



# His Obsession (Mafia Masters #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Rule 1: Never witness a mob hit

Rule 2: Never fall for the don

Rule 3: Rules are made to be broken

I shouldn't have been there.

Shouldn't have seen the man die.

Shouldn't have felt his blood on my skin.

But now, I belong to Callum Kavanagh, an Irish mob boss.

Dangerous, ruthless, and entirely too intoxicating for my own good.

His whispered threats wrap around me like silk.

His touch ignites something I can't explain.

He says it's for my safety. I know it's about control.

My life was safe before I crossed him.

Predictable.

Now, it's a web of secrets, blood, and power, with Callum at the center.

He's not just my captor. He's my obsession. And I might just be his.

But obsessions like ours? They always end in flames.

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

## PROLOGUE

The first light of dawn stretched fingers of pale gold across the hills above Galway, struggling to break through the dense blanket of fog clinging to the land. The air was cool, carrying the scent of North Atlantic Ocean and lush, rich earth. Callum Kavanagh stood just outside the abbey's walls, his bespoke suit and polished shoes incongruous with the rugged beauty of the Irish countryside.

His dark eyes scanned the horizon. With a deep breath, he removed his clothes, closed his eyes and the shift began.

Mist rolled up from the ground, swirling in vibrant shades of emerald and gold, crackling with tiny forks of lightning. Thunder rumbled low and distant, as if the earth itself recognized the transformation. The mist enveloped him completely, blurring his form until he was little more than a shadow within the swirling tempest. The air seemed to hum with power, the transformation seamless and natural as the mist thickened, pulsed, and then began to dissipate.

When the haze cleared, the man was gone. In his place stood a large, sleek black panther, muscles rippling beneath an obsidian coat that absorbed what little light managed to break through the fog. Callum's dark eyes gleamed, unblinking, as they surveyed the fields with a predator's sharp precision.

Without hesitation, he leapt forward, his paws striking the damp earth with soundless grace. The world transformed as he ran, his human responsibilities fading, replaced by the primal thrill of freedom. The fields stretched endlessly before him, a patchwork of green and gold framed by distant, mist-shrouded hills. His powerful

limbs propelled him forward, the wind whispering secrets in his ears as he raced through the early morning.

The fog began to lift as the sun grew bolder, revealing the rolling hills in greater detail. Callum slowed to a lope, his eyes scanning the horizon one last time before turning back toward the old abbey, its ancient stone walls rising solemnly above the surrounding countryside.

The moment he reached the abbey's entrance, the mist returned, swirling once more with color and energy. In the span of a heartbeat, the panther disappeared, and Callum stood in his human form, the dampness of the morning clinging to his frame as he redressed in his tailored clothes.

Rory McMahon was waiting for him at the top of the stone steps that led to the abbey's entrance, his expression grim.

"Callum," Rory said, inclining his head in deference. "We've got a situation in Dublin. Con needs you there immediately."

Callum shook his head, the peaceful clarity of his run evaporating. "What's the issue?"

"Lynch's crew is moving in on our business there. The Councilman's stirring up trouble, too—says he's got evidence that might compromise some of our operations."

Callum nodded once, his mind already shifting to the countless decisions and calculations ahead. "Inform Darragh to prepare the car. Let the household staff in Dublin know I'll be staying until I can take care of whatever needs taking care of. I'll leave within the hour."

He turned toward the abbey's heavy oak doors, his stride steady and strong. The

predator was still there, lingering just beneath the surface, ready to strike when needed. For now, the human mask would suffice.

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### ISOLDE

The National Gallery shimmered with opulence, chandeliers casting diamond-like reflections on the polished floors. Gowns of silk and sequins swept across the marble as Dublin's elite mingled, laughter and the clink of champagne glasses reverberating through the cavernous hall. Isolde Fitzwilliam adjusted the delicate straps of her ivory gown, a picture of composure amidst the chaos of last-minute details.

Her heels clicked purposefully against the stone floor as she slipped through the crowd, her mind occupied with the donor list that had disappeared moments before the auction. The gala's success hinged on that list, and her father's trust in her capability to manage the foundation did too. She exhaled, her frustration tempered by the warm notes of vanilla that lingered from her perfume—a small indulgence that always soothed her nerves.

Thinking to take a shortcut from the grand hall to the offices of the museum, Isolde rounded a corner into a dimly lit hallway. There, she froze. The faint metallic tang of blood mingled with the scent of fresh paint. A pair of men were there in the shadows—one on his knees and bleeding and the other standing over him with a gun—their voices low and urgent.

“I told you to pay,” a gravelly voice snarled, venom dripping from every word.

“I just need more time—” the other man stammered, his words cut short by the sharp spit of a gun affixed with a silencer.

Isolde gasped, her hands trembling as she pressed herself against the cool plaster wall. Her heart thundered in her chest, her mind racing with disbelief. A figure crumpled to the floor, lifeless, while the other wiped his gun with calculated precision. The darkness swallowed him whole as he turned, disappearing down the corridor without a second glance.

She took a faltering step forward as if to follow, her silk gown brushing against the ornate molding of the gallery wall but stopped herself. She bent down to remove her shoes and then took a step back towards the entrance to the hall, but her escape was short-lived. A broad, unyielding chest collided with her back, the faint scent of cedarwood and smoke wrapping around her like a snare.

Before she could cry out, a calloused hand clamped over her mouth, silencing her scream.

“Not a word, love,” a deep voice murmured against her ear, low and commanding.

Isolde’s eyes darted upward, catching the faint reflection of her captor in the polished glass of a nearby painting. His eyes glinted with restrained power, framed by a chiseled face that exuded danger and control.

“Let me go,” she hissed, her voice muffled beneath his hand.

“Not until you calm down.” The words were a growl, more predator than man.

Her pulse raced, fear and something darker swirling in her veins. She squirmed against him, the hard press of his body a stark contrast to her own trembling limbs. His grip didn’t waver, his strength a silent warning.

“I saw...he—” she stammered, her words halting as his fingers loosened ever so slightly.

“I know what you saw,” he interrupted, his voice cutting through her panic. “I saw it, too. If you value your life, you’re going to forget you ever saw anything and pray that no one else finds out differently.”

She turned her head, her amber eyes blazing as they met his. “I can’t do that. I just saw a man murdered. The police need to be called. Who the hell are you, anyway?”

His lips curved into a dark smile that wasn’t reflected in his eyes. “The man who just saved your pretty little life.”

She should have been terrified—his presence radiated a menace that promised he was no better than the man she’d just seen pull the trigger. But beneath the fear was an undeniable heat, a pull she couldn’t explain.

“You—” she began, her voice faltering as he leaned closer, his breath brushing against her temple.

“I’ll explain everything,” he said, his tone softening but losing none of its edge. “But not here.”

The hum of the gala carried on just beyond the hallway, oblivious to the violence that had unfolded mere feet away. Isolde’s mind screamed at her to run, to escape the man who held her like a fragile bird in his grasp. But his touch, rough and unapologetic, ignited a spark of defiance—and desire.

“I don’t go anywhere with strangers,” she managed, her voice steadier than she felt.

He released her mouth, his thumb brushing against her jaw in a gesture that felt both possessive and oddly reverent. “Then it’s a good thing we’re not strangers. Callum Kavanagh.”

Her breath hitched. She'd heard the name before—whispers of power and danger that swirled through Dublin's elite circles like ghost stories told in hushed tones. He was said to be the right-hand man for the Devil of Galway, Conchobar O'Neill, one of the most powerful underworld figures in all of Great Britain.

"You're him," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

"And you," he said, his gaze raking over her, "are in way over your head, Isolde Fitzwilliam."

"How do you know my name?" she demanded, her anger flaring to cover the vulnerability that threatened to consume her.

He leaned closer, his lips a whisper's breadth from her ear. "I make it my business to know everything about the people in one of the cities in which we have business. Especially those who stumble into things they shouldn't."

Her knees weakened as his words settled over her, a heady mix of warning and promise. She should push him away, scream for help, do anything but stand there as his hand slid to her waist, grounding her in place.

"Tell me why I shouldn't go straight to the police," she challenged, her voice trembling but defiant.

His dark chuckle sent a shiver down her spine. "Because they can't protect you from what's coming."

The air between them crackled, the world outside the hallway fading into irrelevance. For an instant, she forgot about the body lying not too far away, about the danger she was in. All that existed was the man before her—dangerous, dominant, and utterly in control.

And heaven help her, she wanted to know what it would feel like to lose herself in that control. She told herself she didn't, but that didn't mean it wasn't true.

"Let me go," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Not yet," Callum murmured, his grip tightening ever so slightly. "Not until I'm sure you understand what's at stake."

The unspoken threat in his words left her breathless. Isolde wasn't sure if it was fear or desire she was feeling so strongly—or perhaps a volatile mix of both. As much as she wanted to shake off the arousal that coursed through her veins, she couldn't seem to do so. Her breath and heart rate were increased, and it wasn't only because of what she'd just witnessed. All she knew was that her life, so carefully controlled and predictable, had just taken a turn she could never have anticipated.

And somehow, Callum Kavanagh was at the center of it all.

The warm press of his body against her back was a stark contrast to the icy fear clawing at her chest. Isolde's breath came in shallow gasps, the adrenaline coursing through her veins screaming for her to run. But his arm, like an iron band around her waist, held her in place.

"You don't want to do anything stupid, love," his voice was low and smooth, a predator's purr that sent a shiver skittering down her spine. "I'd hate to see you get hurt because you couldn't follow simple instructions."

His breath brushed her ear, sending a jolt of something dark and unwelcome through her. She twisted slightly, trying to look up at him, but his grip tightened, his dominance unmistakable.

"I—" she began, her voice faltering as her gaze flicked to the scene unfolding in the

shadows ahead.

Two men moved with disturbing efficiency, their faces impassive as they dragged the lifeless body out of sight. A third man, dressed in a perfectly tailored suit, wiped a smear of blood from his hands before nodding once in Kavanaugh's direction and disappearing through a side door.

She swallowed hard, her mind racing to process the gravity of what she had stumbled into. The acrid scent of blood still lingered in the air, but it was overpowered by the faint trace of Callum's cologne—expensive and intoxicating, a disorienting blend of cedar and leather that clung to her senses.

"You just killed him," she whispered, her voice raw with disbelief.

"No," Callum murmured, his tone chillingly calm. "He killed himself the moment he thought he could cross the wrong people. Fortunately, my people were here to clean up the mess so your gala isn't tarnished."

The words, spoken with such cold certainty, sent another shiver through her. She couldn't reconcile the man holding her—so warm and solid—with the monster capable of such casual violence.

"Let me go," she demanded, her voice firmer this time.

His chuckle was low and dark, the sound vibrating through her. "You're not in a position to make demands, sweetheart."

He leaned closer, his lips so close to her ear that she could feel the heat of his breath. "Here's what you're going to do. You're going to walk back into that glittering little gala of yours, smile for the cameras, and pretend you didn't see a damn thing. Because if you don't..."

She froze, the understood threat in his words more terrifying than anything he could have said outright.

“My life,” she whispered, the words trembling on her lips, “depends on my silence, doesn’t it?”

“Exactly,” he said, his voice softening just enough to make her skin prickle. “You’re a smart girl, Isolde. I don’t think you’ll make this any harder than it needs to be.”

She glanced down the hallway, where the scene had been cleaned up as if nothing had happened. The efficiency was chilling, a stark reminder of the power he wielded.

“I don’t want any part of this,” she said, her voice shaking but resolute.

“You’re already a part of this,” Callum replied, his tone laced with something she couldn’t quite name—mockery, maybe, or something darker. “The question is, how well are you going to play your role?”

Her breath hitched as his hand slid from her waist, but the heat of his presence didn’t fade.

“Remember, love,” he murmured, his voice a dangerous caress, “silence is your safest choice.”

A surge of defiance flared in her chest. She wasn’t going to stand here, trembling under his control like a frightened doe. With a sudden burst of strength, she twisted out of his grasp, her movements fueled by raw adrenaline.

“Stay away from me,” she hissed, stepping back, her eyes blazing with a mixture of fear and fury.

Callum tilted his head, his eyes glinting with amusement. “Run, then,” he said, his voice low and lazy, as though the outcome had already been decided.

She didn’t wait for him to say more. Turning on her heel, she bolted toward the grand entrance, her steps silent against the marble floor. The cool night air hit her like a slap as she burst through the doors, the sound of the city enveloping her as she put her shoes back on.

But even as she fled, Callum’s laughter rang in her ears—low, rich, and maddeningly assured. It wasn’t the laugh of a man who had lost.

It was the laugh of a man who knew they weren’t done.

### CALLUM

The Fitzwilliam Foundation office was a study in pristine order, all clean lines and understated elegance. Morning light streamed through the tall windows, illuminating Isolde as she stood near the central desk, her head bent over a stack of papers. Her ivory blouse and tailored skirt gave her an air of crisp professionalism, but Callum's sharp eyes caught the subtle tremor in her hands as she shuffled the documents.

