation should terrify me. Instead, it sends liquid fire through my veins. He suspects me, wants me, and can't decide which impulse to follow.

"What do you think I am?" I challenge.

His eyes darken. "I think you're going to be the death of me."

Before I can respond, his mouth crashes down on mine. The kiss is brutal, claiming, nothing gentle about it. His tongue demands entrance, and I open for him without hesitation.

He tastes like whiskey and danger, like everything I shouldn't want but can't resist. His hands tangle in my hair, tilting my head for deeper access while his body pins me against the counter.

When we break apart, we're both breathing hard.

"This is a mistake," I pant.

"Probably." His forehead rests against mine. "But I'm done pretending I don't want you."

"We can't?—"

"Can't what? Want each other? Too late for that." His hands frame my face. "You're under my protection now, which means you're mine. And I take care of what's mine."

The possessive words should anger me. Instead, they make me ache with need I can't acknowledge.

"Get some sleep," he says, stepping back. "Tomorrow we figure out how to keep you alive."

"And tonight?"

His smile turns predatory. "Tonight I keep watch. Make sure nothing happens to you while you're dreaming."

"What if I can't sleep?"

"Then I'll have a problem." His eyes burn into mine. "Because the only thing standing between us right now is that bedroom door. And my self-control isn't what it used to be."

The threat hangs in the air as I grab my bag and retreat to the bedroom. Through the thin walls, I hear him moving around, settling in for a long night of keeping watch.

I lie in the unfamiliar bed, hyperaware of his presence just yards away. Every sound makes my pulse race. Every creak of the floorboards reminds me that only a door separates us.

My phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number: Enjoying your new accommodations?

Ice floods my veins. Someone knows where I am. Someone is watching.

I check the locks, peer through the curtains, see nothing but darkness and trees. But the message proves what I suspected—this safe house is anything but safe.

And the man protecting me might be the greatest danger of all.

CHAPTER

NINE

The pub buzzes with Saturday night energy when everything goes to hell.

I nurse my Jameson at the end of the bar, watching Sorchá work.

She moves between tables with practiced grace, carrying trays and dodging wandering hands.

Three weeks of watching her, and I still catch new details—how she counts tips without looking down, how she remembers every order without writing anything.

The front door opens. Cold air rushes in along with three men I recognize.

Lorcan Moran strides through Finnegan's like he owns the place. His crew flanks him—two massive guys who scan the room while their boss adjusts his expensive coat. Every conversation dies as heads turn.

Moran commands attention without trying. Red hair slicked back, green eyes calculating every face in the room. Designer suit that costs more than most people make in a month. The kind of man who never gets told no.

He spots Sorchá right away.

I set my glass down and shift position. Better angle if things go bad. The regular

customers sense trouble—conversations resume but voices stay lower. Everyone knows what Moran represents.

Territory war.

Sorcha finishes taking an order and heads toward the kitchen. Moran intercepts her path, blocking the narrow passage between tables.

"Excuse me," she says.

"Sorcha Quinn." His voice carries over the background noise. "I don't think we've been introduced."

She stops. Every instinct I developed in Afghanistan screams warning. Moran didn't come here for a drink.

"I don't know you," Sorcha replies, stepping sideways.

Moran moves with her, keeping himself between her and the kitchen. "Lorcan Moran. I own several establishments in this neighborhood."

"This isn't your establishment."

His smile never reaches his eyes. "Neighborhoods change. Business relationships evolve."

I stand up from my stool. Three steps closer. Close enough to act if needed.

Sorcha glances around the room, noting the attention they're drawing. Smart—she knows this conversation affects more than just her.

"What do you want?" she asks.

"To discuss your safety." Moran's tone stays conversational, but his meaning cuts clear. "Beautiful woman like you, working late hours in questionable territory. Accidents happen."

The threat hangs in the air like smoke. I count his guys—two visible, one more outside. Standard formation for a public approach.

"I can take care of myself," Sorchia says.

"Can you?" Moran steps closer. "This neighborhood has seen increased violence. Dock workers getting hurt. Shipping containers going missing. Dangerous times for innocent people."

My hand moves toward my jacket. Combat instincts take over.

"What kind of safety are you offering?" Sorchia asks, voice steady despite the obvious threat.

"Protection. Insurance. Peace of mind." His smile widens. "All very reasonable rates."

"And if I'm not interested?"

"Everyone's interested in staying safe."

The front door chimes again. Tommy Flanagan enters—one of our crew. He spots Moran and positions himself near the exit. Good. Blocking escape routes.

Moran notices too. His eyes flick toward Tommy, then back to Sorchia.

"Think about it," he tells her. "I'll be in touch."

He turns to leave and sees me standing three feet away.

"Eamon Kavanagh." Recognition sparks in his eyes. "Didn't see you there."

"Just having a quiet drink." I keep my voice level. "Enjoying the atmosphere."

"Neighborhood establishments should maintain their character."

"They do. Under proper management."

We stare at each other. Two predators taking measure. He knows I'm armed. I know he's calculating odds.

"Give my regards to your father," Moran says.

"I'll do that."

He walks toward the door, his crew following. At the threshold, he pauses.

"Ms. Quinn," he calls back. "Remember what I said about safety."

The door closes behind him. Conversations resume, but tension lingers.

Sorcha stands where he left her, hands clenched into fists. When she looks at me, I see controlled fury instead of fear.

"Friend of yours?" she asks.

"Business acquaintance."

She nods toward the kitchen. "I need to finish my shift."

I watch her work for the next three hours. Every time the door opens, she glances up. Every time a new customer enters, she tracks their movement. Smart survival instincts.

When closing time arrives, I wait while she counts the register and wipes tables. The other staff leave one by one until we're alone.

"You can't go home tonight," I tell her.

She looks up from stacking chairs. "Excuse me?"

"Moran knows where you live. Where you work. Where you shop." I lean against the bar. "He made his play public to send a message."

"What message?"

"That you're vulnerable. That the Kavanaghs can't protect their own territory."

Sorcha slams a chair down harder than necessary. "I'm not Kavanagh property."

"No. But you work in Kavanagh territory. That makes you mine to protect."

The words hang between us, loaded with more meaning than I intended. Her eyes widen at the possessive edge in my voice.

"I didn't ask for protection."

"You didn't ask for threats either."

She moves around the bar, organizing bottles with sharp movements. Anger management through busy work. I track every step, every gesture. The way her jeans hug her hips. How her shirt rides up when she reaches for the top shelf.

"Where am I supposed to go?" she asks.

"Safe house. Family property outside the city."

"For how long?"

"Until we settle things with Moran."

She stops moving. "Settle things how?"

I don't answer. Some things civilians don't need to know.

"I won't hide," she says. "I have a job. A life."

"You won't have either if Moran decides you're more useful as an example."

Her jaw tightens. "There has to be another way."

I consider options. Moving her means acknowledging weakness. Leaving her exposed invites attack.

"I stay at your place," I say. "Direct protection."

"Stay where?"

"Your apartment. Until the threat passes."

She stares at me. "You want to move in with me?"

"I want to keep you alive."

"By sleeping on my couch?"

"By staying close enough to make sure nothing happens to you."

Her laugh has no humor. "This is insane."

"Moran threatened you in public. That requires a response." I step closer, close enough to smell her perfume mixed with the scent of beer and whiskey from work. "Either you disappear, or I stay close enough to protect what's mine."

The possessive words slip out before I can stop them. Her breathing changes, becoming shallower.

"I'm not yours," she says, but her voice lacks conviction.

"Tonight you are."

She considers this, weighing options. I see her calculating angles, escape routes, contingencies. The woman thinks like a tactician.

"Fine," she says. "But I set the rules."

"Such as?"

"You sleep on the couch. You don't touch my things. You don't answer my phone or door. And this ends the minute Moran backs off."

"Agreed."

"And you cook. I'm not your maid."

I can manage that. "One more thing."

"What?"

"If you snore, I'm sleeping in your bed with you."

Her face flushes. "I don't snore."

"Good to know."

She grabs her jacket and heads for the door. I follow her into the night, scanning shadows for watchers. Three blocks to her building. My eyes drift to the sway of her hips as she walks, the confident stride that draws attention from every man we pass.

Mine to protect. The thought burns through me.

Her apartment occupies the second floor of a converted triple-decker. Two bedrooms, small kitchen, living room that barely fits a couch and television. Clean but sparse. The kind of place someone keeps when they don't plan to stay long.

"Bathroom's there," she says, pointing down a short hallway. "Towels in the closet. I sleep with the door locked."

"Smart practice."

She disappears into her bedroom. I hear the click of a deadbolt.

I check the windows—fire escape access, good sight lines to the street. Front door has decent locks but needs reinforcement. Kitchen knives sharp enough for defense if needed.

The couch looks comfortable. I've slept in worse places.

From behind her bedroom door comes the sound of running water. Shower. My mind conjures images I shouldn't be thinking—water running over skin I've never seen, hands I've watched serve drinks now washing away the day.

I push those thoughts aside and check my gun. Full clip, one in the chamber.

The water stops. Footsteps across hardwood. Her door opens a crack.

"Eamon?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. For tonight. For staying."

"Just protecting what's mine."

Silence stretches between us through the thin door.

"Is that what I am?" she asks. "Yours?"

The question hangs in the air like a challenge. I want to kick down that door and show her exactly what she is to me. Want to pin her against the wall and claim her mouth until she stops asking stupid questions.

Instead, I grip the arm of the couch until my knuckles turn white.

"Get some sleep, Sorchá."

Her door closes. The deadbolt clicks.

I settle onto the couch with my gun within reach. Outside, Boston sleeps while I guard a woman who's becoming an obsession.

Through the thin walls, I hear her moving around. The soft sound of fabric hitting the floor. A drawer opening and closing. The creak of mattress springs as she settles into bed.

I close my eyes and try not to picture her in whatever she wears to sleep. Try not to think about how easy it would be to pick that lock and join her.

Tomorrow we'll establish routines. Set boundaries. Pretend this arrangement is professional.

Tonight, I listen to her breathe through thin walls and plan all the ways I want to make her mine.

CHAPTER

TEN

The smell of coffee wakes me before the sound of movement in my kitchen. For a moment, I forget where I am and why there's a man making breakfast in my apartment. Then reality crashes back—Eamon Kavanagh, sleeping on my couch, his body between me and the rival gangsters who want me dead.

I wrap my robe tight and pad barefoot to the kitchen. He stands at my counter, back to me, wearing yesterday's jeans and nothing else. His shoulders show old scars—knife wounds, bullet grazes, the marks of a man who's survived Boston's streets since he was a teenager.

"Morning," I say, voice still rough with sleep.

He turns, coffee mug halfway to his lips. Dark stubble covers his jaw, hair messed from sleep. The sight of his bare chest makes my mouth go dry.

"Did I wake you?"

"No." I move to the cabinet for my own mug, hyperaware of his eyes tracking my movement. "Thank you for making coffee."

"Least I could do." He steps aside but doesn't give me much room at the machine. His body radiates heat, close enough that I catch his scent—clean male skin and danger underneath.

"You take it black?" he asks.

"Cream, no sugar."

He opens my refrigerator without asking, retrieves the carton. When he hands it to me, his fingers brush mine. The contact sends heat racing up my arm.

"Shower's yours if you want it," I offer, then immediately regret the words. Images of water running over those scars, over the muscles of his chest, flood my mind.

"Thanks. I'll grab one after you're done." His voice drops lower. "Unless you want company."

The suggestion hangs between us, loaded with possibility. My pulse jumps, body responding before my brain can stop it.

"I..." I start, then my phone rings.

Cillian's name flashes on the screen. Eamon's jaw tightens as he recognizes his brother's number.

"Take it," he says, but frustration edges his voice.

"Sorcha Quinn," I answer.

"We have a problem," Cillian says without preamble. "Moran's people hit three of our locations last night. I need all hands for a family meeting."

I catch Eamon's eye. He nods, understanding the subtext.

"Where and when?" I ask.

"Warehouse district. One hour. Eamon knows the place."

"We'll be there."

I hang up and turn to Eamon. "Your brother wants you at a family meeting."

"Us. He wants us both there." Eamon drains his coffee mug. "The attacks escalated things. You're not safe here alone anymore."

Part of me—the FBI agent part—celebrates this development. Another opportunity to observe Kavanagh family operations. But the woman whose body still burns from his casual touch feels sick at the prospect of using this access.

"I should shower first," I say.

"Five minutes," he replies, then steps closer. "We don't keep Cillian waiting."

His proximity makes breathing difficult. I escape to the bathroom, heart pounding.

The warehouse sits in an industrial area where legitimate businesses provide cover for less legal activities. Eamon parks between two black SUVs, his hand checking the gun under his jacket before we exit.

"Stay close," he murmurs, fingers finding the small of my back. "Take notes if anyone asks, but mostly just listen."

The touch burns through my shirt as he guides me inside.

The interior holds shipping containers and office equipment, but the back corner has been cleared for a conference table surrounded by chairs.

Cillian stands at the head, pointing to locations on a map spread across the surface.

Tiernan sits to his right, face grim. Three other men I recognize from FBI surveillance photos fill the remaining seats.

"Eamon." Cillian looks up as we approach. "Good. Sorcha, grab a chair. Document this."

I sit beside Eamon, pulling out my phone to use as a notepad. Every detail gets catalogued mentally while I type innocent-looking reminders. Names, locations, operational details—intelligence worth its weight in gold.

"Moran hit the dock warehouse, the Southie storage facility, and the auto shop on Dorchester," Cillian continues. "Professional jobs. In and out clean."

"Any casualties?" Eamon asks.

"Two wounded at the auto shop. Martinez and Kelly." Tiernan speaks for the first time. "They'll live."

One of the unknown men leans forward. "This is retaliation for the pub incident."

"No," Eamon says. "This is probing. Testing our response time and security measures."

Cillian nods agreement. "He's mapping our vulnerabilities."

"So what's our response?" Tiernan asks.

"Increased security at all remaining facilities. Round-the-clock surveillance. And we send a message of our own." Cillian traces a route on the map. "His drug shipment

comes through the harbor tomorrow night. We intercept it."

I type rapidly, documenting locations and operational plans while maintaining the appearance of simple note-taking. This intelligence could help the FBI map the entire Kavanagh network—if I can get it to my handler.

Under the table, Eamon's hand finds my knee. The touch shoots electricity through my system, making concentration nearly impossible. His thumb traces small circles through my jeans while he discusses tactical details with his brother.

The meeting continues for another hour. I absorb everything while fighting the distraction of his casual touch, occasionally asking clarifying questions that prompt even more useful information.

"Sorcha drives with me," Eamon announces when the meeting breaks up. "Security protocol until this situation resolves."

Cillian studies us both, noting the proprietary way Eamon's hand rests on my back. "Your call. But keep her safe."

"Count on it."

Back at my apartment, I watch Eamon check the locks and windows with lethal efficiency. His movements remind me that this man has killed people. The knowledge should frighten me. Instead, it sends dark heat pooling low in my belly.

"We should upgrade your security," he says, examining the door frame. "Better locks. Camera for the hallway."

"I have a security system," I offer, seeing opportunity. "Motion sensors and door alarms. But it could use updating."

"I know a guy. Discrete. He can come by tomorrow."

Perfect. "That would make me feel safer."

"Good." He turns from the window, eyes finding mine. "I'll make some calls. Set up the appointment."

While he talks to his security contact in the kitchen, I slip into my bedroom and retrieve three FBI surveillance devices from their hiding place behind my dresser. Tiny, wireless, undetectable unless you know exactly where to look.

I plant the first behind the headboard in my bedroom, the second inside the living room lamp, and the third underneath my kitchen table. Each one will transmit to a receiver hidden in my closet, recording every conversation for later transmission to my handler.

The guilt sits heavy in my stomach. I'm using Eamon's protection of me to betray him. But this is my job. My duty. The evidence we collect could save lives.

I return to the living room as he finishes his call.

"All set," he says. "Danny will be here tomorrow afternoon."

"Thank you." The words taste like betrayal. "I appreciate you taking care of this."

"Taking care of you isn't a hardship." His eyes darken. "Trust me."

The heat in his voice makes my knees weak.

"Are you hungry?" I ask, needing distraction. "I could make dinner."

"You don't have to cook for me."

"I have to eat anyway. Might as well feed us both."

He watches me move around the kitchen, eyes tracking every bend and stretch. "I can help."

"Can you chop vegetables without losing fingers?"

"I can handle a knife." His voice carries double meaning.

We work side by side, the small space forcing constant contact. His chest brushes my back when he reaches around me. His hand covers mine when he shows me his preferred knife grip. Each touch builds heat between us.

"You cook often?" he asks, voice rough.

"When I'm not living on takeout and coffee." I add garlic to oil, filling the kitchen with its aroma. "You?"

"Basic survival skills. Growing up on the streets, you learn to make meals from whatever you can find."

"How old were you? When you started working for the family?"

"Fourteen." His knife stills. "First job was collecting debts from deadbeats who thought they could hide."

"That's young."

"Kavanagh men start young." He resumes chopping. "Had to prove I belonged."

I understand the subtext. Violence. Blood. Things that would horrify normal people but shaped him into the man beside me.

"Was it hard? The first time you..." I let the question trail off.

"Killed someone?" He meets my eyes. "Easier than I expected. Scared the hell out of me how easy it was."

The honesty catches me off guard. Most people would lie, make excuses. He states it as simple fact.

"How old?" I ask.

"Sixteen. Punk tried to muscle in on our territory. Thought he could take what didn't belong to him." Eamon sets down the knife. "I showed him different."

Heat pools between my thighs at his casual mention of violence. Wrong reaction entirely, but I can't help it. This man could break someone in half without breathing hard, and he's choosing to make dinner with me instead.

We eat at my small table, conversation flowing easier than expected. He tells me about growing up in Cillian's shadow, always fighting to prove himself worthy of the family name. I share carefully edited stories about my childhood, mixing truth with fiction.

"Your father died when you were fourteen?" he asks.

"Car accident." The partial truth comes easily now. "Changed everything."

"I'm sorry."

"It taught me that nothing lasts forever. You have to take what you want while you can get it."

His eyes hold mine across the table. "Good philosophy."

After dinner, we settle on my couch to watch television. I try to keep distance between us, but he's having none of it. His arm slides around my shoulders, pulling me against his side.

"Relax," he murmurs when I stay rigid. "I don't bite. Unless you ask nicely."

The suggestion sends fire racing through my veins. I force myself to settle against him, hyperaware of every point of contact. His fingers play with my hair while we watch some mindless action movie.

"Mind if I ask you something?" he says during a commercial break.

"Shoot."

"The way you fought at the warehouse. Where did you really learn that?"

I've prepared for this question, but his directness still catches me off guard. "Self-defense classes in college."

"Self-defense." He turns to face me fully, arm still around my shoulders. "You dropped a grown man twice your size with self-defense classes."

"Adrenaline makes people do crazy things."

"Does it?" His free hand finds my thigh, thumb stroking through my jeans. "What else does adrenaline make you do?"

My breath catches. "Eamon..."

"What, sweetheart?"

The endearment, combined with his touch, makes rational thought impossible. "We shouldn't..."

"Shouldn't what?" His hand slides higher on my thigh. "Shouldn't enjoy each other's company? Shouldn't admit there's heat between us?"

"It's complicated."

"Only if we make it complicated." He leans closer, mouth near my ear. "I want you, Sorcha. Have since the first night at the pub. But I won't push. Not unless you want me to."

My body screams yes while my mind screams danger. Professional detachment crumbles under his proximity, his scent, the heat radiating from his skin.

"I should get some sleep," I whisper, not moving away.

"Should you?" His lips brush my ear. "Or should you stop thinking so damn much and tell me what you really want?"

His hand cups my face, forcing me to meet his eyes. The intensity there steals my breath.

"Tell me, Sorcha. What do you want?"

The honest answer terrifies me. I want his hands on my skin. I want to taste every scar on his body. I want him to make me forget why I'm here, forget everything

except the heat building between us.

Instead, I pull away. "I want to not complicate things."

Disappointment flickers across his features before he masks it. "Fair enough."

He starts to move away, but a sound from outside freezes us both. Car doors slamming. Footsteps on pavement. His hand goes to his gun while his other arm pushes me behind him.

"Lights," he whispers.

I hit the switch, plunging us into darkness. Through the window, I see two figures moving between the cars in the parking lot. They wear dark clothes and move with deadly purpose.

"Moran's people," Eamon breathes against my ear.

My blood turns ice cold. They've found me.

"Bedroom," he orders quietly. "Lock the door. Window leads to the fire escape. If shooting starts, you run and don't look back."

"What about you?"

"I can handle two men." His voice carries absolute confidence. "Go. Now."

I reluctantly obey, slipping into my bedroom but leaving the door cracked. The apartment falls silent except for my racing heartbeat.

Minutes pass like hours. Then I hear movement, voices too low to make out words.

My hand finds the gun I keep in my nightstand drawer.

The front door opens and closes. Footsteps in my living room. I grip the gun tighter, finger on the trigger.

"Clear," Eamon's voice calls softly. "They moved on."

I emerge from the bedroom to find him checking the locks, shirt back on but still unbuttoned. "Are you sure?"

"Patrol sweep. They'll be back tomorrow night with more men."

The certainty in his voice makes my chest tighten. "How do you know?"

"Pattern recognition. They're escalating." He turns to face me. "This apartment isn't safe anymore."

"Where am I supposed to go?"

"Safe house. Family property. Isolated." His eyes find mine. "You'll stay with me until this ends."

The implications hang between us. Alone together. No interruptions. No professional distance.

"Eamon..."

"You're trembling." He appears in front of me, hands gentle on my shoulders. "Hey. You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you."

The sincerity in his voice breaks my heart. This man would die protecting me, and

I'm betraying him with every breath.

"I know," I whisper.

He studies my face in the dim light. "You're scared."

"A little."

"Of them? Or of me?"

"Of this." I gesture between us. "Of what happens when we're alone together."

His eyes darken. "What do you think will happen?"

"I think we'll do things we can't take back."

"Would that be so terrible?"

Yes. No. I don't know anymore.

"Pack a bag," he says, stepping back. "We leave in an hour."

As I gather clothes with shaking hands, the recording devices mock me from their hiding places. Tomorrow I'll be at a Kavanagh safe house, deeper in enemy territory than any FBI agent has ever been.

The question is whether I'll survive it with my mission—or my heart—intact.

From the living room, I hear Eamon making calls, his voice hard as he arranges our disappearance. In sixty minutes, I'll be alone with the most dangerous man I've ever met.

And God help me, I want it more than my next breath.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

The black Escalade follows us for three blocks before I decide to end this shit. Same vehicle, same distance, making every turn we make. Amateur hour surveillance.

"We've got a tail," I tell Sorch, watching the rearview mirror.

She checks her side mirror without turning around. Smart girl. "How many?"

"One car I can see. Probably more hiding." I take a right instead of heading to the pub. "Let's flush them out."

The Escalade follows. Two seconds later, a white van appears behind it. These fuckers think they're clever.

My phone buzzes. Text from an unknown number: Change of plans. Meet at the warehouse on Pier 7.

"Bullshit," I mutter, showing Sorch the message. "Someone's trying to herd us."

"Trap?"

"Definitely." I gun the engine, weaving through traffic. "Hold tight."

The Escalade accelerates, closing distance fast. I spot the van moving up on our left.

Professional formation, but these aren't cops or feds. The gear's too expensive, the coordination too sloppy.

"Eamon," Sorcha's voice carries warning.