He leaned against the doorframe, his broad shoulders commanding the narrow entrance, exuding a calm that belied the storm of calculations running through his mind. His dark gaze swept over the room, taking in the polite smiles of the staff and the smooth cadence of Ciarán Dempsey's voice as he presented the donation agreement to Isolde. Ciarán was the syndicate's accountant and handled all the legitimate financial transactions for Con.

"It's a significant contribution," Ciarán said smoothly, sliding the papers across the desk. "I'm sure the Fitzwilliam Foundation will make excellent use of it."

Callum didn't bother to hide the smile tugging at the corner of his lips. Ciarán was playing the part of the loyal lieutenant well, as usual. Callum's eyes, however, remained fixed on Isolde.

Her hand hovered over the document, pen poised. She hesitated, just for a fraction of a second, her eyes lifting to meet his. There it was again—that spark of intelligence, the fire that flickered even beneath the shadow of what she'd seen last night.

“Your boss has always been so generous, Mr. Kavanagh,” Isolde said, her voice steady but softer than he remembered. “I have to admit, the timing is... unusual. Over the years we’ve enjoyed the pleasure of your support, but this contribution is beyond generous. I promise we’ll make good use of it.”

Callum’s lips curved into a slow smile, deliberate and unapologetic. “Generosity is a virtue, Ms. Fitzwilliam. Isn’t that the foundation’s motto?”

Her gaze didn’t waver, even as her cheeks flushed. She straightened her posture, regaining control, but he caught the faintest flicker of tension in her expression.

“It is,” she replied evenly. “But it usually comes with a history of interest in our work. Forgive me if I seem ungrateful, but we’re not accustomed to donations of this size from Mr. O’Neill.”

‘Donations of this size,’—a polite euphemism if ever he’d heard one. The taste of copper filled his mouth as he bit the inside of his cheek to suppress the sharp retort that threatened to escape. She was playing with fire, testing boundaries she didn’t yet understand.

He watched her carefully, saw the moment she realized she’d drifted too close to dangerous territory. Her lashes lowered, and she tilted her head, a picture of polished diplomacy... or submissiveness.

“You’re right, of course,” he said, his voice low and measured. “I suppose my employer has been a quiet admirer of the foundation’s work for some time. The organization has a long- standing belief in giving back to the community, and we’ve only recently begun expanding our reach into Dublin.”

Ciarán cleared his throat softly, a subtle signal that the conversation was veering into delicate territory. Callum ignored him. His focus was solely on Isolde, on the graceful

line of her neck as she bent to sign the document.

The sight of her hand trembling slightly as she pressed the pen to paper sent an unexpected surge of protectiveness through him. He tamped it down immediately. Protectiveness wasn't useful here. Control was.

"Mr. Kavanagh," she said, her tone professional but cautious as she slid the signed document back toward Ciarán, who put it in his briefcase and let them alone. "Your employer's support will go a long way toward funding our next initiatives. We'll be sure to keep you updated on our progress."

Her attempt at formality amused him. "I'd appreciate that," he said, stepping closer, his voice dropping just enough to make the air between them crackle. "But I have to admit, I'm more interested in the people behind the foundation than the initiatives themselves."

Her eyes snapped up to his, her cheeks coloring again. "The people?"

"You," he said simply, his gaze locking on hers. "Your passion for this work is obvious. It's rare to see someone so dedicated."

Isolde blinked, clearly caught off guard by his directness. "I—I appreciate that. But the foundation's success is a team effort."

"Of course," Callum said, the corner of his mouth lifting in a way that wasn't quite a smile. "But every team needs a strong leader. I can see why your father trusts you to carry on the family's legacy."

Her expression softened briefly, pride flickering across her features. But it was fleeting, replaced by a wariness that told him she hadn't forgotten who he was—or what she'd seen.

“Mr. Kavanagh,” she began, her tone a touch sharper now, “you’ve been very kind to us, but I have a lot of work to attend to. If there’s nothing else?—”

“There is,” he interrupted smoothly, stepping even closer. He caught the subtle hitch in her breath as his presence crowded hers. “I’d like to schedule a follow-up meeting to discuss some additional opportunities. Perhaps over dinner?”

The question hung in the air, heavy with implied intent.

Isolde hesitated, her eyes flickering with something he couldn’t quite name—defiance, maybe, or curiosity. “I don’t usually mix business with social engagements.”

He leaned in slightly, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “Then consider it a professional courtesy.”

The flush in her cheeks deepened, but she held his gaze, unyielding. “I’ll have my assistant coordinate with your office.”

A wry smile touched his lips. She was clever, he’d give her that. But this game was only beginning, and she didn’t yet realize she was playing on his board.

“Looking forward to it,” he murmured, stepping back just enough to let her catch her breath.

As he turned to leave, he caught the faintest scent of her perfume—soft and warm, vanilla laced with something uniquely hers. The curve of her neck, the determined set of her jaw, the way she hid her fear behind a veil of poise—all of it lingered with him as he strode from the office.

He’d come here to eliminate a threat, to assess whether Isolde Fitzwilliam was more

liability than intrigue. But now, as the door closed behind him, he realized she was both.

And that only made her more dangerous—and more irresistible.

Later that same day the late afternoon sun cast a golden haze over the city as Callum Kavanagh watched Isolde step out of the Fitzwilliam Foundation's glass doors. Her ivory blouse glowed in the waning light, and the gentle sway of her hips as she walked toward the street sent a ripple of something dark and possessive through him. He leaned against the sleek black car parked discreetly across the street, his arms crossed, exuding the quiet menace that came naturally to him.

Against his better judgment, he'd interceded and kept her safe, cleaning up the mess from the dead body. It might not have been the practical thing to do—far from it—but the boss was insistent about not taking the lives of innocents. Keeping Isolde alive, keeping her close, was a risk. But the predator in him had other ideas. He wanted her near, where he could control her every move. And if he was being honest, it wasn't just about managing a liability. There was something about her—her defiance, her fire—that made his blood run hotter, his focus sharper.

The fact that she was dangerous in her own way only made her more tempting.

Isolde's gaze flickered with recognition when she spotted him, her steps faltering. For a brief moment, he caught a glimpse of panic before she carefully smoothed her expression into cool neutrality. Brave little thing.

"Mr. Kavanagh," she said, her tone clipped as she approached. "What are you doing here?"

"Callum," he corrected, his lips curling into a slow, deliberate smile. "We're past formalities, don't you think?"

Her gaze darted around, scanning for witnesses. Smart. But not smart enough.

“This isn’t a good time,” she said firmly, clutching her handbag as if it were a shield.

“If you want to discuss foundation matters, you can call my office?—”

“Foundation matters,” he interrupted smoothly, stepping into her path, “can wait. This is about you and me.”

Her breath hitched, the faintest tremor in her hand betraying her composure. “There is no ‘you and me,’ Mr. Kavanagh. I don’t know what you think?—”

“You don’t know what I think,” he said softly, his voice a low growl that cut through her protests. “But you will.”

Before she could respond, his hand closed around her wrist—not harshly, but with an unyielding grip that brooked no argument. Her eyes widened, and she opened her mouth to protest, but he leaned in, his breath brushing her ear.

“Don’t make a scene, love. You’ll only draw attention, and that’s the last thing either of us wants right now.”

She stiffened but didn’t scream. He could practically feel the anxiety radiating from her as he guided her toward the car, his hand never loosening its hold.

“Callum, you can’t kidnap me in broad daylight,” she hissed under her breath, her voice laced with both fear and anger.

“It’s an abduction,” he corrected, his tone maddeningly calm as he opened the car door and gestured for her to get in. “But let’s not split hairs.”

She hesitated, her jaw tightening, but the calculating gleam in her eyes told him she

was weighing her options. Finally, she slid into the passenger seat, her movements stiff with resistance.

“Good girl,” he murmured, shutting the door behind her before slipping into the driver’s seat.

The drive was silent except for the low hum of the engine. Callum could feel her gaze burning into him, her eyes sharp and unyielding even as she sat rigid in her seat.

“Where are you taking me?” she demanded, breaking the silence.

“You’ll see,” he said simply, his focus on the road ahead.

Her fingers curled into fists in her lap, her frustration was hard to miss. “This is insane. You can’t just?—”

“I can,” he said, cutting her off with a dark edge to his voice. “And I will. You’re lucky I’m giving you this option, Isolde. The alternative isn’t nearly as pleasant.” He had no plans to kill her, but she didn’t need to know that.

She swallowed hard, her lips pressing into a thin line as she glared out the window.

The car wound its way up a secluded road, the city lights fading into the distance as they climbed into the hills. When they finally arrived, the imposing facade of the Hellfire Club loomed ahead, its black marble exterior gleaming under the glow of dim red lights. The valet approached without a word, his gaze averted as Callum handed over the keys and rounded the car to open Isolde’s door.

Her eyes widened as she took in the building, realization dawning. “This is?—”

“The Hellfire Club,” he finished for her, his tone nonchalant. “Dublin’s most

exclusive members-only establishment. I'd say you're in for an unforgettable evening."

She didn't move, her expression a mix of indignation and apprehension. "I'm not going in there."

"You are," he said, his voice soft but firm as steel. "Unless you'd prefer to stay outside and explain to the next person who comes along why you're standing here with me."

Her defiance faltered, and she glanced around, her cheeks flushing. Finally, she stepped out of the car, her movements hesitant but deliberate.

Inside, the air was heavy with sensual energy, the low hum of conversation mingling with the faint strains of music. The club's decor was a blend of dark opulence and restrained decadence—polished leather furniture, low lighting, and an undeniable undercurrent of danger.

Callum guided her through the main floor, his hand resting lightly on the small of her back. She bristled at his touch, but she didn't pull away.

"Why are we here?" she demanded, her voice low and tight.

"To talk," he said, leading her to a private alcove. "And to make sure you understand exactly what's at stake."

As they sat across from each other, the flickering candlelight cast shadows over his face, emphasizing the hard lines of his jaw and the predatory glint in his eyes.

"You need to understand something, Isolde," he said, his voice a low growl. "What you saw last night puts you in a position you're not prepared for. You've stepped into

a world where silence isn't just golden—it's survival."

She met his gaze, her chin lifting in defiance. "And bringing me here is supposed to convince me of that?"

"No," he said, leaning closer, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "Bringing you here is to show you that I'm in control. Of this situation. Of you."

Her breath hitched, her cheeks flushing with a mix of anger and something else—something darker that neither of them was ready to name.

"And what if I refuse to play along?" she challenged, her voice trembling but bold.

Callum's lips curved into a slow, dangerous smile. "You won't. Come along love, I have something to show you."

The implied threat hung heavy in the air, but so did something else—a crackling tension that made his pulse quicken, the primal part of him roaring to life at the fire in her eyes.

A muscular man towered over the delicate woman strapped to the St. Andrew's cross in the middle of the room. The way he moved showed he was a man accustomed to dominating his partner and that tonight was no exception. The woman's gaze held a mixture of trepidation and surrender.

With practiced ease, the man retrieved a long, cylindrical object from a nearby table.

"That's a violet wand," Callum whispered in her ear. "Doesn't look like much until it's turned on, and then it can be as sensual or as wicked as the wielder wants it to be."

Isolde gasped softly as the device was switched on and the settings adjusted. He could see her nipples stiffen beneath her blouse. She was definitely intrigued. Maybe keeping her around could be more pleasurable than he'd anticipated.

As the man's hand moved to the submissive's hip, Callum slid his hand down to cup Isolde's ass. When she tried to move away, Callum pulled her closer and growled softly, but didn't remove his hand.

The wand's tip brushed against the woman's shoulder, making her gasp. Her eyes closed while the sensation rippled across her skin. The man's hand grasped the woman's other shoulder, grounding her as the wand's spark danced across her collarbone.

"I won't watch this," said Isolde quietly as she closed her eyes.

"Yes, you will," said Callum malevolently. "Open your eyes."

Isolde obeyed as her gaze locked on him instead.

"Eyes forward," he continued. "Watch how he moves the wand downward, tracing the outline of her breasts before teasing her nipples with it. See how uneven her breathing is getting. I'll bet she's damn near dripping for him. I'd venture a good sum of money that he'll make use of that honey before the night's over."

"You're a pervert," she hissed.

"And you're not nearly as much of a prude as you'd like me to believe. You're aroused. I can smell it. I can feel it. Say the word, Isolde, and I'll take you upstairs and use the wand on you before I feast on your pussy and fuck you until you can't walk tomorrow. Would you like that, love?"

Isolde remained silent as the wand continued its descent, gliding over the woman's flat stomach, making her muscles twitch. As the wand reached the top of her thighs, the man's hand followed, his fingers gently exposing her glistening folds.

Callum was anticipating that this night might go far better than he'd thought as he heard her breath hitch. That thought came to an abrupt halt as Isolde stomped on the instep of his foot, bringing her elbow back into his midsection and running for the door.