Ahead, a garbage truck blocks our lane. The driver waves like it's an accident, but his positioning screams setup. Behind us, windows roll down on the Escalade.

"Down," I bark.

Gunfire erupts. Our rear window explodes in a shower of glass. I jerk the wheel hard right, tires screaming as we careen down a side street.

"Fuck," Sorcha breathes, brushing glass from her hair.

"Irish mob doesn't usually get this fancy," I say, checking mirrors. "Someone paid good money for professional help."

The van appears at the far end of the street while the Escalade follows behind. They're boxing us in, forcing us toward the industrial district where screams won't carry.

I spot an alley between two buildings. Barely wide enough for a car, but it'll have to do.

"Trust me?" I ask.

Sorcha meets my eyes. "Do I have a choice?"

I aim for the gap. Metal screams against brick as we squeeze through, sparks flying from both sides. We burst into a loading area behind a row of shops.

"There," Sorcha points to an exit.

Before we can reach it, a third vehicle—black SUV—slides into position, blocking our escape. Four men pile out with guns raised. Not street thugs. These bastards move like they know what they're doing.

"Out. Now." I grab my Glock and roll from the car.

Bullets shatter windows as we dive for cover behind a dumpster. I count four shooters, plus however many are still in the vehicles. The gunfire is controlled, disciplined. Someone taught these assholes well.

Sorcha crouches beside me, her own gun steady in her hands. No shaking, no panic. Just cold focus as she returns fire.

"FBI training?" I ask between shots.

"Among other things." She puts two rounds center mass on the closest gunman. He drops hard. "You?"

"Marines. Then the family business."

The remaining shooters advance with covering fire. I estimate twenty seconds before they reach us. The dumpster won't stop rifle rounds much longer.

"Loading dock," I point right. "Better cover."

We move together, me laying down suppressing fire while she advances. Then she covers me. Natural teamwork, like we've done this before.

Behind concrete barriers at the loading dock, I reload and assess. Three shooters left,

plus backup in the vehicles.

"This feels personal," Sorcha says.

"Someone wants us both dead. Question is who?—"

A grenade rolls toward our position. We dive in opposite directions as it explodes, ears ringing, vision blurred. The attackers rush forward through the smoke.

I tackle the first one before he can bring his rifle up. My knife slides between his ribs, finding his heart. He drops, gurgling blood.

Sorcha disarms the second gunman with moves that definitely didn't come from basic FBI training. Kicks his knee backward, breaks his wrist, takes his weapon. Efficient and brutal.

The third shooter has a bead on her back. I throw my knife, catching him in the throat. He falls, choking on his own blood.

"Clear," Sorcha calls.

I scan the area one more time. "For now."

We search the bodies. No identification, but the weapons are top-shelf. Someone with serious money wanted us eliminated.

"Professional contractors," I say. "Not local talent."

"Recent enemies, or did we step on the wrong toes?"

"Has to be connected to your investigation. Too convenient otherwise." I check my

phone for Cillian's number. "We need to?—"

Fire explodes through my left shoulder. I look down to see blood spreading across my shirt, more pumping out with each heartbeat.

"Shit. You're hit." Sorcha's hands press against the wound.

"Just a graze." But it's not. The bullet tore through muscle, and I'm losing blood fast.

"Liar." She helps me to the SUV the attackers left running. "You need medical attention."

"Family doctor," I give her an address. "No hospitals. No questions."

She drives while I keep pressure on the wound. Each bump sends lightning through my shoulder. By the time we reach Dr. Kelligan's back-alley clinic, the world tilts sideways.

"Jesus Christ, Eamon." Kelligan opens the door, takes one look at the blood. "Exam room. Now."

Kelligan's patched up Kavanagh wounds for fifteen years. Retired army medic who asks no questions and keeps no records. He cuts away my shirt and curses at what he finds.

"Bullet's lodged deep. Tore through the muscle, missed major arteries by inches." He prepares instruments while Sorcha watches. "You're lucky to be alive."

"Doesn't feel lucky," I grunt.

Kelligan works with steady hands, digging out bullet fragments. Sorcha stands close

enough that I catch her scent—vanilla and gunpowder. Her eyes stay fixed on my face, watching for signs of distress.

"He always this stubborn?" she asks Kelligan.

"Worse. First time he's brought company." Kelligan glances between us. "Usually bleeds alone in a back alley somewhere."

The comment hits closer to truth than I like. Family takes care of family, but I handle my own problems. Don't show weakness. Don't need help.

Except right now, watching Sorcha's concerned face, needing help doesn't feel weak.

An hour later, I'm stitched up with my arm in a sling. Kelligan warns about infection and limited mobility.

"Keep it clean, keep it still," he orders. "And find somewhere safe to heal. Whoever did this will try again."

I know exactly where to go.

"Safe house," I tell Sorcha as we drive north. "Family property. Completely isolated."

The cabin sits hidden in twenty acres of woods, off any main road. I built it myself over three summers—solar power, well water, enough supplies to last weeks. My private retreat from the family business.

Inside, Sorcha helps me to the couch. The pain medication makes everything soft around the edges, but I stay alert enough to notice her examining the space.

"Cozy," she says, checking window angles and exit routes.

"It's mine. Built it when I needed somewhere to think." I try to shift position and immediately regret it. "Away from family expectations."

She finds the medical kit and checks my bandages. Her fingers are gentle against my skin, but I feel each touch like electricity. When did a federal agent's hands become so distracting?

"How does it feel?" she asks, fingers probing around the wound.

"Like I got shot."

"Smart ass." Her touch lingers longer than necessary. "Any numbness? Tingling?"

"Just where you're touching me."

She meets my eyes, and something passes between us. Recognition of attraction we've been dancing around for weeks. Her hand rests on my bare chest, feeling my heartbeat.

"Eamon," she says quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. For taking that bullet."

"Part of the job."

"No, it wasn't." Her thumb traces along my collarbone. "You threw yourself between me and that gunman without thinking. You could have died."

I did throw myself in front of her. Instinct overrode training, protection overrode self-

preservation. That should worry me, but her touch makes it hard to think clearly.

"Someone has to watch out for you," I say.

"I can take care of myself."

"I know. I've seen you fight." I catch her hand with my good one. "Doesn't mean I'll stop trying to keep you safe."

Her fingers curl around mine. "Even though I'm supposed to be your enemy?"

"Especially then."

We stare at each other in the dim cabin light. Her lips part slightly, like she's considering something dangerous. The space between us charges with possibility.

Then she pulls back, professional mask sliding into place.

"You need rest," she says. "I'll take first watch."

I want to argue, but exhaustion wins. I fall asleep on the couch with Sorcha sitting across the room, gun within reach, watching monitors that show our perimeter.

When I wake hours later, she's moved closer. Close enough to check my breathing, my temperature. Her hand rests on my forehead, cool against my skin.

"How do you feel?" she asks.

"Like I want to kiss you."

The honest answer slips out before I can stop it. She freezes, hand still touching my

face.

"Eamon—"

"I know. Wrong time, wrong situation, wrong everything." I sit up carefully. "But I can't stop thinking about it."

Her eyes search mine. "This complicates everything."

"Everything's already complicated." I reach up to cup her cheek. "One more complication won't kill us."

"The people shooting at us might."

"Then we better make the most of tonight."

She leans into my touch, closing her eyes. When she opens them again, they're dark with want.

"This is a terrible idea," she whispers.

"The best ones usually are."

She moves closer, her thigh brushing mine on the couch. The cabin feels smaller, warmer, charged with tension we've been fighting for weeks.

Tomorrow will bring consequences. Questions about who ordered the hit. Decisions about what comes next between us. But tonight, isolated from the rest of the world, we can stop pretending this attraction doesn't exist.

Her hand slides down my chest, careful of my injured shoulder. "We're going to

regret this."

"Probably." I pull her closer with my good arm. "But I'm done fighting what I want."

Her lips are an inch from mine when she whispers, "What do you want, Eamon?"

"You," I say, and close the distance between us.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

The fever burns through Eamon like wildfire. One hundred and three degrees, and climbing. I press a cool cloth to his chest, watching sweat bead across his skin as he tosses restlessly on the narrow bed.

"Eamon." I lean over him, my hair brushing his shoulder. "You need to drink something."

His eyes open, unfocused and glassy. "Sorcha?"

"I'm here." I slip my arm behind his neck, helping him sit up. The movement brings us close—his bare chest against my arm, his breath hot on my neck. "Drink."

He takes a few sips before collapsing back. The bullet wound in his shoulder has turned angry red, infection spreading despite my efforts to keep it clean.

"Hurts like hell," he mutters.

I examine the bandage, noting how the fever makes him compliant. Vulnerable. The dangerous enforcer who terrifies half of Boston lies helpless while I tend his wounds.

"I need to clean this again," I tell him, gathering supplies.

He nods weakly. I peel away the soaked bandage, revealing inflamed flesh. His body

tenses as I work, removing infected tissue.

"Hold still," I murmur, one hand pressing his chest down while I clean the wound.

"Can't." His breathing grows ragged. "Everything's spinning."

I lean across him to reach the antiseptic, my body covering his. The position puts my breasts against his chest, and even burning with fever, his hands find my waist.

"Sorcha," he whispers, gripping me tighter than necessary.

"Just cleaning the wound," I say, though I don't pull away.

His hands slide up my sides as I work. "You smell good. Like vanilla and something else."

"Gunpowder," I reply without thinking.

He laughs, the sound rough. "Perfect combination."

I apply fresh bandages while his hands roam my back with fevered possessiveness. This man who barely touches anyone clings to me like I'm his anchor.

"Stay close," he says as I finish. "Don't like being alone when the dreams come."

"What dreams?"

"The docks. Tommy Castellano." His eyes drift shut. "All the faces. The first time I had to... handle things for the family."

My pulse quickens. Confessions during fever—exactly what the Bureau needs. But

instead of recording, I find myself stroking his damp hair.

"How old were you?"

"Sixteen. Dad said it was time to prove myself." His grip on my waist tightens. "Guy was skimming from our territory. Had to send a message."

I should be taking notes. Should be documenting every word. Instead, I watch pain cross his features.

"Been carrying bodies ever since," he mutters. "Starting with Thomas Nolan."

My breath catches. "Thomas?"

"The accountant. Collins said he was selling us out to the feds. Made it seem like he'd destroy the family." His voice breaks. "But he wasn't. Just found Collins stealing money. I killed an innocent man because I was young and stupid and wanted my father's approval."

The confession I've hunted for months spills out while he burns with fever and need. His hands explore my body like he's afraid I'll disappear.

"Should have known better," he continues. "Guy had kids. A regular life. Didn't fit."

I lean down, my lips near his ear. "Collins manipulated you."

"Doesn't matter. I pulled the trigger." His arms encircle me completely now, pulling me down against his chest. "Been trying to balance the scales since. Saving kids, stopping the worst shit. But it doesn't bring him back."

"Eamon—"

"Promise me something." His fevered eyes lock on mine. "If something happens to me, make sure Collins pays. He's still out there, still pulling strings."

"Nothing's going to happen to you."

"Promise me."

I nod, knowing I'm crossing every professional line. "I promise."

He pulls my mouth down to his, kissing me with desperate hunger. The fever makes him unrestrained, all walls down. I respond despite myself, tasting his need and vulnerability.

When I pull back, he's unconscious again.

I sit there shaking, my body still thrumming from his touch. Three months building this case, and now it comes through moments of genuine intimacy I can't bring myself to exploit.

My phone buzzes. Byrne: Status update required immediately.

I type back: Subject recovering. Will report soon.

His response: Need concrete evidence. Time running out.

I stare at Eamon's sleeping form, then slip away to explore the safe house. The main room seems ordinary until I notice a loose panel behind an old painting.

Inside, a metal box holds documents the family keeps separate from regular business. Financial records. Territory maps. Communication logs.