One of the bouncers made a move to stop her.

"Let her go," said Callum. "She's new to the lifestyle. I'll have her better trained before we come again."

Callum tipped the bouncer heavily as he exited the club and saw Isolde getting in a cab. It drove off into the night. She had no idea what she'd stumbled upon the night before, but Callum did. It was a game of cat and mouse, predator and prey. He doubted she knew she was playing a dangerous game, but he did. And heaven help them both, he meant to ensure he was the victor and that it ended the way he wanted.

### ISOLDE

Shadows stretched and fractured, dancing on the Fitzwilliam Foundation's walls, lending the pristine room an illusion of chaos. Isolde sat at her desk, back straight and shoulders tense, her fingers brushing lightly over the surface of a file. She tried to ground herself in the familiar rhythm of work, but the man seated across from her disrupted all semblance of calm.

Callum Kavanagh exuded a quiet, deliberate menace, his dark gaze fixed on her as though she were prey. The afternoon light highlighted the silver threads woven into his black suit, the fabric so sharp and precise it looked sculpted to his frame. He leaned back in his chair, one arm draped casually along the side, as if he owned not just the room but the world outside it.

"This meeting," Isolde began, her voice steadier than she expected, though her hands tightened around the file to keep them from trembling, "is completely unnecessary, Mr. Kavanagh. The donation has already been accepted, and all documentation was signed yesterday. I'm not sure why you felt the need to request this... follow-up."

Callum grinned, his lips curling with amusement. "A man can't follow up on a sizable investment? It's good business sense, Ms. Fitzwilliam. But I suspect you already know that."

Heat crept up her neck despite her best efforts to remain unaffected. "The foundation appreciates your employer's generosity, but our allocations are non-negotiable. We'll

distribute the funds as we see fit.”

He chuckled softly, the sound rolling through the room and sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. “And I’m sure you’ll do an admirable job. Still, my employer has a keen interest in ensuring those funds are used... effectively.”

Isolde bristled, her eyes narrowing. “Are you suggesting the foundation would mismanage them?”

“Not at all,” he said smoothly, leaning forward now, his elbows resting on his knees. The movement drew him closer, close enough that she caught the faint scent of cedarwood and smoke. His voice dropped, low and intimate. “I’m simply reminding you that trust is earned, not given.”

The sound of her assistant’s heels clicking down the hallway outside echoed through the office, each sharp tap a counterpoint to the erratic rhythm of her pulse. She focused on the noise, willing herself to find some semblance of control.

“You’ve made your point, Mr. Kavanagh,” she said, her voice clipped as she tried to steer the conversation back to safer territory. “The funds are secure, and you can rest assured they’ll be put to good use.”

He leaned back again, his eyes never leaving hers, the weight of his gaze as tangible as a hand on her skin. “Good use, indeed. But let’s not pretend you don’t understand why I’m here, Isolde.”

Her breath caught at the way he said her name—low, deliberate, like a caress. She tightened her grip on the file in front of her, as if it could serve as a barrier between them.

“I don’t see the purpose of continuing this conversation,” she said firmly, though her

voice lacked the force she intended.

Callum tilted his head, the predatory gleam in his eyes intensifying. “The purpose, Ms. Fitzwilliam, is to establish a relationship. My employer isn’t just making a larger than normal donation. This is an investment. And investments require... oversight.”

Her cheeks flushed, a mix of anger and something she couldn’t name simmering beneath the surface. “The foundation doesn’t answer to private donors, no matter how large the contribution. We remain autonomous.”

“Autonomy,” he mused, his tone laced with mockery. “An admirable principle. But principles are expensive, aren’t they? And I’d wager that your foundation could do a hell of a lot more with continued support from the O’Neill organization. Or am I wrong?”

She opened her mouth to argue, but the words caught in her throat. He wasn’t wrong, and she was sure he knew it. The donation was a lifeline, and the prospect of future contributions was impossible to ignore.

Her silence must have spoken volumes because his smile deepened, his confidence pressing against her like a physical weight. “That’s what I thought,” he murmured.

The sound of her assistant moving further away left the office cloaked in an oppressive silence. Isolde felt the walls closing in, as if Callum’s presence consumed every inch of the room.

“I still don’t see why this required a private meeting,” she said, her voice quieter now, betraying the cracks in her resolve.

His gaze flicked to her hands, still clutching the file, then back to her face. “Because it’s easier to talk freely when we’re not surrounded by watchful eyes. You don’t

strike me as the type who likes being backed into a corner, Isolde. But here we are.”

Her skin prickled under his scrutiny, heat pooling low in her belly despite the fear she couldn’t entirely shake. She hated how he unraveled her so easily, how the lines between defiance and something darker blurred in his presence.

“Mr. Kavanagh,” she began, her tone icy in an effort to mask her unease, “I’d appreciate it if you kept our interactions strictly professional from now on. There’s no need for?—”

“For what?” he interrupted, his voice silken. “Private meetings? Direct conversations? Or are you more concerned about the feeling between us in this room?”

Her cheeks burned, and her eyes flashed. “There is no feeling between us, in this or any other room. There is only your unwelcome presence.”

His laughter was low and intimate, curling around her like smoke. “Unwelcome, is it? Tell me, love, is that why your breath hitches every time I get close? Or why your skin flushes when I look at you?”

He crossed the room, sliding a file across the desk toward her, his fingers brushing hers briefly. The contact was electric, sending a sharp jolt up her arm that made her breath hitch. Isolde tried to ignore the reaction, but it was impossible not to feel the gravity of his touch—solid, deliberate, and far too intimate.

She pulled her hand back quickly, clutching the file like a lifeline. “I will not allow a repeat of last night,” she said sharply, keeping her voice firm as she met his gaze.

Callum’s grin widened, and he leaned slightly closer, the predator in him clearly enjoying her discomfort. “I agree,” he murmured, his voice low and dark, like a storm

rolling in. “Next time, you won’t be running out on me, leaving me with no relief. If you strike me again, love, I’ll put you over my knee for what I suspect is some much-needed discipline. And once I’m done with that...” His eyes flicked to her mouth, his gaze darkening. “...we’ll find something better to do with that sharp tongue of yours. Something that’ll leave you much more agreeable.”

Her stomach flipped at the quiet, confident threat, a mix of shock and anger flaring in her chest. She shot up from her chair, the legs scraping against the floor as she moved to put some distance between them.

“You are insufferable,” she hissed, her cheeks flaming. “Do you really think I’d let you?—”

“Let me?” he interrupted, his smile giving way to something sharper, more dangerous. “That’s cute, Isolde. But let’s not pretend you didn’t enjoy last night—at least the parts that you allowed yourself to. You remember how my hand felt on you, don’t you? How my body pressed against yours.”

Her throat tightened, and she cursed inwardly at the memories his words conjured. She had been trying to forget—the heat of his hand on her ass, the hard line of his body against hers—but now the sensations flooded back, vivid and unavoidable.

“You’re delusional,” she snapped, gripping the edge of her desk to steady herself.

“Am I?” Callum said smoothly, stepping around the desk and closing the distance between them. She stiffened but held her ground, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing her retreat.

Her heart raced as he leaned in, his breath brushing against her cheek, warm and teasing. “Tell me, love, why are you blushing?”

“Because you’re infuriating,” she shot back, her voice trembling slightly despite her best efforts.

He chuckled, the sound low and rich, and Isolde hated the way it sent a ripple of heat through her. “Careful, Isolde. You’re starting to sound like you care.”

Her hand clenched into a fist, but she forced herself to take a steadying breath, determined not to let him bait her. “This meeting is over,” she said, her voice cold.

“Not yet,” he replied, stepping back just enough to give her space to breathe. His keen eyes glittered with amusement and something more dangerous as he folded his arms. “There’s one more thing we need to discuss.”

“What now?” she asked, exasperated.

He tilted his head slightly, his expression softening, though it did little to lessen the intensity of his gaze. “I owe you an apology,” he said.

The unexpected statement caught her off guard. “An apology?”

“I underestimated you,” he said, his tone laced with a grudging respect. “I assumed you were just another sheltered heiress playing at charity work. But I’ve done my research, love. The foundation has flourished under your leadership, but I wonder what your uptight donors would say if they knew you had guest privileges at Baker Street in London?”

Her breath caught, her mind scrambling for a response. Baker Street was a discreet, exclusive club, one where anonymity and trust were paramount. The fact that Callum knew about her connection to it sent a chill racing down her spine.

“How do you know about my privileges at Baker Street?” she demanded, her voice

sharper than she intended.

His smile returned, though it was softer this time, almost appreciative. “I make it my business to know things. Especially about people who interest me.”

Isolde’s pulse hammered in her ears. “I don’t interest you.”

“You interest me more than you should,” he said simply, the honesty in his tone catching her off guard. “And that’s why you should be careful, Isolde. Because the more I learn about you, the more I want to see how far you’ll let me push you.”

The words hung in the air between them, heavy and dangerous. She wanted to tell him to leave, to slam the door on whatever game he thought he was playing. But the part of her that should have been running screamed at her to stay, to stand her ground.

“You don’t scare me,” she said finally, though her voice faltered at the end.

“Don’t I?” Callum asked, his voice soft but laced with steel. He stepped closer again, and Isolde’s breath hitched as the heat of his body radiated against hers. “Maybe you should be scared, love. Or maybe you should be honest with yourself about why you’re not. Fear can be, after all, something of an aphrodisiac.”

Before she could respond, the door to her office creaked open slightly, and her assistant poked her head in, her polite smile faltering when she saw how close they were. “Ms. Fitzwilliam, your next appointment is here.”

Isolde stepped back quickly, her face flaming as she turned to her desk. “Thank you, Evelyn. I’ll be right out.”

The door closed again, leaving her alone with Callum, who hadn’t moved an inch.

“This isn’t over,” he said quietly, his dark gaze locking with hers one last time.

Then he turned and strode to the door, leaving her standing in the golden light, her hands trembling and her heart racing.

As the door clicked shut, Isolde pressed her palms to the desk, willing her breathing to steady. She told herself she hated him, that his presence was nothing more than a threat she needed to eliminate. But deep down, she knew the truth.

It wasn’t hate that made her pulse race. It was the dangerous allure of a man who could unravel her carefully ordered world with nothing more than a touch.

### CALLUM

Callum was watching from the shadows of the alley across the street when Isolde exited the building, flanked by Ted Walsh, the head of the foundation's security team. He must have rattled her more than he'd thought. But if she thought the former cop would be able to protect her from him, she had another thought coming.

He smiled as he followed them to The Celestial Stag, the crown jewel of the O'Neill Organization's legitimate ventures in Dublin. Con always liked to mix legitimate and not-so-legitimate businesses in the same city to keep the cops and Interpol on their toes.

He entered the restaurant via the back entrance and was seated in his private booth before Isolde was shown to a table with an older gentleman he recognized. James Fitzwilliam, Isolde's father. Walsh had all the subtlety of a freight train as he took up a post close to their table with his back against the wall, scanning the restaurant before taking a seat at a nearby table.

The rich aroma of roasted lamb hung in the air, mingling with the faint scent of truffle oil and freshly baked bread. The restaurant was an oasis of polished marble, subdued lighting, and understated elegance, its exclusivity a magnet for Dublin's elite. Callum's dark gaze wasn't on the gleaming chandeliers or the impeccably dressed servers gliding between tables, though. His attention was fixed across the room, where Isolde sat with her father.

James Fitzwilliam carried himself with the calm assurance of old money, his every movement deliberate, his tailored suit impeccable. He was a man who knew his place in the world—and worked hard to maintain it. Isolde, seated beside him, looked every inch the perfect daughter, her ivory blouse and emerald-green skirt accentuating her poise. But Callum wasn't fooled by outward appearances.

Her body language was stiff, her movements guarded, as though she were bracing herself against something unseen. The candlelight caught the coppery strands in her dark chestnut hair, highlighting the rigidity in her shoulders. She wasn't entirely at ease.

Good.

The clink of glasses and murmur of quiet conversations masked any sound from their table, but Callum didn't need to hear their words to understand the dynamics at play. James leaned in, speaking softly, his hand gesturing toward the file resting on the table between them. Isolde nodded, her face a carefully controlled mask of neutrality.

“Ted Walsh looks uncomfortable,” Padraig Byrne, the organization's tech wizard and head of their money laundering division, muttered as he joined Callum.

Callum's lips twitched in a faint smile. He'd noticed.

Walsh was seated one table away, his sharp eyes scanning the room with the restless energy of a man who'd spent too many years in law enforcement. Every few seconds, his gaze darted toward the Fitzwilliam table, then swept over the rest of the diners, lingering on the entrances and exits.

Callum tapped his fingers against the edge of his glass of Guinness, his eyes narrowing. “He's a liability.”

“Not an immediate one,” Padraig said, leaning back against the leather booth. “He’s former Scotland Yard. Sharp, but he knows better than to poke his nose into the wrong business. At least for now.”