I photograph each page methodically. These show the full scope of their operation—territory divisions, rival family conflicts, protection schemes across the city.

Then I find something that stops my heart cold.

Payment records to FBI agents. Not small bribes, but substantial monthly payments for intelligence. Strategic information about investigations, raid schedules, witness locations.

Agent Riordan Byrne's name appears throughout the documents.

My handler. My supervisor. The man who assigned me to infiltrate the Kavanaghs.

I sit back, mind reeling. If Byrne works for them, this entire operation is compromised. Every report I've filed, every piece of intelligence—all filtered through a corrupt agent.

But why assign me to investigate his own benefactors? What's his real game?

I photograph the corruption evidence with trembling hands. This changes everything about my mission, my safety, who I can trust.

"Planning to steal those?"

Eamon's voice freezes my blood. I turn to find him in the doorway, pale but alert, gun trained on me.

"Looking for more medical supplies," I say, closing the box.

"In a hidden compartment?" He steps closer, weapon steady despite his injury. "Try

again."

"I heard something. Thought someone might be?—"

"Cut the shit." His voice turns deadly calm. "Professional movements. Professional search technique. Who the fuck are you?"

My mind races. "I told you?—"

"Bartenders don't move like federal agents. Bartenders don't know how to find hidden compartments." He kicks my purse across the floor.

Contents spill everywhere—makeup, keys, phone, and my emergency FBI badge.

Eamon goes white as he picks up the badge. "Special Agent Sorcha Quinn."

The words hang between us like a death sentence.

"You can explain this," he says, voice dangerously quiet.

"Eamon—"

"You're federal." He reads the badge again. "You've been investigating my family while I protected you. While I..."

His voice trails off, realization hitting.

"While you what?" I ask.

"While I fell for you." The admission sounds like it costs him. "While I told you things I've never told anyone."

"My feelings are real."

"Your feelings?" He laughs bitterly. "Your job was to fuck the information out of me."

"That's not?—"

"How much did you record? The fever confessions? Me telling you about Thomas Nolan?"

I don't answer, which tells him everything.

"Of course." He shakes his head. "Every vulnerable moment. Every time I trusted you."

"The corruption evidence changes things. Byrne?—"

"I don't give a shit about corruption." He advances on me, gun lowered but fury radiating from every line of his body. "You let me fall for you while building a case against my family."

"It wasn't supposed to happen."

"What wasn't? The feelings or getting caught?"

I back against the wall as he closes the distance. Even injured and betrayed, he's dangerous. "Both."

"Both," he repeats. "Honest at last."

He plants his free hand against the wall beside my head, caging me in. This close, I

see the devastation in his eyes beneath the anger.

"Was any of it real?" he asks quietly.

"All of it. Every touch, every moment?—"

"Except the part where you're federal."

"I never wanted to hurt you."

"But you did." His voice drops to a whisper. "You destroyed the first real thing I've felt in years."

His phone rings. He steps back to answer, keeping the gun on me.

"What?" he answers harshly.

"Eamon, we have a problem," comes Cillian's voice. "Moran's people hit three of our operations tonight. They knew exactly where to strike."

Eamon's eyes narrow on me. "How'd they know?"

"Inside information. Someone's feeding them intelligence."

"Someone like a federal agent?"

Silence on the line. "Where is she now?"

"Right here. Caught her going through Dad's private files."

"Bring her in. Dad wants to question her himself."

"No," Eamon says, surprising me. "She's my problem. I'll handle it."

He hangs up and studies me with cold calculation.

"Please," I say. "The corruption evidence?—"

"Proves your people are as dirty as mine." He grabs my wrist, pulling me toward the door. "Doesn't change what you did."

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere we can have a proper conversation. Without interruptions."

The promise in his voice makes my blood run cold. I've seen what Eamon does to people who betray his family.

Now I'm about to become one of them.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

The badge hits the table, and my world tilts sideways.

"Special Agent Sorch Quinn, Federal Bureau of Investigation."

I pick up the cold metal, turn it over in my hands. The woman who saved my life tonight. The federal rat who's been playing me for weeks.

"You lying bitch."

She backs against the wall, hands raised. Smart move. I cross the room in three steps, slam my palms against the wood on either side of her head. Cage her in.

"How long?" My voice comes out rough, dangerous.

"Eamon—"

"How fucking long have you been gathering evidence against my family?"

Her gray eyes don't waver. "Three weeks."

"Three weeks of lies. Three weeks of you spreading your legs while planning to destroy us."

Color floods her cheeks. "That's not what this was."

"No? Then what was it, Agent Quinn?" I lean closer, my body pressing hers against the wall. "Professional duty? Taking one for the team?"

"The mission had nothing to do with sleeping with you."

"But you did it anyway."

"Yes."

Her honesty hits harder than any lie would. I grab her wrists, pin them above her head with one hand. Feel her pulse racing under my thumb.

"You know what we do to rats in my world?"

"Kill them."

"After we make them suffer." My free hand traces her jaw, deceptively gentle.

"You've seen what these hands can do, haven't you?"

She shivers but meets my gaze. "You won't hurt me."

"Why not?"

"Because you care about me. Despite everything."

The truth cuts deep. I want to snap her neck. Want to fuck her against this wall. Want to make her disappear forever. Want to keep her here where I can protect her.

"Tell me about your assignment," I growl. "All of it."

"FBI sent me after Agent Henderson went missing. My handler is Riordan Byrne. Target is RICO charges against your family."

"What evidence do you have?"

"Photos. Audio recordings. Financial records."

My grip tightens on her wrists. "Recordings of what?"

"Conversations at the pub. Some with you."

Every late-night talk. Every moment I thought we connected. All recorded for prosecutors.

"Where are they now?"

"Encrypted servers. Byrne has access."

I release her wrists, step back before I do something we'll both regret. Or enjoy too much.

"What about the wire you were supposed to wear?"

"I couldn't do it."

"Why?"

She rubs her wrists where I held her. Red marks bloom on pale skin. "Because I started caring about the people I was supposed to betray."

"Caring." I taste the word. "Is that what you call it?"

"What would you call it?"

I move back into her space, cup her face with both hands. Rough enough to remind her who's in control.

"I'd call it getting your heart tangled up with the enemy."

"You're not my enemy."

"I should be."

Her breath catches as my thumb traces her lower lip. "But you're not."

The air between us crackles with heat and danger. I should kill her. Instead, I want to claim her all over again. Mark her so deep she forgets which side she's supposed to be on.

"There's more," she whispers.

"What?"

She reaches into her jacket, moves careful and slow. Pulls out a folded paper.

"I found this in the surveillance van. Communication between Byrne and the Moran organization."

I take the document, scan the contents. My blood turns to ice.

"Your handler's been feeding information to our enemies."

"Meeting times. Security details. Everything we discussed in planning."

"How long?"

"Eight months, based on these timestamps."

I crush the paper in my fist. Henderson's disappearance. The precision attacks on our territory. The way Moran always seemed one step ahead.

"Byrne set us up."

"And used me to do it."

I look at her – really look. Federal agent. My family's enemy. The woman who fell apart in my arms last night. All of it true at once.

"Your mission is fucked."

"Completely."

"And you've been gathering evidence for a corrupt bastard who wants my family dead."

"Yes."

"So what now, Agent Quinn?"

She straightens, chin lifting with that stubborn streak I've learned to recognize. "Now I have a choice to make."

"Which is?"

"Continue the mission and hand everything over to a corrupt handler. Or find another

way."

I study her face. Looking for deception. Fear. Instead I see determination and something that looks like loyalty.

"What kind of other way?"

"The kind where we work together to expose the real criminals."

"We." I laugh, sharp and bitter. "There is no we. You're federal law enforcement. I'm Irish mob muscle. We don't team up."

"We do if we want to survive this."

She has a point. Byrne knows she's here. Knows she's gathered intelligence. If she goes back with nothing, he'll get suspicious. If she hands everything over, my family dies.

"What are you proposing?"

"I go to the scheduled check-in tomorrow. Give Byrne what he expects but hold back the evidence about his Moran connection."

"And after?"

"We find proof of the corruption. Clean up this mess."

I consider her proposal. The risks. The possibilities. The way her body fits against mine when I crowded her against the wall.

"One problem with your plan."

"What?"

"My family finds out I'm working with a fed, they'll put bullets in both of us."

"Then we don't tell them. Yet."

"You want to lie to the Kavanaghs."

"I want to protect them. Same as you."

I step closer again, drawn by forces I can't control. "And what about us?"

"Us?"

"Don't play dumb. You know what I mean."

Her eyes darken. "I don't know if there can be an us after this."

"Because of the badge?"

"Because of everything."

I trace my finger down her throat, feel her pulse jump. "Feels like there's still something here to me."

"Eamon..."

"Say my name again."

"We can't?—"

"Can't what? Can't want each other? Can't finish what we started?" I lean closer, my mouth near her ear. "Can't fuck like the world's ending around us?"

She shivers against me. "This is insane."

"Most of my life is insane. Doesn't mean it's not worth living."

I pull back to look at her. Federal agent. Betrayer. The woman who makes my blood burn.

"Here's what's going to happen," I say. "Tomorrow night, you give Byrne just enough to keep him happy. But you're mine now. My protection. My rules."

"I'm not property."

"No. You're something much more dangerous." I brush my thumb across her lips again. "You're mine by choice."

Her breath catches. "And if I choose to walk away?"

"Then you walk. But we both know you won't."

"Why?"

"Because despite the badge and the lies, you belong here now. With me."

I extend my hand to her. "Partners?"

She stares at my hand for a long moment. Then reaches out, grips it firm.

"Partners."

I don't let go. Instead, I pull her closer, until her body presses against mine again.

"New rule," I murmur against her ear. "No more lies between us. Complete honesty."

"Agreed."

"Good." I release her hand but don't step away. "Because I'm going to tell you something honest right now."

"What?"

"Finding that badge should have ended this. Should have made me hate you."

"But?"

"But all I can think about is how badly I want to fuck you against this wall until you forget you ever carried federal credentials."

Her pupils dilate. Heat flares between us despite everything.

"We shouldn't?—"

"Probably not."

"It complicates everything."

"I know."

She looks up at me, gray eyes full of want and confusion. "What are we doing, Eamon?"

"Surviving. Together."

I lean down, capture her mouth in a kiss that tastes like betrayal and need and dangerous choices. She kisses me back with desperate hunger, her hands fisting in my shirt.

When we break apart, we're both breathing hard.

"Tomorrow changes everything," she whispers.

"Tonight doesn't have to."

Her answer comes in the way she pulls me closer, choosing this moment over all the complications waiting outside these walls.

Federal agent. Irish mob enforcer. Two people who should be enemies finding something worth protecting in each other.

It might get us both killed.

But right now, it feels worth the risk.

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

I watch Eamon pace the safe house like a caged animal, fury radiating from every movement. Twenty-four hours since he discovered I'm FBI, and we're still dancing around the explosion waiting between us.

"We need to talk business," I say, spreading surveillance photos across the table. "Byrne expects results, and Moran won't wait forever."

He stops pacing, blue eyes cold as winter. "You want my help catching dirty feds?"

"I want to stop Moran from destroying your family while exposing the agents helping him." I tap the photos. "This affects us both."

Eamon approaches, examining shots of Byrne meeting with Moran's crew. "How long has this bastard been selling us out?"

"Years. Every major hit on your operations happened after Byrne received 'intelligence' about your activities." I arrange the timeline. "He's been setting you up while building his career."

His knuckles go white gripping the table edge. "Son of a bitch."

"If we prove the connection, we eliminate your Moran problem and my corruption case." I meet his stare. "But I need access to family records. Communication logs."

Internal documents."

"From the woman who's been lying since day one?"

Fire shoots through my veins. "I never lied about wanting real criminals caught. Just about which badge I carry."

He studies me, war playing across his features. Then he pulls out his phone.