Callum’s gaze returned to Isolde. She shifted in her seat, her lips curving into a faint smile at something her father said, but the smile didn’t reach her eyes. It was practiced, polite. The memory of her fire—her sharp tongue, her flushed cheeks, the way her breath hitched when he got too close—flickered in his mind, and his smile deepened.

“She doesn’t want to be here,” Callum murmured.

Padraig followed his gaze, frowning slightly. “Her father’s making a point. Showing her off, maybe, or reasserting control. Family dynamics are messy at that level.”

Callum could feel his muscles stiffen as his attention snagged on the way James leaned toward Isolde, his voice lowering. Her expression shifted subtly—annoyance, perhaps, or defiance buried beneath a carefully neutral mask.

“James Fitzwilliam doesn’t reassert control without reason,” Callum said quietly, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. “And she doesn’t yield without a fight.”

Padraig arched a brow. “You’re watching too closely. If Fitzwilliam notices, he’ll start asking questions.”

“Let him,” Callum said, his voice cold. “He’s not the one I’m interested in.”

A server approached their booth, bowing slightly as she placed a plate of roasted lamb before Callum. The aroma intensified, rich and heady, but his appetite had already shifted.

From across the room, Isolde's gaze lifted, her eyes scanning the restaurant. The moment her gaze locked on Callum's, her body tensed visibly.

She didn't look away.

Good girl.

Callum held her gaze, raising his glass slightly in a silent toast. He saw the flicker of surprise in her expression, followed by something darker, more conflicted. She broke eye contact, looking down at her plate, but her composure had already cracked.

Padraig chuckled softly. "I think you just ruined her evening."

"Not yet," Callum said, his voice low and dangerous. "But I will."

Walsh's sharp gaze turned toward their booth, his brow furrowing as he caught Callum's lingering attention on Isolde. Callum met his stare without flinching, his expression unreadable. Walsh shifted slightly, his hand brushing against the edge of his jacket—a subtle movement that suggested he was armed.

Callum smiled, leaning back in his seat. Walsh's instincts were good, but they wouldn't be enough.

"You're going to provoke him," Padraig warned.

"He's irrelevant," Callum replied, his tone dismissive. "She's the one who matters."

Across the room, James Fitzwilliam rose, placing a hand on Isolde's shoulder as he spoke to her. She nodded, glancing toward Walsh before picking up her clutch. Callum watched her move, her steps graceful but deliberate as she followed her father toward the exit.

The moment she passed his booth, Callum reached out, his fingers brushing lightly against her arm.

She froze.

“Ms. Fitzwilliam,” he said softly, his voice carrying just enough gravitas to make her pause.

She turned slowly, her amber eyes flashing with a mix of anger and wariness. “Mr. Kavanagh,” she said evenly, though the stress in her voice was unmistakable.

“I trust you’re enjoying your evening,” he said, his gaze dropping briefly to her lips before returning to her eyes.

“Immensely,” she replied coolly.

Her father’s voice called her name from the entrance, but she didn’t move. Not yet. Callum leaned closer, his voice lowering so only she could hear.

“I’ll see you again soon,” he murmured. “And next time, we won’t be interrupted.”

Her breath hitched, and he saw the faintest flicker of uncertainty in her expression before she turned on her heel and walked away.

Padraig sighed, swirling the wine in his glass. “You’re playing with fire.”

Callum’s smile widened as he watched her disappear through the door. “Good thing I like the heat.”

The low hum of conversation buzzed around him, underscored by the clink of silverware against fine china. The Celestial Stag was at its peak dinner hour, every

table occupied by Dublin's elite. The scent of good food mingled with the faint tang of wine and filled the air. Yet the Guinness in Callum's hand tasted bitter as he listened to Padraig deliver the news.

Padraig leaned forward in the booth, his wiry frame tense, his pale blue eyes darting around the room before settling on Callum. "It's Lynch. His crew's been sniffing around, asking questions about the Fitzwilliam family."

Callum's dark gaze flicked toward Padraig, the easy demeanor he'd worn moments ago vanishing. "What kind of questions?"

Padraig glanced down at his own pint, shifting uncomfortably. "They're asking about connections. Trying to figure out if there's overlap between us and them. Specifically, about her."

Her.

The word hung in the air like a knife poised to drop as Callum processed the implications.

"Isolde," he said quietly, the name slipping from his lips like a threat.

Padraig nodded. "Word is, Lynch thinks she's useful. Maybe leverage. Or bait."

Callum set his glass down with deliberate precision, his fingers curling into a fist against the polished wood of the table. The thought of Eoin Lynch's crew anywhere near Isolde sent a dark, simmering rage through him. She was already too close to the fire, thanks to her unfortunate timing at the gala. Now this?

The familiar weight of his shoulder holster pressed against him, a cold reminder of the world he operated in. He could feel the reassuring presence of his Glock beneath

his jacket, but even that didn't ease the apprehension coiling in his gut.

"Bait," Callum repeated, his voice low and dangerous. "If Lynch thinks he can use her against me, he's more of a fool than I thought."

Padraig leaned back slightly, sensing the shift in Callum's mood. "What do you want to do about it?"

For a long moment, Callum said nothing. His eyes drifted across the room, landing on the empty table where Isolde and her father had dined earlier. He could still see her in his mind's eye, the way her lips had pressed together in that stubborn line he'd come to expect when she was trying to conceal her emotions. The way her eyes had flared with something that wasn't entirely fear when he'd brushed her arm as she passed.

She didn't belong in his world. But now, thanks to Lynch, she wasn't just a liability—she was a target.

"Double the surveillance on her," Callum said finally, his voice sharp as glass. "I want eyes on her at all times. No one gets near her without me knowing."

Padraig frowned. "You sure about that? Bringing more attention to her could?—"

"I don't need your opinion, Padraig," Callum interrupted, his tone icy. "I need results."

Padraig nodded quickly, his shoulders stiffening. "Understood."

Callum picked up his glass, brought it to his lips, but then set it down without taking so much as another sip. He turned it loose, unfinished, and leaned back in his seat, his eyes fixed on Padraig.

“And if Lynch or any of his crew get within striking distance of her,” Callum continued, his voice dropping into a growl, “they don’t walk away. Understood?”

Padraig’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Understood.”

As Padraig slid out of the booth, Callum’s gaze returned to the restaurant’s entrance. He thought of Isolde’s expression when she’d left, the stiffness in her shoulders as her father ushered her toward the door. The way her breath had hitched when he’d whispered that they weren’t done.

He told himself his growing obsession with her was purely practical. She was a loose end—a witness to a crime she should never have seen—and now a potential pawn in Eoin Lynch’s games. Protecting her was about protecting Con’s interests, nothing more.

But even as he tried to convince himself, the image of her fiery defiance lingered in his mind. He could still feel the heat of her skin beneath his fingers, the electric jolt of her presence.

Callum stood, adjusting his suit jacket as he cast one last glance around the restaurant before crossing the dining room and stepping into the night, the cool Dublin air doing little to calm the storm brewing inside him.

If Lynch thought he could use Isolde, in any way, he was in for a rude awakening.

And if she thought she could stay out of Callum’s reach, she was about to learn just how tightly he intended to keep her under his control.

Some obsessions, after all, weren’t meant to be tamed.

### ISOLDE

The soft glow of recessed lights bathed Siobhan Harrington's art gallery in a lovely, warm light, casting long shadows across the eclectic collection of paintings and sculptures. The scent of old books and leather lingered in the air, mingling with the faint tang of red wine. She and Siobhan had been friends since boarding school. Isolde sat on the edge of a plush armchair in Siobhan's private office, her fingers tracing the cool rim of her wine glass as she tried to gather her thoughts.

"This isn't like you," Siobhan said, her voice smooth and measured as she reclined on the antique settee across from Isolde. Her auburn hair caught the light, framing her sharp, curious eyes. "You're distracted. And not by work."

Isolde forced a smile, lifting the glass to her lips and taking a small sip. The wine was bold, earthy, but it did little to steady the unease twisting in her stomach.

"It's nothing," she said, keeping her tone light. "Just... a long week."

Siobhan raised an arched brow, setting her own glass down on the low table between them. "A long week doesn't send you rushing here after hours with that look on your face. What's going on, Isolde?"

Isolde hesitated, her thumb brushing over the rim of her glass. The memory of the bouquet she'd received that morning surfaced, unbidden. Sterling silver roses, their petals cool to the touch, had arrived at her office with a note tucked neatly inside:

Tell your shadow, Ted Walsh, to be on the lookout for Eoin Lynch. He's taken an interest in your foundation. And in you.

—C

The message had sent her heart into a frenzy, not just because of the warning but because of who it had come from. Callum. The man who seemed to delight in unraveling her carefully constructed life, one deliberate move at a time.

“You can trust me, you know,” Siobhan said, leaning forward, her voice softer now. “Whoever he is, whatever this is, I won't judge. Just tell me.”

Isolde's head snapped up, her amber eyes meeting Siobhan's. “What makes you think this is about a man?”

Siobhan's lips curved into a knowing smile. “Because you only get that look when someone's under your skin. And judging by the frenetic energy radiating off you, he's either infuriating, irresistible, or both.”

Heat crept up Isolde's neck, and she set her glass down with a little more force than necessary. “It's complicated.”

“I'm sure it is,” Siobhan replied, her tone dry but not unkind. “But you're not here for platitudes. Talk to me, Isolde. What's he done?”

Isolde exhaled, her fingers lacing together in her lap. “He's... persistent. Intrusive. He's made it clear he's not going anywhere, and he's tangled up in things I can't even begin to unravel.”

“Dangerous things?” Siobhan pressed, her expression sharpening.

“I don’t know,” Isolde lied, hating how easily the words slipped out. She couldn’t tell Siobhan the truth—not about Callum’s connection to the O’Neill organization, not about the warning in his note, not about the way he made her feel, and certainly not about the way they’d met.

Siobhan studied her for a long moment; there was a certain gravitas in her gaze. “You’re leaving something out.” Isolde’s lips parted, a protest forming, but Siobhan held up a hand. “Don’t deny it. I’ve known you too long. Whoever this man is, he’s more than just an inconvenience. He’s gotten under your skin, and you don’t know how to handle it.”

Isolde’s throat tightened, her hands gripping the armrests of her chair. “I’m handling it,” she said, her voice sharper than she intended.

Siobhan’s brow furrowed, but she didn’t push further. Instead, she reached for her wine glass, taking a slow sip before setting it down again. “You know I’m here if you need anything. Advice, a distraction, a place to hide a body—whatever you need.”

A startled laugh escaped Isolde, breaking through the anxiety that had settled over her. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Siobhan smiled, but her gaze remained watchful. “Just be careful. Men like that are—persistent, intrusive—they don’t usually stop until they get what they want.”

Isolde’s chest tightened at the truth in those words. Callum didn’t strike her as a man who ever stopped.

Her phone buzzed in her clutch, the sound jarring in the quiet office. She fished it out, glancing at the screen.

A text from an unknown number.

Did you tell Walsh yet? Or do I need to handle Lynch myself? –C

Her heart thudded painfully in her chest. The audacity of him, the nerve to intrude on her life so casually, so completely, set her nerves on edge. But beneath the anger was something she hated to admit—a flicker of anticipation, of thrill.

“Is everything all right?” Siobhan asked, her voice cutting through the haze.

Isolde forced a smile, slipping the phone back into her clutch. “Yes. Just a work thing.”

Siobhan didn’t look convinced, but she let it go. “If you say so.”

As they finished their wine and conversation drifted to lighter topics, Isolde couldn’t shake the importance of the message—the warning. Callum wasn’t just in her life—he was in her head. And no matter how much she tried to push him out, he always seemed to find a way back in.

When she left the gallery later that night, the cool Dublin air did little to calm her racing thoughts. Her driver pulled up to the curb, but before she climbed into the car, she glanced around the quiet street.

A shadow moved in the distance, disappearing around a corner before she could make out who—or what—it was.

Her pulse quickened.

She told herself it was nothing, just her imagination. But as the car pulled away, she couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching.

And if it wasn’t Callum, she couldn’t be sure who it was, but Lynch or someone

working for him would certainly be in the running. And why did the idea of Callum watching her both thrill and comfort her? Why did she take—knowing who and what he was—comfort in believing he was watching over her? And why, if it wasn't Callum, did she feel the icy fingers of dread running up and down her spine?

The low hum of city traffic surrounded her as Isolde stepped out of the car, the cool Dublin air wrapping around her. She adjusted her coat and glanced up at the Fitzwilliam Foundation's headquarters, its tall glass facade gleaming faintly under the streetlights. Ted Walsh moved beside her, a quiet but resolute presence, his eyes scanning the area with the practiced vigilance of a former cop.

"You didn't have to come," she said, trying to keep the irritation from her voice.

"Yes, I did," Walsh replied curtly, his gaze not wavering. "Especially after the warning you got today. Callum Kavanagh doesn't throw out names like Eoin Lynch for fun. If he says there's a threat, I'm staying until you're safely out of here."