"Cillian," he says when it connects. "We've got a situation requiring family resources."

I listen as he explains—no mention of my deception, just the corruption threat. Smart. Keep it simple.

"She wants to talk," Eamon says, offering the phone.

"Agent Quinn." Cillian's voice carries ice. "My brother says you've identified threats to our mutual interests."

"Corrupt federal agents feeding Moran intelligence. They've compromised your security while advancing their careers on your blood."

"Stopping this benefits everyone?"

"Yes. The corruption ends, Moran loses his advantage, justice gets served."

Silence. "You'll have what you need. But this cooperation dies when the threat does."

"Understood."

The line goes dead. I hand back the phone.

"Easier than expected," I admit.

"Family protects family. Right now, stopping Moran protects family." He pockets the device. "Cillian's practical about useful alliances."

I turn to the evidence. "I need to contact someone at Bureau headquarters. Off the books."

"Someone clean?"

"Rachel Martinez. Trained me at Quantico, now assigned to Los Angeles." I consider risks. "She's solid, but reaching out exposes us both."

"Do it."

Using Eamon's encrypted phone, I dial from memory. Rachel answers quickly.

"Quinn? You're supposed to be underground in Boston."

"I am. Listen—I need help with a corruption case. Unofficial channels only."

"How dirty?"

"Agent-in-charge dirty. Multiple years. Organized crime partnerships." I glance at Eamon. "People die if this reaches wrong ears."

"Copy that. What do you need?"

We establish secure protocols for evidence transfer. Rachel agrees to investigate

Byrne through back channels, cross-referencing his career advancement with organized crime prosecutions.

"Dangerous territory, Sorcha," she warns.

"Story of my life."

After disconnecting, I find Eamon organizing family documents. Financial records, security reports, attack summaries—everything needed to build our case.

"Your brother moves fast."

"When family's threatened." He gestures at the papers. "Every Moran hit over three years. Dates, methods, casualties."

I compare his files to my Bureau records. The pattern screams corruption—every successful attack followed Byrne's communications with unknown contacts.

"This is gold," I say, excitement building. "Combined with Rachel's investigation..."

"We'll bury them," Eamon finishes.

Working together, we map connections between dirty agents, Moran operations, and attacks on Kavanagh interests. Despite everything between us, our skills mesh perfectly. His street knowledge, my federal training.

Hours blur past. Evidence builds into undeniable proof. As night falls, we break for food—Chinese takeout eaten in focused silence.

"Tomorrow I contact Byrne," I say, reviewing our strategy. "Feed him false intelligence about your operations while recording everything."

"Risky play. If he suspects..."

"We're dead." I hold his gaze. "But if we succeed, Byrne and Moran both burn."

Eamon shoves back from the table, hands raking through dark hair. "Why trust you? You've lied about everything since we met."

The question cuts deep. I could offer professional justifications about common enemies and mutual benefit. Instead, I give him truth.

"Because I know what corruption costs. Watched good agents die while dirty ones got promoted." My father's face flashes through memory. "Some fights matter more than personal grudges."

He searches my expression for deception. "Your father. You said corrupt cops killed him."

"Chicago PD. Detective Morrison was feeding intel to the Torrino family." Old wounds open fresh. "Dad got close to exposing him. Morrison arranged an ambush during what should have been a routine arrest."

Understanding dawns in Eamon's eyes. "You know what it feels like. Family murdered by people sworn to protect."

"Yes." My voice drops. "That's why this matters."

Eamon moves to the window, moonlight highlighting the rigid line of his shoulders.

"Thomas Nolan," he says quietly. "The accountant I killed. There's something about that night you need to know."

My pulse jumps. "What?"

"Vincent Collins brought me files. Photos. Said Nolan was meeting federal handlers, planning to expose everything." He turns back. "When I broke into his house, found him working late... he asked if I was there about the missing money."

I wait, sensing deeper revelation.

"I didn't understand. Collins claimed Nolan was stealing, then turned informant when caught." Guilt weights every word. "Your guy tried explaining. Said Collins was the real thief, that he had proof. I thought he was lying to save his neck."

The truth hits like a physical blow. "Collins manipulated you."

"Into murdering an innocent man." Eamon meets my stare. "Just like Morrison manipulated his situation to kill your father."

The parallel strikes bone-deep. Both our fathers killed by corrupt authority figures using younger men as weapons.

"That's why you're helping," I realize. "Guilt."

"Partly." He steps closer. "But also because you're right. Some battles transcend personal shit."

The air between us thickens with more than professional cooperation. Shared trauma, mutual understanding, attraction despite betrayal and lies.

"Sorcha," he says, my name rough with want.

I should retreat. Maintain boundaries. Instead, I close the distance.

"This is stupid," I whisper.

"Probably." His hands cup my face. "Give a damn?"

I answer by kissing him, channeling weeks of rage and confusion and desperate need into the contact. He responds with matching hunger, crushing me against him like he can erase every lie between us.

His mouth burns down my throat, teeth scraping sensitive flesh. I arch into him, fingers shredding his shirt buttons. When fabric rips, we both reach for more skin.

"Here?" I gasp as he lifts me onto the table.

"Right fucking now," he growls, scattering evidence papers across the floor.

Documents about murder and corruption flutter down as he works my jeans open, calloused fingers burning through cotton. I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him harder against me.

"I should fucking hate you," he says, thumb circling my clit through wet fabric.

"I know," I pant, freeing his cock from leather and denim.

He tears my panties away, positioning himself at my entrance. "Look at me when I take you."

I meet his blazing stare as he drives deep in one brutal thrust. We both cry out at the perfect friction, at how right this feels despite everything wrong about it.

"Fuck, you're tight," he groans, pulling back to slam in again.

"Harder," I demand, nails raking bloody lines down his back.

He pounds into me with punishing rhythm, each stroke hitting deeper than the last. The table rocks under our violence, threatening to collapse beneath our desperate fucking.

"This what you wanted?" he snarls against my ear. "Getting fucked by the criminal you're hunting?"

"Yes," I sob, sensation overwhelming thought. "God, yes."

His thumb finds my clit again, circling with perfect pressure as he hammers into my pussy. The dual stimulation drives me toward the edge fast and hard.

"Come on my cock," he orders. "Let me feel you break apart."

The command pushes me over. I scream his name as pleasure tears through me, back arching as my pussy clamps down around him. He follows with a roar, pumping hot come deep inside me.

We collapse together, sweaty and shaking. Evidence papers stick to our damp skin as reality slowly returns.

"That was..." I begin.

"Fucked up," he finishes, but his arms tighten around me.

I laugh despite everything. "Understatement of the year."

He helps me down, and we gather scattered documents in charged silence. Rebuilding our case while processing what just exploded between us.

"Tomorrow's dangerous," I say, reorganizing files.

"Deadly," he agrees. "But we face it together now."

I nod, surprised how much that steadies me. Enemy turned ally turned something nameless. Tomorrow we hunt corruption. Tonight, we found connection in the wreckage of our lies.

The evidence rebuilt, our alliance sealed in sweat and confession. Whatever comes next, we'll handle it as partners.

Even though neither of us planned for that part.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

I watch Sorcha adjust her earpiece, and my cock tightens at the way her fingers graze her neck. She's preparing for what might be her final conversation with that corrupt bastard Byrne, and all I can think about is how badly I want to taste that exact spot where her pulse beats.

Fuck. Not the time, Eamon.

The coffee shop buzzes with morning customers, perfect cover for what we're doing. She sits three tables away, close enough that I catch her scent when she walked past—something clean and dangerous that makes my hands itch to touch her.

My position gives me clear sight lines to all exits. Years running the docks taught me to catalog threats—two ways out, kitchen access, parking lot visibility. If this goes sideways, we need options. And I need her alive.

Sorcha checks her watch, and I study the way her lips purse when she's concentrating. Those same lips that drive me crazy when she argues with me, when she tells me exactly what she thinks. I wonder how they'd feel wrapped around my?—

Byrne arrives exactly on time, his federal credentials hidden beneath a cheap civilian jacket. The sight of him approaching her makes my jaw clench. He thinks he's meeting a loyal asset. Instead, he's walking into our trap.

"Agent Quinn," Byrne says, sliding into the seat across from her. "Report."

I activate the recording app on my phone, angling it toward their table. Every word matters now. But watching her perform for this piece of shit makes my blood burn.

Sorcha leans forward, and I catch a glimpse of cleavage above her conservative blouse. "The Kavanaghs are planning something big. European expansion through their Rotterdam contacts."

Complete bullshit. Cillian and Orla crafted this lie last night while I watched Sorcha pace our safe house, wearing nothing but my shirt and panties. The memory of her bare legs beneath the cotton nearly broke my focus then, just like it's breaking it now.

"Timeline?" Byrne asks, pulling out a notebook.

"Six weeks. They're moving major assets overseas." Sorcha maintains perfect composure while lying to her superior. "Eamon mentioned Caribbean accounts."

Hearing my name from her lips does things to me it shouldn't. The way she says it—like she owns it, owns me. Christ, maybe she does.

Byrne writes everything down. "Good. This fits with our other intelligence."

"Other intelligence?" Sorcha probes, and I admire how smoothly she works him.

"Moran's people have been watching Rotterdam too. We're coordinating a joint operation."

My hands curl into fists. Federal agents working with the Moran crew? The same bastards who've been trying to muscle in on our territory for months?

"Moran?" Sorchá asks, feigning surprise. Her acting skills are fucking perfect. Makes me wonder what else she's good at pretending.

"Lorcan's been providing valuable insight into Kavanagh operations. Mutual benefit." Byrne checks his watch. "We're accelerating everything. RICO charges filed next week."

I see Sorchá's hand tremble slightly before she controls it. That tiny crack in her composure makes me want to cross the room and break Byrne's neck for putting fear in her eyes.

"Next week? That's fast."

"The Director wants results. Moran's intelligence gives us what we need." Byrne leans closer to her, and possessive rage floods my system. "Your role continues until arrest. Document everything."

"Understood."

The bastard's eyes linger on her face, her mouth. I know that look—I've had it myself every time I'm near her. But seeing it on him makes me want to show him exactly what happens to men who look at my woman that way.

My woman. When the hell did that happen?

Byrne leaves through the main entrance. I count to thirty, then follow. Years of collecting debts on the waterfront taught me how to tail someone without being seen—stay back, use reflections, blend with the crowd.

Byrne walks two blocks before getting into a black sedan. I memorize the license plate, continue following as the car moves through downtown traffic. The whole

time, part of my mind stays focused on Sorcha back at the café, wondering if she's safe, if she needs me.

The sedan stops outside Moran's shipping office. Byrne exits, walks straight inside like he owns the place. No surveillance, no caution. This isn't his first visit.

I position myself across the street, using a newspaper stand as cover. Through the office windows, I watch Byrne meet with Lorcan Moran himself. They shake hands like old friends, and my anger builds with each passing second.

My phone camera captures everything. Date stamps. Location markers. Visual proof that we can use to destroy both these bastards.

Twenty minutes later, Byrne emerges with a thick envelope. Payment for selling out his own badge. I photograph the exchange, then track him back to his federal vehicle.

The evidence is solid. A federal agent meeting directly with organized crime, taking money, coordinating operations against us. Sorcha was right to suspect corruption.

I text her the all-clear signal, then head to our meeting point, my mind already shifting to how I'm going to keep her safe during what comes next.

The warehouse conference room holds an unlikely alliance. Cillian sits at the head of the table, Orla to his right with legal documents spread before her. Sorcha enters right on time, and I can't help but notice how her hips move in that conservative skirt.

Focus, you bastard.

"Status?" Cillian asks.

"Byrne bought the Rotterdam story," Sorcha reports, her voice steady despite what

she just went through. "But he's accelerating the RICO charges. Filed next week."

"And the Moran connection?" Orla looks up from her documents.