Isolde sighed, the tightness in her shoulders creeping higher. "I'm perfectly capable of handling myself. You don't have to babysit me."

Walsh didn't even look at her. "Humor me."

Her jaw clenched, but she didn't argue further. Deep down, she knew Walsh was right. Callum's warning about Lynch's interest in her wasn't something to dismiss lightly, and she wasn't naïve enough to think she was untouchable. Besides she was witness to a murder... that couldn't be a good thing. Why, oh why, had she gone to look for that guest list?

They stepped inside the building, the familiar warmth of the lobby easing some of her unease. The security guard nodded at them as they passed, and the elevator doors slid open with a soft chime.

“Just another hour or two,” Isolde said as the elevator began its ascent. “Then I’m calling it a night.”

“Take all the time you need,” Walsh replied. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t press further. The elevator doors opened to the foundation’s main offices, the space eerily quiet after hours. The faint hum of the building’s climate control system was the only sound as they walked down the corridor to her office.

Isolde slipped out of her coat and draped it over a chair before settling behind her desk. Walsh positioned himself near the door, his arms crossed, his sharp gaze scanning the room.

“I’m not used to being shadowed like this,” she muttered, flipping through the stack of documents she’d left earlier in the day.

“Get used to it,” Walsh replied, his tone leaving no room for argument.

“I suppose if I don’t cooperate, you’ll report it to my father.”

“I’m not sure how effective your da would be up against Lynch. I’d be more inclined to report it to Kavanaugh.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she said, her eyes narrowing.

“Wouldn’t I?” he asked, holding her gaze. “I know Kavanaugh and the O’Neill Syndicate by reputation. If Lynch is after you, Kavanaugh can keep you safe. The second I don’t believe I can say the same, I’ll deliver you to him personally.”

“You’d just hand me over to a gangster?”

“No, but if I thought he could keep you safe when I couldn’t, I would. I’m not saying the O’Neill Syndicate are members of Scouting Ireland, but they do have a certain code of honor that sets them above the rest...”

“Like what?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“They don’t deal in drugs, and anyone who wants to deal in their territory needs to be ready to deal with the cops and the O’Neills. They take no pleasure in killing. They don’t involve innocents or amateurs if they can avoid it. They won’t tolerate arms smuggling if they believe the arms are destined to be used against the aforementioned innocents or amateurs.” Walsh ended his litany with a shrug. “I’m not saying they aren’t gangsters, but they do have a code they live by. Trust me when I say, Eoin Lynch is no amateur and certainly no innocent. But do you mind my asking why Kavanaugh thinks Lynch might be a threat to you?”

She didn’t respond, instead turned back to focus on the task at hand. The monotony of numbers and contracts helped to steady her nerves, the routine grounding her in the face of so many unknowns.

The sharp crash of something breaking shattered the silence.

Isolde’s head snapped up, her heart leaping into her throat. The sound had come from the storage room down the hall.

Walsh was already moving, his hand on the holstered gun at his side. “Stay here,” he ordered, his voice low but firm.

“Walsh—” she started, but he silenced her with a sharp look before disappearing into the hallway, his soft-soled footsteps almost silent on the floor.

The seconds stretched unbearably as Isolde sat frozen at her desk, her ears straining

for any sound. Her mind raced with Callum's warning about Lynch's men, the memory of his note now seeming far more ominous than before.

A muffled curse broke the suspense, followed by a familiar voice.

"For God's sake, Walsh, put the gun down! It's me!"

Isolde exhaled shakily as the stiffness rolled from her shoulders. She stood and hurried into the hallway, where she found Walsh standing in the storage room doorway, his gun lowered but his expression still sharp.

Inside, Malcolm Conway—her foundation's financial advisor—was sprawled on the floor, surrounded by scattered papers and an overturned crate. He looked up sheepishly, adjusting his glasses. "Sorry about that. I tripped over the damn crate."

Walsh glared at him, his grip still firm on his weapon. "You scared the hell out of us."

Malcolm pushed himself to his feet, brushing off his trousers. "Didn't realize I needed clearance to drop off financial reports."

"What are you doing here this late?" Isolde asked, stepping into the room. "And what were you doing in the closet?"

Malcolm held up a thick folder, his face flushed. "I was going over the accounts and found something that didn't sit right. Thought you'd want to see it sooner rather than later. I stepped in here to see if last year's files had been moved down to archives."

Isolde frowned, taking the folder from him. She opened it, scanning the pages inside. Her stomach sank as she saw the numbers.

“Malcolm, what is this?” she asked, her voice tight.

“Discrepancies,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Funds moving into accounts they shouldn’t be. It started shortly before we received that large donation from O’Neill’s organization and has picked up in the short time since.”

Her breath caught, her fingers tightening on the folder. “Are you saying they’re connected?”

“I don’t know yet,” Malcolm said quickly, glancing at Walsh. “But the timing is suspicious.”

Isolde stared at the numbers, her pulse pounding in her ears. The irregularities weren’t minor—they were significant, enough to raise questions about where the money was going and why.

“Does anyone else know about this?” she asked, her voice low.

“Not yet,” Malcolm replied. “I was coming straight to you.”

“Good,” Walsh said firmly, stepping closer. “Keep it that way. No one else sees these until we figure out what we’re dealing with.”

Isolde nodded, her mind racing. The donation had been a lifeline for the foundation, but now it felt like a noose tightening around her neck. Callum’s warning about Lynch suddenly took on new significance. Had the donation been bait? A way to draw her—and the foundation—into something far darker than she’d realized?

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she pulled it out with trembling hands. A new message lit up the screen.

I told you to be careful. You're not playing their game, Isolde. You're playing mine.  
—C

The air seemed to leave the room, her vision narrowing as she stared at the message.

“Is everything all right?” Walsh asked, his voice cutting through the fog of her thoughts.

Isolde slipped the phone back into her pocket, her expression carefully neutral. “Yes,” she lied, turning back to the folder in her hands. “Everything’s fine.”

But it wasn’t fine.

Not by a long shot.

### CALLUM

Rain lashed against the windows of Callum's office, streaking the glass in uneven rivulets that distorted the view of the Dublin skyline. The storm outside mirrored the one brewing inside him, each drop a metronome to his simmering rage. He sat behind his massive oak desk, his dark gaze fixed on the document in his hand.

Padraig Byrne stood a few feet away, his usual calm demeanor marred by unease as he explained the details of the report.

"Councilman Bradford's been sniffing around for months," Padraig said, his voice steady despite the charged atmosphere filling the room. "But now, it's more than just idle curiosity. He's flagged several of the Fitzwilliam Foundation's transactions for review."

Callum's growled low, the paper crinkling in his grip. "How close is he to making it a problem?"

Padraig hesitated, and that was answer enough.

"Too close," Callum muttered, his voice low and dangerous. He tossed the report onto the desk, leaning back in his chair as he ran a hand through his dark hair. The bitter taste of his espresso lingered on his tongue, growing colder by the second, much like his mood.

“It’s not Isolde,” Padraig added quickly, sensing where Callum’s thoughts were heading. “She hasn’t said a word to anyone about the irregularities. If she had, we’d already know about it. This is all Bradford’s doing. He’s got a vendetta against the O’Neill organization, and he’s using the foundation as a way to come at us sideways.”

Callum’s eyes narrowed. “Why the sudden escalation?”

Padraig shrugged, his expression grim. “Could be personal, could be political. Either way, he’s got the resources to make things difficult. If he starts digging too deep?—”

“He won’t,” Callum interrupted, his tone icy. “I won’t let him.”

The room fell into a heavy silence, broken only by the rhythmic patter of rain against the glass. Callum leaned forward, resting his forearms on the desk as he stared down at the crumpled report.

The Fitzwilliam Foundation had been a calculated risk from the start, a legitimate front that allowed the O’Neill organization to funnel money discreetly while simultaneously bolstering its public image. But now that calculated risk was turning into a liability, thanks to Bradford’s meddling.

And Isolde.

Her name slipped into his thoughts unbidden, a thorn lodged deep in his side. She’d been a complication from the moment she’d stumbled into his world, her fire and defiance threatening to unravel the careful control he prided himself on.

“You’re thinking about her,” Padraig said, his tone somewhere between exasperation and amusement.

Callum shot him a sharp look. “What makes you think that?”

Padraig grinned, folding his arms across his chest. “Because you’ve got that look. The one you get when you’re trying to decide whether to kiss someone or kill them.”

Callum’s lips twitched into a faint, humorless smile. “Maybe both.”

Padraig sighed, running a hand over his face. “You’re playing a dangerous game, boss. If Bradford digs deep enough to find the foundation’s connection to us, she’s going to get caught in the crossfire. You know that.”

“I know,” Callum said quietly, his voice laced with steel. “And I won’t let that happen.”

“You sound awfully sure of yourself.”

“I have to be,” Callum replied, his eyes narrowing. “She’s already in this, whether she knows it or not. If Bradford comes for her, he’ll have to go through me first.”

Padraig raised an eyebrow, his skepticism clear. “And what if she finds out about the laundering? About what we’ve been using her foundation for?”

Callum leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed on the storm outside. “She won’t.”

Padraig’s silence spoke volumes, but Callum ignored it. He wasn’t about to explain himself—not to Padraig, not to anyone. Well, that wasn’t true. If the O’Neill asked, Callum wouldn’t lie to him, but using the Fitzwilliam Foundation to launder money had been Con’s idea in the first place. He liked that their money laundering had an altruistic outcome as well.

After a long moment, Padraig shifted, his tone turning pragmatic. “We need to figure

out how to neutralize Bradford before he can do any more damage. I can dig into his connections, see if there's leverage we can use."

"Do it," Callum said, his voice a low growl. "And make it quick. I won't let him jeopardize everything we've built—or put Isolde in more danger."

Padraig nodded, turning to leave, but paused at the door. "You're protecting her like she's one of ours. That's... unexpected."

Callum's gaze flicked to him, his expression unreadable. "She is one of ours, Padraig. She just doesn't know it yet."

Padraig shook his head, smiling ruefully. "Whatever you say, but do take a look at that report."

The door clicked shut, leaving Callum alone with the storm raging both inside and out. He reached for the espresso, but the bitterness on his tongue had nothing to do with the cooling liquid.

It had everything to do with the fact that Isolde Fitzwilliam was becoming more than just a liability.

She was becoming an obsession.

And obsessions, as Callum well knew, were dangerous things.

The rain continued to hammer against the windows of Callum's office, the storm matching the violent energy swirling inside him. He stood near his desk, his dark eyes scanning the latest report Padraig had left for him. The paper trembled slightly in his hands, a testament to the rage simmering beneath his calm exterior.

Her name was there, nestled in the dense paragraphs of intelligence like a venomous snake poised to strike: Deirdre Lynch.

The cooling espresso on his desk was forgotten as Callum's grip tightened on the report. The corners of the paper crinkled, but his gaze remained fixed on the damning connection between Deirdre and Bradford.

"Feeding him information," he murmured under his breath, his tone low and dangerous. He wondered if her husband knew.

His ex-lover's name tasted bitter on his tongue, dredging up memories he'd spent years burying. Deirdre Lynch—once a complication he'd foolishly indulged, now married to Eoin Lynch, his rival. And, if this report was accurate, a key player in Bradford's growing campaign against the O'Neill organization.

Callum tossed the report onto the desk, pacing to the window. The storm outside blurred the city lights, the water cascading down the glass like the chaos that threatened to spill over in his world.

He closed his eyes, and the past clawed its way back into his mind.

It had been a summer night, the kind Dublin rarely offered. Warm, with a soft breeze carrying the scents of the River Liffey and faint traces of jasmine from the garden. Callum had stood in the parlor of the O'Neill estate, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his slacks as Deirdre paced the room, her stilettos clicking against the polished floors.

"You don't mean this," she'd said, her voice sharp, trembling with barely restrained fury. "You can't mean this."

"I do," Callum had replied, his tone cold and unyielding. "It's over, Deirdre."

She'd stopped mid-step, turning to face him with a fire in her emerald eyes that had once captivated him. Now, that fire only fueled his resolve.

"You think you can just walk away?" she spat, her voice rising. "After everything I let you do to me?"

"It was all consensual, and I have a written contract to prove it," he said coldly.

"I don't give a damn about your written contract. Is that it? Because I said I didn't want to do that anymore? How can you do this to me, to us?"

"There is no us," he said evenly. "Not anymore."

Her laugh was bitter, cutting through the air like a blade. "Because I value myself too much? Because I want more than just stolen nights and half-truths?"

"Because you don't know how to stop," he snapped, his temper flaring. "You don't know when enough is enough, Deirdre. You push, and you manipulate, and you—" He broke off, exhaling sharply, reining himself in. "This has to end."

Her face twisted with anger, but there was something darker beneath it—something calculating. "You think you're untouchable, Callum Kavanagh. I'll tell them what you did to me..."