I place my phone on the table, showing the photographs. "Visual confirmation. Byrne met Moran right after leaving Sorch. Cash payment exchanged."

Cillian studies the images while I study Sorch. She's wound tight, adrenaline still coursing through her system. I want to pull her against me, let her know she's safe now. Instead, I grip the edge of the table.

"How long has this been going on?" Cillian asks.

"Years, based on how comfortable they were together," I reply. "This isn't new."

Sorch leans forward, giving me another glimpse of cleavage that makes my mouth go dry. "Byrne mentioned 'other intelligence' from Moran's people. They're feeding him information to target your family while protecting their own operations."

"Eliminate the competition through law enforcement," Orla says. "Classic corruption."

Cillian drums his fingers on the table. "What are our options?"

"Expose everything," Sorch answers without hesitation. "Federal corruption, Moran cooperation, the whole damn network."

"Risky for you," I point out, hating how true it is. "Byrne finds out you've switched sides, you're dead."

"I'm dead anyway if this continues. He's accelerating because Moran wants your

territory." Sorcha meets my eyes, and something electric passes between us. "At least fighting back gives us control."

The way she says 'us' makes my chest tight. When did she become part of us? When did I start wanting her to be?

Orla spreads more documents across the table. "Legal framework for federal corruption cases. We need irrefutable evidence."

"More than photographs?" Cillian asks.

"Financial records. Communication logs. Multiple sources." Orla traces the requirements with her finger. "Build a case that can't be dismissed or buried."

I consider what we need operationally. "Surveillance on Byrne. Document his meetings, payments, communications with Moran."

"And infiltration of their operation," Sorcha adds. "I maintain my cover while gathering evidence from inside."

"That's fucking suicide," I snap, the words coming out harsher than intended.

Her eyes flash. "It's the job."

"The job doesn't matter if you're dead."

"This corruption threatens both our interests," she continues, ignoring my concern. "Your family's freedom and my integrity as law enforcement."

Cillian looks between us, and I realize my protective instincts are showing. "You're proposing we help a federal agent build a case."

"Against other federal agents working with your enemies," Orla clarifies. "Strange allies, but effective ones."

I see the strategic value, even through my desire to lock Sorch a away somewhere safe. "Better fighting corruption together than getting destroyed separately."

"Agreed." Cillian stands. "What do you need from us?"

Sorch a pulls out a notepad, all business despite the danger. "Access to your financial systems. Documentation of legitimate versus questionable income streams. Evidence of Moran interference with your operations."

"And protection," I add, meeting her eyes. "If Byrne suspects your loyalty, he'll eliminate you."

"Family protection extends to allies," Cillian says, but his gaze moves between Sorch a and me like he's seeing something new. "You'll have our full support."

Orla gathers her legal documents. "I'll coordinate with federal prosecutors I trust. Build cases against Byrne and Moran at the same time."

"How long do we have?" I ask.

"Five days," Sorch a answers. "Byrne expects major intelligence by Friday. We either deliver enough evidence to destroy him, or he destroys us."

The room falls silent. Five days to expose federal corruption, eliminate the Moran threat, and protect both criminal and law enforcement interests.

"Resources?" Cillian asks.

"Everything," I reply. "Surveillance teams. Financial documentation. Communication intercepts. Full family operation."

Sorcha looks around the table, her green eyes finally landing on mine. "A month ago, I planned to arrest all of you. Now you're my only hope for justice."

"Not criminals," Cillian corrects. "Family. Which now includes you."

The declaration hangs in the air. Sorcha Quinn, federal agent, accepted into the Kavanagh organization. Life's strange fucking turns.

"Operational planning starts now," I say, though what I really want is to get her alone. "Surveillance schedules. Evidence collection. Communication protocols."

We spend the next hour developing strategy, and I catch myself watching Sorcha more than focusing on the plans. The way she thinks through problems. How she challenges our assumptions. The competence that's sexy as hell.

"Friday's meeting with Byrne," Sorcha says as we finish. "I'll wear recording equipment. Document everything."

"Backup surveillance," I add, already planning how to keep her safe.

"Legal documentation," Orla continues. "Proper evidence handling for prosecution."

"And extraction plans," Cillian concludes. "If everything fails, we get you out alive."

Sorcha stands, checking her weapon with practiced ease. The sight of her armed and dangerous does things to me. "Five days to take down federal corruption and criminal cooperation."

"Five days to prove family loyalty goes beyond blood," I correct.

As everyone prepares to leave, Sorcha approaches me. This close, I can smell her shampoo, see the flecks of gold in her green eyes.

"Thank you," she says quietly. "For watching my back today."

"Partners protect each other," I reply, my voice rougher than intended. "Family rule."

She nods, and I see understanding in her eyes. Federal agent or not, she's under Kavanagh protection now. My protection.

"Eamon." Her voice drops, becomes something more intimate. "What happens after? When this is over?"

The question hangs between us, loaded with possibility and danger. I step closer, close enough to feel the heat radiating from her body.

"We figure it out as we go," I say, my fingers brushing hers. "Together."

Her pupils dilate, and I know she feels this thing between us too. Whatever the hell it is.

The next five days will determine everything. Justice versus corruption. Family versus institutional betrayal. And whether a federal agent and an Irish mob enforcer can find something real in the middle of all this chaos.

Time to find out what we're both made of.

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

I adjust the tiny recording device hidden in my earring, my fingers brushing against my neck. Eamon's eyes track the movement from across the car, his gaze lingering on the pulse point at my throat.

"Stop fidgeting," he says, voice rough. "You look nervous."

"I am nervous." I check my appearance in the visor mirror. The black dress hugs every curve, designer but not flashy. Professional enough for a criminal consultant, sexy enough to distract. "Moran's going to see right through this."

"No, he won't." Eamon reaches over, his fingers grazing mine as he flips the visor up. "You're going to walk in there and own that room. You're Sarah Mitchell, and you're the best money launderer on the East Coast."

The heat from his touch spreads up my arm. Three weeks of this dangerous partnership, and I still react to him like a teenager with her first crush. Even now, heading into enemy territory, my body responds to his proximity.

"Sarah Mitchell doesn't exist," I whisper.

"She does today." His thumb traces across my knuckles before he pulls away. "Today, you're mine. My specialist. My woman bringing expertise to expand our operation."

The possessiveness in his voice makes my stomach flutter. I know it's an act, part of our cover, but the way he says 'my woman' sends heat pooling low in my belly.

We pull up to the warehouse that serves as Moran headquarters. Men lounge near the entrance, guns hidden under jackets. This isn't federal surveillance or corporate espionage. This is walking into a viper's nest where one wrong word means a bullet to the head.

"Remember what I told you about respect," Eamon says, getting out to open my door. The gentlemanly gesture serves dual purposes—establishing the dynamic Moran expects while giving him an excuse to put his hand on my lower back.

His palm burns through the thin fabric as he guides me toward the entrance. I force myself not to lean into his touch, even as my body craves more contact.

"Kavanagh." Lorcan Moran emerges from the warehouse, his green eyes immediately fixing on me with predatory interest. Red hair, expensive suit, the kind of smile that makes women disappear. "And this must be the specialist."

"Sarah Mitchell." I extend my hand with confidence I don't feel. His handshake lingers, fingers stroking my palm in a way that makes my skin crawl.

Eamon's hand tightens on my back, a silent warning. Or maybe jealousy. I can't tell the difference anymore.

"Insurance fraud expert," Moran says, still holding my hand. "Eamon tells me you've been very... helpful to his family."

The innuendo is obvious. Heat floods my cheeks as I extract my hand. "I prefer to think of it as creative accounting."

"I bet you do." Moran's gaze travels down my body with obvious appreciation. "Shall we discuss your talents upstairs?"

The office overlooks the warehouse floor through one-way glass. Moran gestures to a leather chair positioned where he can watch me while I sit. Everything about this setup screams power play.

"Drink?" He moves to an expensive bar, his movements predatory and controlled.

"Whiskey," I reply, crossing my legs and watching his eyes follow the motion. If he wants to play this game, I'll use his distraction to my advantage.

Eamon settles into a chair where he can see both Moran and me. His jaw is tight, hands clenched. The jealousy radiating from him is almost palpable.

"Sarah has tripled the Kavanagh's clean revenue," Eamon says, his voice carrying an edge. "Her methods are... innovative."

"I specialize in turning liabilities into assets." I accept the crystal tumbler, letting my fingers brush Moran's as he hands it to me. His pupils dilate. "A warehouse fire becomes capital improvement. A shipping delay becomes business interruption coverage. All perfectly legal."

"Clever." Moran sits across from me, leaning forward. "And your fee?"

"Fifteen percent, plus consulting." I lean back, letting the movement pull my dress higher on my thighs. Moran's eyes drop immediately. "I handle the paperwork. You handle the business."

While he's distracted, I slip the first recording device under the table's edge.

"The feds have been sniffing around our shipping," Moran says, dragging his attention back to my face. "Traditional methods become risky."

"Federal agencies don't talk to each other." I cross my legs the other direction, watching his gaze follow. "DEA investigates trafficking. Treasury handles financial crimes. Insurance fraud falls through the cracks."

I stand to admire a painting on the wall, placing the second device behind the frame while commenting on the artwork. Moran's eyes are glued to my ass as I stretch to reach the frame.

Behind me, I hear Eamon's sharp intake of breath. When I turn, his eyes are dark with something that has nothing to do with our mission.

"Beautiful piece," I comment, returning to my seat.

"I prefer live art," Moran says, his meaning clear.

Eamon's knuckles go white against his whiskey glass. The tension in the room ratchets higher.

"Tell me about your expansion plans," I say, redirecting the conversation while my pulse races from the dangerous undercurrents.

For the next hour, I outline money laundering schemes while Moran reveals operational details. His gaze never leaves my body, hands gesturing in ways that invade my personal space. Each time he leans closer, Eamon's breathing gets more controlled.

"The Donovans think they can muscle into our territory," Moran says, refilling my glass. His fingers linger on mine around the crystal. "Your methods could help us..."

discourage them."

"Competition requires flexible thinking." I let him maintain the contact while slipping the third device into the flower arrangement beside my chair. "Insurance provides cover for all kinds of business activities."

"I like flexible women," Moran murmurs, thumb stroking across my knuckles.

A glass shatters. We both look over to see Eamon setting down the broken remains of his tumbler, whiskey spreading across the side table.

"Clumsy," he says, voice deadly quiet. "Let me clean that up."

Moran releases my hand as Eamon moves to the bar for napkins. The message is clear—back off.

"Your partner seems protective," Moran observes.

"Eamon values his assets," I reply, the double meaning hanging between us.

When Eamon returns, he positions himself closer to my chair. Close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his body, smell his cologne mixed with the whiskey he spilled.

"Sarah's methods require discretion," Eamon says. "The wrong kind of attention could compromise everything."

His hand settles on my shoulder, thumb brushing the bare skin above my dress. The touch sends electricity down my spine even as I maintain focus on Moran.

"Of course." Moran's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "I respect... business partnerships."

We finalize details for another hour, the sexual tension thick enough to cut. Moran's obvious interest, Eamon's barely controlled jealousy, and my body's traitorous response to both dangers create a powder keg of hormones and adrenaline.

"I'll consider your proposal," Moran says as we prepare to leave. He kisses my hand instead of shaking it, lips lingering against my skin. "I hope we'll be seeing more of each other."

"Count on it," I reply, extracting my hand with apparent reluctance.

Outside, Eamon grabs my elbow, pulling me toward our car with barely leashed violence.

"Get in," he growls, opening the door.

I slide into the passenger seat, pulse racing from the mission's success and Eamon's obvious fury. He slams his door and starts the engine with unnecessary force.

"That went well," I venture.

"Did it?" He pulls into traffic, knuckles white on the steering wheel. "Because from where I sat, it looked like foreplay."

"It was an act, Eamon. Part of the cover."

"Was it?" He stops at a red light, turning to face me. His eyes burn with possessive fury. "Because watching him touch you, watching you let him..." His voice trails off.

"You're jealous."

"Damn right I'm jealous." The light turns green but he doesn't move. "The way he

looked at you, like he wanted to bend you over that desk and?—"

A car honks behind us. Eamon floors the accelerator, and we shoot forward.

"It was necessary," I say, checking the recording devices on my phone. All three are active, transmitting perfectly. "We got everything we needed."

"And what's that worth? Letting him paw you? Letting him think he can have you?"

I turn in my seat to face him. "Are you saying you can have me?"

His eyes meet mine for a dangerous moment before returning to the road. "That's not what I meant."

"Isn't it?"

The car falls silent except for the engine and our ragged breathing. The adrenaline from the mission mixes with the sexual tension that's been building between us for weeks.

"The devices are working," I say, trying to regain professional footing. "We have recordings of him discussing criminal operations."

"Good."

"There's something else. He knew about federal investigations. Too much detail. Someone's feeding him information."

Eamon's attention sharpens. "FBI?"

"Maybe. Or DEA. Customs. Could be anyone with access." I scroll through the audio

files uploading to secure servers. "This corruption goes higher than we thought."

"How high?"

"High enough to know about undercover operations. High enough to put agents in danger." The implications hit me fully. "High enough to get me killed if they figure out who I am."

Eamon pulls over abruptly, parking in an empty lot. He turns to face me, expression intense.

"That's not going to happen."

"You can't know that."

"I can and I will." His hand cups my face, thumb stroking my cheek. "No one touches you. No one hurts you. I don't care what agency they work for."

The promise in his voice makes my heart race faster than any danger. This man who I'm supposed to arrest is swearing to protect me from my own people.

"Eamon..."

"I know this is fucked up. I know I'm the last person who should be saying this." His thumb traces my lower lip. "But you're mine, Sorch. Not the FBI's. Not Moran's. Mine."

Before I can respond, his mouth crashes against mine. The kiss is desperate, possessive, everything we've been fighting for weeks. I melt into him, hands fisting in his shirt as he claims my mouth with rough hunger.

When we break apart, we're both breathing hard.

"We can't do this," I whisper against his lips.

"We already are," he replies, pulling me closer.

The mission was a success. We have evidence, surveillance access, and intelligence about corruption. But as Eamon's hands tangle in my hair, pulling me back for another kiss, I realize we've crossed a line there's no coming back from.

Tomorrow, we'll deal with consequences. Tonight, I stop fighting what I want and take what I need.

Even if it destroys everything.

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

The surveillance footage makes my stomach turn. Agent Byrne meeting with Moran again three months ago. Six months ago. A year. Each timestamp proves what we suspected—this corruption runs deeper than anyone imagined.

"How long has this bastard been selling us out?" Sorchia asks, her voice tight with fury.

I scroll through more files we pulled from Byrne's personal computer. The way she leans over my shoulder, her perfume mixing with the scent of her skin, makes it hard to focus. Even now, hunting corruption, I want her.

"Based on these records? At least three years. Maybe longer."

The evidence spreads across the table like a cancer diagnosis. Bank transfers. Meeting schedules. Communication logs. Byrne hasn't just been feeding information to Moran—he's been running FBI operations to benefit criminal organizations.

"The agent who disappeared before me," Sorchia says, her finger tracing a timeline. The simple touch sends heat through me. "Jessica Martinez. Look at this."

She points to a payment dated two weeks before Martinez vanished. Same amount Byrne received for previous betrayals. Her breast brushes my arm as she reaches across me. My body responds despite the gravity of what we're discovering.

"He sold her out too."

"Then eliminated her when she got too close." I stand, needing distance before I pin her against the wall and forget about evidence entirely. "How many agents has this piece of shit killed?"

My phone buzzes. Cillian: Everything quiet your end?

I text back: Evidence confirmed. Moving to present to AD now.

But as I hit send, something feels wrong. Too quiet. No street noise. No movement in the hallway. My instincts scream danger—the same ones that kept me alive on Boston's streets before the family took me in.

Sorcha notices too. Her hand moves to her weapon, and I fight the urge to pull her behind me, to shield her with my body. "We need to go. Now."

The window explodes inward. Glass shards spray across the room as dark-clad figures pour through. Professional gear. These aren't street thugs—they're trained killers.

"FBI! Nobody move!"

But these aren't real federal agents. The voices belong to Moran's crew wearing tactical gear.

I flip the table, creating cover as gunfire erupts. Sorcha rolls behind the couch, returning fire with controlled precision. Even in combat, she's fucking beautiful—deadly and graceful, everything I want in a woman.

"Back exit!" I shout, laying down covering fire.

She moves first while I hold them off. Street fighting isn't like the movies—it's brutal, fast, and unforgiving. Six shooters. Professional spacing. They've done this before.

I empty my clip and reload, buying Sorch a time to reach the emergency stairs. A bullet tears through my jacket, burning across my ribs. Pain hits but I keep moving. Nothing matters except getting her out alive.

The stairwell offers temporary safety. Sorch a waits at the landing, blood trickling from a cut on her forehead. The sight of her hurt makes me want to go back and kill every one of those bastards.

"You hit?" she asks, reaching for my jacket.

Her fingers brush my chest through the torn fabric. Even now, adrenaline pumping, I want those hands on my bare skin.

"Just a scratch. Keep moving."

We descend fast, but footsteps echo above us. They're following, boxing us in. At the third floor, Sorch a stops.

"There." She points to a service corridor. "Maintenance access to the parking garage."

We push through the door as voices shout orders behind us. The corridor stretches toward the garage, but I hear engines outside. They've surrounded the building like professionals.

"How did they know?" Sorch a demands.

The answer hits me like a punch to the gut. "Byrne. He's been monitoring our communications."

We reach the garage as vehicles screech outside. Black SUVs block the exits. More tactical teams pour from the vehicles. Too many to fight.

"Separate," I tell Sorch, grabbing her shoulders. Touching her, even like this, sends electricity through me. "You take the evidence, get to your people."

"Like hell. We stick together."

"Listen to me." I pull her closer, close enough to smell her hair, to feel her body heat. "Those files prove everything. If we both get caught, it's over. The corruption continues."

Her eyes flash with stubborn determination. Christ, she's magnificent when she's angry. "I'm not leaving you."

A door explodes open behind us. Muzzle flashes light up the garage. I push Sorch toward a maintenance tunnel as bullets spark off concrete, my body covering hers for precious seconds.

"Go! That's an order!"

She hesitates for one heartbeat. I see the war in her eyes—duty versus what we have together. Then she nods and disappears into the tunnel, laptop bag clutched against her chest.

The sight of her running tears something inside me. My woman. My partner. Disappearing into darkness while I stay behind to face these animals.

I turn back to buy her time. My gun spits fire, keeping the shooters pinned while she escapes. A tactical team moves to flank me. I shift position, using vehicles for cover.

My ammunition runs low. Three rounds left. Two. One.

I drop the empty weapon and raise my hands as they close in. At least Sorchá got away with the evidence. At least she's safe.

"Eamon Kavanagh," one of them says, removing his tactical mask. I recognize him from surveillance photos—Moran's lieutenant. "You've caused considerable trouble."

"Just getting started, asshole."

He smiles coldly. "We'll see about that."

The warehouse stinks of rust and stagnant water. They've zip-tied me to a metal chair, restraints that bite into my wrists. Blood drips from my split lip onto the concrete floor.

Moran himself arrives an hour later, dressed in an expensive suit that makes him look more like a banker than the piece of garbage he is. But his eyes hold the coldness of a killer.

"The famous Kavanagh enforcer," he says, circling my chair. "Not so tough now."

"Your boys got lucky."

"Did they?" He sits across from me. "Agent Byrne provided excellent intelligence about your location. Told us exactly when you'd be reviewing those files."

The betrayal cuts deep. Byrne played us from the beginning, and I walked Sorchá right into it.

"Where's your girlfriend?" Moran asks.

The word 'girlfriend' doesn't begin to cover what Sorcha means to me. She's everything—partner, lover, the woman who owns my heart.

"Gone. With everything that proves your corruption."

His face darkens. "Agent Quinn escaped with evidence that could destroy my arrangement with certain federal officials. That creates problems."

"Good. I hope it destroys everything you've built."

Moran stands, nodding to his lieutenant. Pain explodes across my jaw as the man's fist connects. I taste blood but don't give them the satisfaction of crying out.

"She'll come for you," Moran says. "Women always try to save their men. When she does, we'll have the evidence and two bodies to dispose of."

"You don't know Sorcha." But even as I say it, I know he's right. She'll come. She'll risk everything for me, just like I'd do for her.

"I know enough." He checks his watch. "Agent Byrne is tracking her phone signal now. We'll have her location within the hour."

My blood runs ice cold. If they find her, the evidence dies with her. All our work, all the proof of corruption—gone. And worse, they'll hurt her. Kill her.

The thought of anyone touching Sorcha makes me want to rip these restraints apart with my bare hands.

"Good luck with that," I say, hoping she's smart enough to ditch the phone.

Moran's smile falters. He realizes I'm not afraid enough.

"Perhaps some motivation will help." He pulls out his phone, shows me a photo. Sorcha entering my apartment building two days ago. "We know where she lives. Where her mother works. Where her sister goes to school."

Rage builds in my chest like a wildfire. "Touch her and I'll hunt you down like the dog you are."

"Protective, aren't we?" Moran laughs. "She's federal law enforcement. The enemy. Yet you're willing to die for her."

"Without question."

"How romantic." He pockets the phone. "Let's see if she feels the same way about a criminal."

Two hours pass before my phone rings. Moran answers it on speaker.

"Eamon?" Sorcha's voice fills the warehouse, and hearing it makes my chest tight with need and fear. "Are you okay?"

Relief and terror war inside me. She's safe but walking into danger.

"I'm fine, baby," I say, letting emotion color my voice. "Where are you?"

"Somewhere safe. With friends."

Moran cuts in. "Agent Quinn. I believe we should discuss terms."

Silence on the line. Then: "You're not getting the evidence."

"Then your boyfriend dies."

"You hurt him, and I'll destroy everything you've built."

The fierce protection in her voice makes me want her even more. My woman. My fierce, beautiful federal agent who'd burn the world down for me.

"One hour. Pier 47. Bring the files or watch him bleed out."

The line goes dead.

Moran turns to me. "She'll come. Love makes people stupid."

"She's smarter than that."

"We'll find out."

But I know Sorcha. She won't trade the evidence for my life—too many future victims depend on exposing the corruption. She'll find another way. She has to.

My phone rings again thirty minutes later. This time, a different voice answers when Moran picks up.

"Who the hell is this?" Moran demands.

"Cillian Kavanagh," my brother's voice cuts through the warehouse like a blade. "I believe you have something that belongs to me."

Moran's eyes widen. He wasn't expecting family involvement.

"Your brother walked into federal business," Moran says. "Not our problem."

"Everything involving my family is our problem." Cillian's tone drops to deadly calm.

"Agent Quinn contacted me. Explained the situation. We're coming to get him."

"With what army?"

"The one that's been watching your warehouse for the past hour."

Through the dirty windows, muzzle flashes light up the night. Automatic weapons fire echoes off brick walls. Moran's men shout orders, running toward defensive positions.

Cillian's voice continues over the chaos. "You've got sixty seconds to walk away from my brother. After that, we come in shooting."

Moran draws his pistol, pressing it against my temple. "I've got a gun to his head!"

"Then you better hope your aim's perfect," Sorch's voice comes from behind him.

Moran spins as Sorch emerges from the shadows, weapon trained on his center mass. Her FBI tactical vest hugs her curves, making her look like a warrior goddess. Beautiful and deadly, everything I've ever wanted.

"Drop it," she orders.

For a moment, nobody moves. Then Moran's survival instincts kick in. He releases me and drops his weapon.