"And I have your written agreement that it was consensual and witnesses who will attest that you enjoyed yourself immensely and who heard you say so again and again."

"Bastard. No one walks away from me without paying the price. You'll regret this."

Her threat lingered in the room long after she stormed out, her perfume—a mix of

roses and something sharper—hanging in the air like a warning.

Callum opened his eyes, his fists clenched at his sides. He should have seen this coming. Deirdre had always been tenacious, always looking for a way to get even. Marrying Eoin Lynch had been her first move in the game she'd declared that night, and now she was leveraging her position to strike at him in the shadows.

The fact that she was working with Bradford—feeding him information about the Fitzwilliam Foundation and, by extension, the O'Neill organization—wasn't just a betrayal. It was a declaration of war. Callum wondered if Eoin knew she'd declared a war he couldn't win.

Callum turned back to his desk, his movements sharp and deliberate. He picked up the report again, scanning the details. Deirdre's involvement complicated everything. It wasn't just about Bradford's vendetta or Lynch's territorial games anymore. It was personal.

The sound of his office door opening broke his focus, and Padraig stepped inside, his expression guarded. "You did read it then."

"I read it," Callum said flatly, tossing the report back onto the desk. "How long has she been in contact with Bradford?"

Padraig hesitated. "A few months, at least. She's been careful, using intermediaries to pass information. But the timing aligns with when Bradford started scrutinizing the foundation."

Callum's mind raced. "And Lynch?"

"Hard to say how much he knows," Padraig admitted. "But he's not the type to let her act independently. If she's feeding information to Bradford, he's benefiting from it."

Callum exhaled sharply, his anger barely contained. “She must know about our arrangement with the foundation. She’s using that information as leverage. Using Isolde as a pawn.”

Padraig tilted his head slightly, studying Callum. “And that bothers you more than it should.”

Callum’s eyes snapped to Padraig’s, his glare enough to silence any further commentary. “It bothers me because it compromises the operation. Nothing more.”

“Of course,” Padraig said, though his tone suggested he didn’t believe it. “So, what’s the play?”

Callum leaned forward, resting his hands on the desk. “We neutralize Bradford. Quietly. Dig up everything we can on his weaknesses—finances, affairs, skeletons in his closet. Use it to shut him down before he can go public with anything.”

“And Deirdre?”

The name sent another wave of heat through Callum’s veins, but his voice remained steady. “She made her choice when she married Lynch and sided with Bradford. If she gets in my way, I’ll deal with her.”

Padraig nodded, though his expression remained cautious. “And Isolde? What happens if she starts digging into the foundation’s accounts and connects the dots?”

Callum’s gaze darkened, his voice dropping to a growl. “She won’t.”

“And if she does?”

Callum’s lips curved into a cold smile. “Then I’ll remind her whose game she’s

playing, bring her into the fold, and neutralize her.”

“In other words, you’ll abduct her, spirit her off to Galway, turn her, and take her to mate.”

Callum chuckled. “You make that sound like a bad thing.”

“I think she’s becoming a bit of an obsession for you.”

“Again, you make it sound like a bad thing.”

Padraig shook his head and chuckled before taking his leave.

The storm outside intensified, the wind howling against the windows as if echoing the storm brewing inside him. Callum straightened, his mind already mapping out the steps he’d need to take.

Deirdre might have thought she could outmaneuver him, but she’d forgotten one crucial thing.

No one played the game better than he did, especially with the O’Neill’s backing. And no one crossed him without consequences.

Later that evening, the rain continued to batter the windows with relentless fury, each drop a staccato drumbeat against the glass that mirrored the chaos in Callum’s mind. He stood in his office, leaning heavily on the edges of the massive oak desk, his fingers curling around its worn edges. The wood creaked under the pressure, as if it, too, could sense the storm brewing inside him.

The report Padraig had delivered lay open before him, its contents a brutal reality check. Deirdre Lynch’s betrayal wasn’t surprising, but it complicated everything. Her

alliance with Councilman Bradford, his boss' dangerous rival and Deidre's husband, Eoin Lynch, and her willingness to use the Fitzwilliam Foundation as leverage—it was a powder keg waiting to explode.

And Isolde was right in the center of it.

His jaw muscles clenched as he ground his teeth. Every instinct told him to focus solely on protecting the O'Neill organization. Con's empire was his life's work, a legacy he'd fought to secure and expand, and it was his responsibility to safeguard it at all costs.

But then there was her.

Her fire. Her defiance. The way she looked at him with those amber eyes that held equal measures of challenge and vulnerability. Isolde Fitzwilliam had become more than a complication, more than a liability. She'd become a choice he didn't want to make.

Protecting Isolde meant putting her closer to the line of fire, tying her more firmly to him and his world. Yet if he left her vulnerable, if he didn't keep her under his control, Lynch or Bradford—or both—would use her as a pawn.

He wasn't about to let that happen.

The door creaked open, and Padraig stepped inside, his sharp eyes taking in Callum's tense posture. "You back again?" snarled Callum.

"Well, I do have other things to do than to watch you swoon over your obsession."

"She's not my obsession," he snapped.

“Oh sure, she isn’t,” laughed Padraig.

“Knock it off and tell me why you are here,” Callum replied flatly, not looking up.

Padraig approached cautiously, a man who recognized the magnitude of the approaching storm. “I’ve run a deeper trace on Bradford’s connections. He’s building his case on three angles: political posturing, public outcry over supposed charity fraud, and some whispers about wanting a private revenge for an O’Neill-connected death in his family. He’s not bluffing. If we don’t stop him soon, he’ll make it all public.”

Callum straightened, his dark eyes locking onto Padraig with predatory intensity. “We can’t let it go that far.”

“We won’t,” Padraig assured him. “But Deirdre’s involvement adds a wild card. She’s not just feeding Bradford information—she’s amplifying it. If she makes this personal, there’s no telling how far she’ll go.”

Callum’s lips curved into a cold, humorless smile. “She always did enjoy stirring the pot. She’ll do anything to settle old scores.”

Padraig tilted his head. “The real question is, what are you going to do about the Fitzwilliam girl? She’s the key to Bradford’s leverage. She might not know it yet, but she’s sitting on a ticking bomb.”

Callum crossed his arms, his broad shoulders casting a shadow over the desk as he considered Padraig’s words. “She’s under my protection.”

Padraig raised an eyebrow. “And the organization? You’re not seriously considering prioritizing her over Con’s empire, are you?”

Callum's glare was icy. "I'm considering the fact that protecting her might be the best way to protect the organization. If we lose her—and the foundation—we hand Bradford and Lynch exactly what they need to dismantle everything we've built here in Dublin."

Padraig hesitated, then nodded. "You're playing a dangerous game."

"One I don't intend to lose," Callum said simply, his voice a low growl.

The rain outside intensified, the rhythmic pounding against the windows like war drums. Callum moved to the window, his hands clasped behind his back as he stared out at the storm-lit city. He could see the faint glow of the Fitzwilliam Foundation's building in the distance, a beacon in the night that felt more fragile than ever.

He could feel the gravity of the decision pressing down on him. If he focused solely on the O'Neill organization, Isolde might become collateral damage. But if he poured too many resources into protecting her, he risked leaving Con's empire vulnerable.

Unless...

His mind sharpened, the pieces of the puzzle falling into place. Protecting Isolde and protecting the organization weren't mutually exclusive. In fact, if he played it right, securing her might be the most effective way to secure everything else.

He turned back to Padraig, his voice calm but firm. "Double the surveillance on Isolde. I want her watched at all times—at home, at the foundation, everywhere. Lynch won't get near her without me knowing."

Padraig nodded. "And Bradford?"

Callum's smile was dark, his eyes gleaming with purpose. "We'll deal with him."

Quietly. I want every bit of leverage we can find on him, and I want it fast.”

As Padraig turned to leave, Callum added, “One more thing.”

Padraig paused, glancing back.

“If Deirdre makes another move, I want to know about it immediately,” Callum said, his voice laced with steel. “She’s already crossed too many lines.”

Padraig hesitated, then nodded. “Understood.”

When the door clicked shut, Callum returned to his desk, his hands resting on its solid surface. The tightness in his chest hadn’t eased, but his resolve had solidified.

The coming storm would force his hand, but he wasn’t about to let it destroy everything he’d worked for—or take Isolde from him.

His phone buzzed, the sound cutting through the quiet. He picked it up and saw the message:

I know what you’re doing. You can’t protect her forever, Callum. Eoin doesn’t play by your rules. –D

Callum’s grip tightened on the phone, his fury igniting once more.

“I don’t play by yours or theirs, either,” he muttered to himself, his voice a promise as much as a threat.

The storm outside raged on, but Callum’s mind was already racing ahead. The battle lines were drawn, and he knew one thing for certain.

He would protect Isolde Fitzwilliam. Not just because she was the key to the organization. Not just because she was a pawn in Lynch's game.

But because she was his. His mate. His fated mate.

### ISOLDE

The relentless plodding of Walsh's shoes against the polished floors of the Fitzwilliam Foundation had become a sound Isolde could no longer bear. Every time she turned, there he was—hovering, shadowing her, his presence an unyielding reminder of the danger that had quietly infiltrated her life. Even when he didn't speak, his watchful gaze said enough: You're not safe.

She hated it.

More than that, she hated the way Callum Kavanagh's name seemed to linger in her mind like a whisper in the dark. His note about Eoin Lynch had been a warning, yes, but it had also felt like a claim. The thought ignited something volatile within her—a mix of rebellion and something far more dangerous.

When Walsh stepped out to take a call, she seized her chance. Leaving her phone deliberately on her desk, Isolde slipped out of her office, weaving through the emptying halls of the Foundation's headquarters. By the time Walsh returned, she would be gone.

The scent of coffee and fresh-baked bread wafted through the air as Isolde stepped into the warm confines of the Fitzwilliam Foundation's homeless shelter. The building was alive with quiet activity: volunteers moving between tables, clients eating modest dinners, and staff quietly managing the organized chaos. Isolde had always found solace in this place, where the work felt immediate and raw, untainted

by the politics and pretenses of her world.

She rolled up her sleeves, tying on an apron as she greeted the familiar faces among the shelter's staff. "Put me to work, Moira," she said with a small smile, addressing the shelter's coordinator, an older woman with a kind face and sharp eyes.

"Always good to see you here, love," Moira replied. "You can help serve tonight. Full house as usual."

For hours, Isolde moved between the tables, serving bowls of stew and warm bread, her polite words and soft smiles met with gratitude that tugged at her heart. Many of the faces she saw were the same ones she'd seen on previous visits, etched with the hard lines of life's relentless trials. She wondered, not for the first time, how different her life might have been if she hadn't been born a Fitzwilliam. If she hadn't grown up in a world of privilege, would she have ended up here too, fighting for her next meal?

By the time the shelter began to wind down for the evening, exhaustion had settled in her bones. She helped the staff stack chairs and wipe down tables, the mundane tasks grounding her in a way that the polished sterility of the Foundation's offices never could.

"Thanks, love," Moira said as Isolde hefted the last trash bag from the kitchen. "That's the last of it. I'd walk you out, but?—"

"Don't worry about me," Isolde interrupted with a reassuring smile. "I've got it."

She pushed through the heavy metal door at the back of the shelter, stepping into the dimly lit alley. The smell of rain-dampened concrete mingled with the stale scent of garbage. It was a quiet night, the city's usual clamor muted by the lateness of the hour.

She tossed the bag into the dumpster with a satisfying thud, brushing her hands together to rid them of invisible dirt. For an instant, she stood there, letting the cool air wash over her, a reprieve from the suffocating watchfulness she'd endured all week.

Then she heard it—a faint shuffle, just out of sight.

Her heart leapt into her throat as she turned sharply, her eyes scanning the shadows. “Hello?” she called, her voice steady despite the sudden spike of adrenaline.

Nothing.

She took a cautious step back toward the door, her fingers tightening around the handle of the dumpster for support. The alley was narrow, flanked by tall brick walls that seemed to close in around her. The faint hum of a streetlight buzzed above, casting long shadows that flickered ominously.

Another sound—a scrape, closer this time.

“Who’s there?” she demanded, her voice sharper now.

A figure emerged from the shadows, and her breath caught in her throat. For one terrifying moment, she thought it might be Lynch or one of his men. But as the figure stepped into the light, the unmistakable shape of Callum filled her vision.

“Christ, Callum,” she breathed, her voice trembling with a mix of relief and anger. “What are you doing here?”

He didn’t answer immediately, his dark eyes scanning her from head to toe, his expression unreadable. He looked utterly out of place in the alley, his tailored coat and sharp features an eerie contrast to the grit and grime around him. But his presence

was no less commanding for it—if anything, it was more so.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said finally, his voice low and edged with steel. “It’s not safe.”

“I’m perfectly capable of taking out the trash,” she snapped, folding her arms across her chest. “I don’t need you—or Walsh—hovering over me like some kind of personal bodyguard.”