Cillian and Orla enter through the main door, flanked by family security. My brother cuts my restraints while Orla checks my injuries with gentle hands.

"You came," I say to Sorch as she secures Moran.

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

"Hoped you'd be smart enough to stay away."

She holsters her weapon and helps me stand, her touch burning through me even now.
"Smart was bringing backup."

I pull her against me before I can stop myself, needing to feel her alive and whole in my arms. She melts into me for just a moment, letting me hold her.

"We need to go," she whispers against my neck, her breath making me shiver.

Outside, federal vehicles mix with family cars. An impossible alliance that somehow worked.

"What happens now?" I ask Sorcha as we reach the cars.

She shows me the laptop bag, then looks up at me with heat in her eyes. "Now we present this evidence and watch some federal agents go to prison."

"And us?"

She glances at Cillian and Orla, then back at me. Her hand finds mine, fingers intertwining. "Now we figure out what comes next."

The warehouse burns behind us as we drive away, corruption evidence secure and my woman safe in my arms. Whatever comes next, we'll face it together.

And tonight, I'm going to show her exactly how grateful I am that she came for me.

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

The hospital room door locks behind me with a soft click. Eamon's eyes track my movement as I approach his bed, hunger replacing the pain medication haze from yesterday.

"How long until the nurses check on you?" I ask, setting my gun and badge on the nightstand.

His mouth curves into the dangerous smile that first caught my attention months ago. "Twenty minutes. Why?"

Instead of answering, I climb onto the narrow bed, straddling his hips with care for his bandaged ribs. His hands immediately grip my thighs through my FBI-issued slacks.

"Sorcha," he growls, voice rough. "I'm not exactly at full strength here."

"Good thing I plan to do all the work." I lean down, lips brushing his ear. "You nearly died protecting me. Now I want to show you exactly what that means to me."

His grip tightens. "The nurses?—"

"Will mind their own business if they know what's good for them." I bite his earlobe, making him hiss. "This is what I need, Eamon. To feel you alive under my hands."

Three days of watching monitors, counting breaths, praying he'd wake up. Three days of realizing I'd burn down the entire Bureau if it meant keeping him safe.

I work his hospital gown up, revealing the hard planes of his chest marred by purple bruises and white bandages. My fingers trace around the injuries, worshipping every inch of unmarked skin.

"You're mine," I whisper against his throat. "My criminal. My protection. Mine."

"Yours," he agrees, bucking beneath me despite the pain. "All yours, agent."

The title sounds different now. Not a barrier between us, but a game we play. Federal agent and Irish enforcer, twisted together in ways that would horrify my supervisors.

I grind against his growing hardness, still fully clothed while he lies exposed beneath me. Power and vulnerability shifting between us like a drug.

"Tell me what you want," I demand.

"I want to watch you come apart on top of me. Want to feel how wet you get when you're in control." His voice drops to gravel. "Want to mark you so every fed in that building knows who you belong to."

Heat pools between my legs at his words. I reach for his hands, pinning them beside his head despite his injuries.

"You don't get to mark me," I say, grinding harder. "I mark you."

I lean down and bite his shoulder, just above the bandages. Hard enough to leave teeth marks. He arches beneath me, cursing beautifully in Irish.

"The FBI called six times today," I tell him, working my way down his chest with

teeth and tongue.

"What did you tell them?"

"Nothing. I was too busy keeping you alive." I reach his hip bone, nipping the sensitive skin there. "But I have to go in this afternoon."

His hand tangles in my hair, pulling me back up to meet his eyes. "What will you tell them about us?"

"That depends." I position myself over him, still clothed but pressed against his cock through the thin hospital gown. "Are you planning to disappear when this is over? Go back to your life of violence and crime?"

"Not without you."

The words hit me like electricity. I rock against him, chasing friction through too many layers of clothing.

"Even if it means leaving Boston? Leaving your family?"

"You are my family now." His hands find my hips, guiding my movements. "My loyalty. My choice."

I pull back to shed my jacket and blouse, revealing the black lace bra underneath. His eyes devour the sight of me above him, rumpled and desperate.

"The review board will crucify me for this," I tell him, unclasping the bra. "For choosing a criminal over my duty."

"Is that what you're doing?"

I lean down, pressing my bare breasts against his chest, careful of his wounds. "I chose you the moment I let you into that safe house instead of calling for backup. Everything after was just me catching up."

He captures my mouth in a kiss that tastes like possession and promise. His tongue claims mine while his hands roam my bare back, mapping territory he's learned by heart.

"The door," I gasp against his lips.

"Is locked. And anyone who tries to interrupt us will answer to me."

The threat in his voice sends heat straight to my core. Even injured, even vulnerable, he's still dangerous. Still mine.

I work my slacks and underwear down, kicking them off without breaking our kiss. Now we're skin to skin, my wetness coating his length as I grind against him.

"Inside me," I demand. "Now."

He positions himself at my entrance, hands gripping my hips to guide me down. I sink onto him with a moan that echoes off the sterile walls.

"Christ, you feel perfect," he breathes, head falling back against the pillows.

I start to move, riding him with deliberate control. Each thrust sends sparks through me while his hands worship my body, thumbs brushing my nipples until I arch into his touch.

"Is this what you want from me?" I ask, picking up the pace. "Your federal agent, fucking you in a hospital bed while her colleagues hunt for her?"

"I want all of you. The agent, the woman, the fighter." His voice strains with pleasure and pain. "Every dangerous, beautiful piece."

I lean forward, bracing my hands on either side of his head as I ride him harder. The angle hits something deep inside me, making me cry out.

"That's it," he encourages. "Take what you need from me."

"I need everything." The confession tears from my throat as pleasure builds. "I need you alive. I need you safe. I need you mine."

"Then claim me."

I bite his jaw, his throat, marking him as thoroughly as he's marked my soul. My movements become frantic, chasing release while he meets each thrust despite his injuries.

"Come for me," he orders. "Show me who owns who."

The command pushes me over. I shatter above him, clenching around his cock as waves of pleasure crash through me. He follows with a groan that vibrates through his chest, spilling inside me while I collapse against him.

We lie tangled together, breathing hard in the aftermath. His hands stroke my hair while I listen to his heartbeat, strong and steady beneath my ear.

"What happens now?" he asks.

"Now I go face the music with my supervisors." I lift my head to meet his eyes. "Tell them I'm taking a leave of absence."

"And after?"

"After, we disappear. New city, new names if we have to." I trace the edge of a bandage with my finger. "Think you can handle a quiet life with a disgraced federal agent?"

His laugh rumbles through his chest. "Darling, nothing about you will ever be quiet."

A knock at the door interrupts us. I scramble for my clothes while Eamon adjusts his hospital gown.

"Mr. Kavanagh?" A nurse's voice calls. "Visiting hours end in ten minutes."

"Come in," he calls back.

I'm dressed and composed by the time she enters, though my lips feel swollen and my hair is mussed.

"How's our patient?" she asks, checking his monitors.

"Much better," Eamon says, eyes finding mine. "Ready to start recovery."

She makes notes on his chart. "Doctor Morrison will discharge you tomorrow if your vitals stay stable."

After she leaves, I gather my belongings from the nightstand. My badge feels heavier in my hands.

"I'll be back tonight," I tell him. "After I deal with the Bureau."

"Sorcha." He catches my wrist as I lean down to kiss him goodbye. "Whatever they threaten you with, remember—we have evidence of their corruption. Byrne's conspiracy. They need us more than we need them."

I nod, though we both know the truth. I've crossed too many lines to come back from this unchanged.

"I love you," I tell him.

"I love you too. Now go show those bureaucrats what happens when they try to separate us."

I walk out of that hospital room a different woman than the one who entered. The federal agent who started this investigation died somewhere in the wreckage of corruption and violence.

The woman leaving chose love over duty, passion over procedure.

And I regret nothing.

Two hours later, I sit across from Assistant Director Martinez, Deputy Director Walsh, and Internal Affairs investigator Sarah Kim. The tribunal feels like a firing squad.

"Agent Quinn," Martinez begins, "your actions during the Kavanagh operation raise serious concerns about judgment and protocol adherence."

"The operation succeeded," I reply. "We exposed corruption within the Bureau and dismantled a criminal conspiracy."

"At considerable cost to operational security," Walsh adds. "Your relationship with the target compromised the investigation."

"My relationship with Eamon Kavanagh provided intelligence we never would have obtained through traditional methods."

Kim consults her notes. "You operated without authorization, endangered federal personnel, and developed personal feelings for a known criminal."

"I adapted to developing circumstances and followed the evidence where it led."

"Even when it led you to trust an Irish mob enforcer over your sworn duty?" Martinez asks.

The question hangs between us. Three faces wait for my answer—an answer that will determine my future in federal law enforcement.

"Eamon Kavanagh saved my life. Multiple times. He provided intelligence that exposed Agent Byrne's corruption and prevented further criminal activity." I meet each of their gazes. "Yes, I trusted him. That trust was justified."

"Was it justified when he eliminated Vincent Collins?" Walsh presses.

"Collins was eliminated during an armed confrontation. I was not present during that specific incident."

"But you had prior knowledge of Kavanagh family intentions."

"I had knowledge that Collins posed a continued threat to the investigation and to witness safety."

My phone buzzes with a text. I glance down: Byrne arrested. Confessed to eliminating Agent Stevens. Case closed. - Martinez

I look up to find Martinez watching me read.

"We arrested Agent Byrne an hour ago," he says. "He approached Agent Ramirez this morning, claiming you were feeding information to the Kavanaghs and needed

elimination. Ramirez reported the contact."

Relief floods through me. "He confessed?"

"To multiple federal crimes, including the murder of Agent Stevens." Martinez slides a tablet across the table. "He's attempting to implicate you in his conspiracy, but his accusations contradict all evidence."

The video shows Byrne in handcuffs, voice carrying his desperate lies: "Quinn was working for them from the beginning. The whole operation was compromised."

"His story falls apart under scrutiny," Kim notes. "Communications records, witness statements, and physical evidence all support your version of events."

"However," Walsh continues, "your unauthorized methods require formal review. Internal Affairs must investigate your actions during this operation."

I nod. Expected this outcome.

"Effective immediately, you're placed on administrative leave pending that investigation."

The words sting but don't surprise me. "How long?"

"Six months minimum. The investigation will determine whether disciplinary action is warranted."

Six months of limbo while bureaucrats debate my fate. But I made my choice weeks ago in that safe house.

"There is one positive development," Martinez adds. "The Kavanagh family provided extensive cooperation in the Byrne investigation. That cooperation resulted in a

limited immunity agreement."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning Eamon Kavanagh won't face federal charges for his assistance. Clean record, moving forward."

At least he's protected. Whatever happens to my career, I accomplished that much.

"Agent Quinn," Martinez concludes, "clean out your desk. Turn in your credentials. We'll contact you when the review ends."

I stand, shake hands professionally, and walk out with my spine straight.

In the parking garage, I dial Eamon.

"How did it go?" he asks immediately.

"Administrative leave. Byrne's in custody. You're clear of federal charges."

"What about your career?"

"Uncertain. But I made my peace with that choice." I unlock my car. "Eamon, how do you feel about California? Or maybe Colorado?"

"Are you asking me to run away with you, Agent Quinn?"

"I'm asking if you want to build a life with me somewhere they don't know what a Kavanagh is."

His laugh carries joy and relief. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Pack light. I'll pick you up tomorrow morning."

"Sorcha?"

"Yeah?"

"No regrets?"

I think about the badge I just surrendered, the career I spent twenty years building, the institutional loyalty I abandoned for one dangerous man.

"None at all."

The FBI gave me purpose for two decades. Eamon Kavanagh gave me something worth abandoning that purpose for.

Tomorrow we start over. New city, new names, new life.

Just the two of us against whatever comes next.

It's everything I never knew I wanted.