Callum stepped closer, the heat of his presence sending an unwelcome shiver down her spine. “You left your phone at the office,” he said, his tone accusatory. “Do you have any idea how reckless that was?”

She glared at him, refusing to back down. “Reckless? I’m not the one dragging innocent people into criminal turf wars.”

His lips curved into a slow, dangerous smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “I’m not the one who wandered into a world she doesn’t understand. But here you are, Isolde.”

Her breath hitched as he closed the distance between them, his gaze dark and intense. “You can’t keep doing this,” she said, her voice trembling despite her defiance. “Showing up, warning me, acting like you have any right to control my life.”

“Control?” he echoed, his tone mocking. “If I wanted control, love, you wouldn’t be here arguing with me. You’d be safe in my bed, under my watch, where Lynch’s men couldn’t touch you.”

She froze at his words, her pulse pounding in her ears. His words sank into her, the danger she’d been trying to ignore crashing down like a tidal wave. She swallowed hard, trying to steady her breathing. “And you?” she asked, her voice quiet but firm. “Why are you here, Callum? Is it just about Lynch, or is this about you?”

For a split second, something flickered in his eyes—something raw and unguarded. But it was gone as quickly as it appeared, replaced by the cold, calculated man she'd come to expect.

“It doesn't matter why I'm here,” he said, his voice low and dangerous. “What matters is that you're not safe. Not from Lynch, not from Bradford, and certainly not from me.”

Her heart thundered in her chest as his words hung between them, heavy and undeniable. He reached out, his fingers brushing against her arm. The contact sent a jolt of arousal surging through her veins—hot and sweet—and she hated the way her body responded to him, her breath hitching, her resolve faltering.

“Go away, Callum. Leave me alone,” she snarled. She was fed up with everyone and their brother telling her what to do. She was perfectly capable of taking care of herself.

“I told you before,” he murmured, his voice a dark promise. “This isn't over, Isolde. Not by a long shot.”

As he stepped back into the shadows, disappearing as quickly as he'd appeared, Isolde stood frozen in the alley, her pulse racing, her mind a whirlwind of fear and frustration.

She didn't know what scared her more: the danger that surrounded her—or the way Callum Kavanagh made her feel.

The night was heavy with the scent of rain-soaked asphalt and the faint, off-putting tang of fear. Isolde's breath came in short, uneven bursts as she rounded a corner, the muted glow of a flickering streetlamp doing little to illuminate the shadowed alleyways. Her earlier determination to steal a moment of solitude now seemed

reckless, her own steps echoing like a countdown to disaster.

She froze mid-step as the sound of voices reached her ears. Low and gruff, she could hear the underlying intent in them, the kind of intent that made her skin prickle with unease. She didn't understand all the words, but she heard enough: her name, spoken with an edge that sent a chill racing down her spine.

"Keep moving," another voice growled, closer now. "She couldn't have gotten far."

Her stomach twisted, the reality of Callum's warnings crashing down on her with brutal clarity. This wasn't paranoia. It was real. And she was in over her head.

Before she could retreat, a hand clamped around her wrist, pulling her with a force that stole the air from her lungs. She was yanked into the shadows of a narrow alcove, the rough brick wall pressing cold and unforgiving against her back. Panic surged, but before she could scream, another hand—strong, unyielding—covered her mouth.

"Quiet," Callum's voice rasped in her ear, low and dangerous. His body pressed against hers, shielding her completely from view as the sounds of heavy boots drew closer. The heat from his body was a stark contrast to the cold dread creeping through her veins. She felt trapped, consumed by the sheer dominance of his presence, but she didn't fight. Not with danger so close. Instead, she clung to him as if he was a lifeline in the building maelstrom that threatened to consume her.

The thundering of her heart drowned out the distant hum of the city, her pulse hammering against her ribs as if trying to break free. Callum's hands were firm, one still covering her mouth, the other braced against the wall beside her head, caging her in. Yet, for all their strength, there was a gentleness to his touch that confused her. A care that belied the violence she knew him capable of.

The voices grew louder.

“She was supposed to be here,” one man muttered, his tone laced with frustration. “I saw her go in the alley.”

“Then where the hell is she?” another snapped. “The boss isn’t going to like this.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe you want to tell him we lost her,” a third voice shot back, dripping with sarcasm. “Be my guest.”

The first man grumbled something unintelligible before another voice chimed in, quieter but sharper. “What does he even want with her? She doesn’t seem like the usual?—”

A dull thud interrupted the question, followed by a pained grunt. “It’s not our job to ask questions,” the third man snarled. “We follow orders. Got it?”

Isolde’s breath hitched as the full impact of their words sank in. The boss. Whoever they worked for, it wasn’t Callum. This was someone else—someone who had sent these men after her with a purpose she didn’t want to understand.

Callum’s hand pressed more firmly against her mouth, his body a solid wall of protection against hers as he listened intently. She could feel the antagonism coiled in him, the predator lurking just beneath the surface, ready to strike if the situation called for it.

The men’s voices began to fade as they moved farther down the alley, their heavy footsteps echoing in the still night. Isolde’s body trembled, adrenaline coursing through her veins as she struggled to catch her breath. Only when the silence stretched long and unbroken did Callum finally release her.

“What the hell—” she began, her voice a whisper, but he silenced her with a sharp look, his finger pressed against her lips.

His eyes burned into hers, dark and intense, and in that fleeting moment, the danger of the alley was eclipsed by the danger of him. The heat between them was intense, a volatile mix of fear, anger, and something far more primal.

“Not here,” he murmured, his voice low and commanding. “Not yet.”

He stepped back just enough to let her move, his hand wrapping firmly around her wrist as he guided her out of the alcove and down a side street. The grip wasn't painful, but it left no room for argument. Isolde knew better than to protest. She followed, her heart still racing, her mind a whirlwind of questions and emotions she couldn't begin to untangle.

When they finally emerged into the faint glow of a busier street, Callum stopped abruptly, turning to face her. His hands came up to cup her face, his touch startlingly gentle as he tilted her chin upward, forcing her to meet his gaze.

“You can't keep doing this,” he said, his tone a mix of anger and concern. “Running off, ignoring the warnings. You don't understand the game you're in, Isolde, and it's going to get you killed.”

Her eyes burned with defiance, though her voice trembled when she spoke. “I didn't ask to be in this game, Callum. I don't even know what this is.”

“This,” he said, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper, “is survival. And you're not going to make it if you don't start listening to me.”

She pulled back from his touch, her pulse quickening for reasons that had nothing to do with fear. “You don't get to dictate my life. You don't own me.”

His dark chuckle sent a shiver down her spine, his gaze locking onto hers with unrelenting intensity. “Not yet,” he said, the words both a promise and a warning.

“But you’re mine to protect, whether you like it or not.”

Her breath hitched, the strength of his claim awakening something deep and dark inside her. She wanted to argue, to tell him he had no right, but the words wouldn’t come. Because deep down, some part of her knew he wasn’t entirely wrong.

Before she could respond, his phone buzzed, the sound breaking the tension like a blade slicing through taut fabric. He glanced at the screen, his expression darkening as he read the message.

“We need to move,” he said, his voice all business now. “It’s not safe here.”

His words sent a shiver through her, but it wasn’t just fear. It was the way he said it, like a vow carved in stone, unyielding and absolute. The world she thought she knew had shifted irrevocably, and she wasn’t sure if she was terrified or relieved.

“Callum—” she began, but he cut her off with a low growl that sent heat pooling in her belly.

“You don’t get to argue with me about this, Isolde,” he said, his voice a razor’s edge. “Someone tried to hurt you tonight. They’ll try again. Until we get them shut down, you don’t take a step without me.”

She wanted to fight him, to push him away and reclaim the autonomy she felt slipping through her fingers. But the intensity in his voice and eyes—were a lifeline she hadn’t known she needed. And God help her, she felt safer here, pressed against this wall with Callum shielding her, than she had in weeks.

As they disappeared into the shadows once more, Isolde felt as if her life was no longer her own. Callum had dragged her into his world—a world of danger and intrigue where nothing was as it seemed. And as much as she hated to admit it, part of

her didn't want to leave.

"This is insane," she whispered, her voice trembling.

"This is survival," he countered, his hand coming up to brush a stray strand of hair from her face. The gentleness of the gesture was at odds with the lethal power she could feel radiating off him. "And you're lucky I found you before they did."

Her heart raced, a wild drumbeat that echoed in the hollow space between them. "You can't just... take over my life," she said, though the protest sounded weak even to her own ears.

His lips curved into a dangerous smile, one that didn't reach his eyes. "I can. And I will."

The raw certainty in his voice made her knees weak, and she hated herself for the way her body responded to him. She should be afraid, furious even. But instead, all she could think about was how the heat of his body pressed against hers chased away the cold that had seeped into her bones.

The sound of distant footsteps broke the moment, and Callum tensed, his head snapping toward the source. His hand came to rest on her hip, steadying her as he shifted slightly to block her from view. She didn't dare move, her breath caught in her throat as the voices from earlier faded into the night.

When he turned back to her, his expression was darker, more dangerous than before. "This isn't over. Whoever sent them won't stop until they get what they want. And right now, that's you."

Her stomach twisted at his words, fear clawing at her chest. "Why me?" she whispered. "I'm just... no one. I don't understand."

His hand tightened on her hip, the pressure grounding her. “You’re not no one, Isolde. You’re in this now, whether you realize it or not. But as long as I’m here, they won’t touch you.”

The promise in his voice was as terrifying as it was comforting. She wanted to push him away, to fight the hold he had on her, but the truth was undeniable. She needed him. And that realization scared her more than anything else.

“I don’t trust you,” she said, her voice barely audible.

“You don’t have to,” he replied, his dark eyes locking onto hers. “You just have to stay alive.”

The words hung heavy in the air until Callum finally stepped back. The absence of his warmth was startling, leaving her feeling exposed and vulnerable.

“Come on,” he said, his tone softer now, though no less commanding. “We’re leaving.”

She hesitated, her mind a whirlwind of emotions she couldn’t untangle. But as she looked up at him, at the storm in his eyes and the strength in his posture, she knew there was no choice.

“Where are we going?” she asked, her voice steady.

Callum’s lips curved into that dangerous smile again, a glint of something unreadable flashing in his eyes. “Somewhere they can’t find you.”

And as he took her hand, leading her out of the shadows and into the night, Isolde couldn’t shake the feeling that her world had just been turned upside down. She wasn’t sure if she was running from danger—or deeper into it.

### CALLUM

There was a feeling of unease in the alley as Callum hustled Isolde toward the SUV parked just beyond the shadows. Her steps faltered in her attempts to keep pace with him, but his grip on her wrist was firm—unyielding. She wasn't escaping him tonight. Not after the stunt she'd pulled.

"Slow down," she hissed, her voice trembling, though whether from fear or anger, he wasn't sure. "Callum, I can't?—"

"You'll manage," he cut her off, his tone rougher than he'd intended. He didn't slow down. Not when he could still feel those men's presence lingering like a specter in the night. Not when her recklessness had nearly gotten her killed.

She was damn lucky he'd gotten to her first.

The SUV's headlights flared to life as Padraig, ever-reliable, swung open the passenger door. Callum didn't hesitate, practically shoving Isolde into the seat before slamming the door behind her.

"You stay behind, Padraig. Keep to the shadows and make sure no one is following us," he said quietly.

"Right-o, boss."

Callum rounded the front of the vehicle and slid into the driver's seat, the vehicle's locks clicking shut with a finality that hung in the air.

"Put on your seatbelt," he ordered, his voice clipped as he adjusted the rearview mirror to check for tails.

Isolde glared at him, her arms crossed like a stubborn child. "You don't get to bark orders at me like I'm some—some captive."

"Buckle up, Isolde," he growled in a low, menacing voice.

Her eyes flared with defiance, but with a frustrated huff, she yanked the belt across her chest and clicked it into place. Callum wasted no time pulling away from the curb, the low hum of the engine cutting through the silence. The city blurred past in streaks of light and shadow, but his mind stayed sharp, tuned to the danger that still clawed at the edges of the night.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded after a few minutes of charged silence.

"Somewhere safe," he replied without looking at her, his hands gripping the wheel with a controlled strength that betrayed his fury.

"Take me home," she said, her voice steadier now. "You've made your point. I'll be more careful."

Callum's knuckles whitened. "You're not going home."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not."

“Callum!”

Her raised voice grated on his already frayed nerves. He turned sharply onto a quiet side street, tires skidding slightly, before pulling into the underground garage of his private penthouse. The security gates closed behind them with an audible clunk .

Isolde’s glare deepened as she undid her seatbelt and reached for the door handle. “You can’t just?—”

Callum was out of his seat and at her side before she could finish. He opened the door, and before she could protest, he grabbed her waist and tossed her over his shoulder in one smooth motion.

“Callum!” she shrieked, fists pounding against his back. “Put me down!”

He ignored her, carrying her effortlessly across the concrete floor, his strides purposeful. Her protests were muffled against his broad back, but he could hear every word: furious, breathless curses that would’ve amused him under other circumstances.

“You can argue all you want, mo chroí, ” he said, his voice low and laced with dark amusement. “But I’ve had enough of your nonsense for one night.”

“ Nonsense? ” she sputtered. “You have no right—no right to kidnap me!”

“Saving your life isn’t kidnapping,” he replied as the elevator doors slid open. “It’s common sense.”

Her struggles intensified, her breath hitching when he stepped inside, and the doors shut. When one of her blows proved more painful than the others, Callum brought his hand up and smacked her backside sharply.

“Enough.”

“Bastard,” she cried, outraged.

“Brat. You do that again and you’ll find sitting down rather uncomfortable.”

He could feel her struggle with wanting to hit him again and the realization he wasn’t making an idle threat. Instead, she said, “You can’t just lock me away. I’m not some damsel you can throw in a tower.”

Callum’s lips twitched as he suppressed a grin, though his tone remained calm. “You’re not going anywhere until I know you’re safe. End of discussion.”

The penthouse was dark when they entered, the floor-to-ceiling windows revealing a glittering expanse of the Dublin skyline. Callum took the stairs two at a time, striding down the hall. He set Isolde down with a deliberate gentleness, though his hands lingered on her waist for more time than was absolutely necessary. The smack to her ass and her acquiescence, however reluctant, to his dominance was intoxicating. An image of Isolde bent over the back of his couch, her backside a fetching shade of pink from his discipline as he prepared to shove his hard cock into her wet and ripe pussy flashed before his eyes. When he looked at her, her cheeks were flushed, her chest rising and falling with her ragged breath.

“Take me home,” she said again, her voice softer now, though no less determined.

“No.”

She rounded on him, her hands curling into fists at her sides. “You can’t keep me here.”

“I can, and I will,” he said, stepping closer. He could see the mix of fear and anger

swirling in her eyes, but there was something else, too—something that flared hotter every time he invaded her space. “You remember what I said. I let you get away with that temper tantrum downstairs due to the stress you’ve been under. I won’t excuse that behavior in the future. You’re under my protection now, Isolde. Whether you like it or not.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off with a low growl. “Do you think those men were out there by accident? Do you think Lynch doesn’t know exactly where you live, where you work, where you sleep? Are you willing to risk the foundation’s security team? They’re good for crowd control and to make a display, but in a firefight, I would be worried they’d shoot themselves or each other. Walsh is good, but not good enough... at least not good enough outside of your office building.”

She paled at his words, her shoulders stiffening.

Callum softened his tone just a fraction. “You’re staying here. And that’s final.” Callum opened a nearby door and gestured inside. “This will be your room. It locks from the inside if that makes you feel better. You’re free to leave it when you want—within the penthouse. I will arrange with Walsh to watch over you when I take you to the office. Don’t even think about trying to slip away again. Don’t test me, Isolde.”

The challenge in his eyes was impossible to ignore, and she didn’t seem ready to try. She turned and stalked into the room, slamming the door behind her. Callum grinned faintly at the sound.

Good. Let her be angry. Anger was better than fear.

The following days settled into a strange rhythm—one that Callum hadn’t expected but found himself oddly unwilling to disrupt.

Each morning, he dropped Isolde at her office, leaving Walsh to stand guard. Callum knew Walsh wasn't pleased about the arrangement, but the man was too pragmatic to argue. Each night, Callum picked her up and brought her back to the penthouse, their conversations becoming less combative as the days wore on.

Over late dinners and quiet moments, Callum began to see glimpses of the woman beneath the armor. She was sharp and fiery, but also thoughtful and vulnerable in ways she tried to hide. She challenged him at every turn, but each argument—each spark—only drew him deeper.

And he knew she felt it, too.

The way her breath became ragged when he stood too close. The way her eyes lingered on his hands. The way her sharp retorts faltered when his voice dropped to a murmur.

She was fighting it, but the battle was hers to lose.

On the fourth morning, after escorting Isolde up to her office, Callum returned to the lobby, his usual guarded silence broken by the sight of James Fitzwilliam waiting near the entrance.

“Kavanagh,” Fitzwilliam said, his voice carrying that aristocratic disdain Callum had little patience for. “What the hell do you think you’re doing with my daughter?”

Callum didn't slow his pace, his tone cold as he replied, “Protecting her.”

Fitzwilliam's face turned red. “I don't need men like you protecting my family. I don't need you anywhere near my family.”

Callum stopped, turning to face him fully. His expression was unreadable, his dark

gaze cutting. “With all due respect, Fitzwilliam, your daughter is in danger.”

“What kind of danger?”

“The kind that could get her killed. Walsh might be fine for here in your building, but he’s out of his league outside these doors. And before you get all high and mighty with me, I’ll remind you that your family has been well-served by its association with the O’Neill Syndicate. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

Fitzwilliam’s mouth opened and closed, his rage obvious.

Callum smiled faintly, stepping closer. “You don’t like me. I get that; I don’t care. What I do care about is Isolde. Her life is in danger, and I’m the only one keeping her alive. So, unless you plan to do better, stay out of my way.”

Fitzwilliam glared at him, but the man had no retort. Callum turned on his heel and walked out of the building without another word.

In the reflection of the glass doors, he caught a glimpse of Isolde watching him—her expression a complicated mix of emotions he couldn’t name.

He smiled faintly to himself.

She might not trust him yet, but she would... whether she liked it or not.

That evening after picking her up, the glow of the city bled into the penthouse as evening settled, the golden lights of Dublin shimmering like ghosts against the glass walls. Callum stood at the bar, pouring himself a measure of whiskey, the liquid catching the fire’s flicker from the hearth across the room. The day had been long, and his patience—already stretched thin—was beginning to unravel.

Isolde sat curled in the corner of the couch, a throw blanket tucked loosely over her lap. She was watching him, her amber eyes sharp despite the fatigue on her face.

“You’re quiet,” she said, breaking the silence.

Callum turned slightly, glass in hand, and raised an eyebrow. “Should I be putting on a show?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” She uncrossed her legs, sitting up straighter as her expression hardened. “I saw you talking to my father today.”

Callum stilled, the glass halfway to his lips. He took a deliberate sip, letting the warmth burn down his throat before answering. “And?”

“And I want to know what he wanted.”

He shrugged, leaning one hand on the back of an armchair as he watched her. “Nothing you need to concern yourself with.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only one you’re getting.”

Isolde stood abruptly, the blanket falling forgotten to the couch as she stalked toward him. “You can’t keep me locked in this gilded cage and expect me to just accept everything you do, Callum. I have a right to know why my father approached you.”

Her fire both infuriated and intrigued him. Callum’s gaze tracked her movements, taking in the rigidity of her body as she stood, the way she wrung her hands in front of her as she paced. She was angry— good . Anger was energy, focus. But it also made her careless, and he couldn’t afford that right now.

“You think you have a right?” he asked softly, his voice laced with something dangerous. “That’s adorable, mo chroí . But let me remind you where you are. You’re here because someone tried to kill you, not because I enjoy your company.”

Her eyes narrowed, and he caught the flicker of hurt behind her defiance. “Oh, don’t worry, the feeling is mutual. I didn’t ask you to save me, and I sure as hell didn’t ask for this... this arrangement.”

Callum’s jaw ticked, the last word scraping against his temper like flint to steel. He set the glass down with a sharp click on the bar and stepped toward her, his movements deliberate.

“Careful, Isolde,” he warned, his voice a low growl. “You might not like where this conversation ends.”

Her chin tilted stubbornly upward as she held his gaze. “I’m leaving tomorrow. I’ll have Walsh’s team see to my protection.”

A dark laugh escaped him, rough and bitter. “You think you can just decide to leave?”

“Yes.” She crossed her arms, her breath coming faster. “I’ve put up with this long enough. I’m grateful you helped me, but I’m not your problem to solve. I don’t belong here, Callum, and you damn well know it.”

Callum stared at her, his mind a storm of irritation and something far more dangerous. Doesn’t belong here? The hell she didn’t. She belonged exactly where he put her—under his protection, in his care, in his bed, where no one else could touch her.

But instead of shouting, he let a cold, lethal calm settle over him. “We’ll discuss it in

the morning.”

Isolde’s eyes flared and he thought she might throw something at him. “There’s nothing to discuss,” she snapped, turning on her heel. “I’m going to bed.”

“Do that,” he said flatly, though his gaze followed her until she disappeared up the stairs to her room.

As the sound of her door closing echoed through the penthouse, Callum exhaled sharply, his patience worn to shreds. He raked a hand through his hair and returned to the bar, pouring himself another drink before settling into the leather chair in front of the fire.

The whiskey burned less this time, but it didn’t quiet the storm inside him. Isolde was a complication he hadn’t seen coming—a fire he couldn’t extinguish no matter how hard he tried. When he’d told Con what was going on, the Devil of Galway had merely laughed, indicated his trust in Callum’s ability to handle it, and wished him well. Callum told himself it was about protecting Con’s interests, that keeping her close was the logical move, but logic didn’t explain the way she got under his skin. The way she invaded his dreams was further evidence she was his fated mate.

That was the last thing he needed. What the hell had he gotten himself into?

The flames crackled softly in the hearth, their glow dancing across the polished floors and illuminating the darker corners of the room. Callum leaned back in the chair, whiskey glass dangling from his fingers as he stared into the flames, trying to piece together his next move. Lynch was circling closer, Bradford was a thorn he’d yet to pluck, and now... Isolde.

The sound of breaking glass shattered his concentration.

### CALLUM

Callum's body tensed, every muscle coiling with instant readiness. He stood in one fluid motion, his senses sharp, his gaze darting toward the far end of the penthouse. The sound had come from the back.

Calm and deliberate, he strode to his desk, sliding open a drawer and retrieving the handgun he kept there. The familiar weight of the Glock settled into his palm as he checked the magazine and clicked it back into place.

His mind was already ahead of him, calculating possibilities. If Lynch's men had found the penthouse, they'd underestimated him badly.

Callum slipped out of the office, moving silently up the stairs to Isolde's room. He pocketed the gun before knocking once—sharp and firm.

“Isolde.”

When she didn't answer immediately, he opened the door, finding her standing by the bed, barefoot and frowning. “What's going on?” she demanded.

He cut her off, his tone calm but commanding. “We may have trouble. Lock the door behind me when I leave.”

Her face paled, but she straightened her spine. “What kind of trouble?”

“Not now.” He stepped farther into the room, his dark gaze pinning her in place. “Listen carefully. Lock the door. If anyone but me comes for you, you go to the back of the walk-in closet. There’s a hidden compartment in the wall. You’ll find the lever to get inside in the back, right corner. Once inside, close the door. It locks automatically. Get inside and don’t come out until I tell you.”

Her mouth opened in protest, but Callum wasn’t having it. He stepped forward, closing the distance between them, his hands framing her face as he tilted her chin up sharply.

“You’re not arguing with me right now, Isolde,” he said, his voice a low growl. “You do exactly what I said. Do you understand me?”

Her lips parted, her breath catching at the dominance in his tone. “Callum, I?—”

He didn’t let her finish.

His hands tightened on her face as his mouth came down on hers with bruising force, a punishing kiss that left no room for doubt, no space for argument. It was raw, possessive, and entirely without apology. Her hands rose instinctively to his chest, but she didn’t push him away. Instead, her fingers curled into his shirt, holding on as if the kiss had knocked her world off its axis.

When he finally pulled back, his breathing was ragged as he stared into her eyes. “Lock the door, mo chroí, ” he murmured, his voice still dark with promise. “And stay put.”

Her wide eyes searched his face as if she was thinking about arguing with him again. But she nodded, her voice barely above a whisper. “Okay.”

Callum stepped back, his gaze lingering on her for a beat longer than necessary

before he turned and strode toward the door. He glanced over his shoulder just once.

“Remember what I told you.”

Callum waited just outside Isolde’s door, his ear tuned to the faint click of the lock sliding into place. For a moment, he remained still, listening. Only when he was certain she’d obeyed him did he turn on his heel and head downstairs, the polished soles of his shoes silent on the hardwood floors.

The Glock felt solid in his hand, the accustomed weight grounding him as his senses sharpened. Whoever had broken in had made a mistake—a fatal one if they thought they could catch him off-guard.

He moved like a wraith, every step deliberate, his gun aimed and ready as he entered the kitchen. Moonlight spilled in through the windows, catching on the shards of broken glass that littered the floor. He frowned, his gaze narrowing on the servants’ entry door that hung slightly ajar, the frame splintered as if someone had forced their way in.

Callum’s gut tightened. No footprints, no sounds—but there was something.

A scent.

Floral. Soft and familiar.

His grip on the gun tightened as the realization clicked into place. It was faint, but unmistakable—the same scent of jasmine and rose that Deirdre Lynch used to wear.

Deirdre.

A muscle ticked in his jaw as the implications settled like iron in his chest. She’d

been here. But why?

The sound of a sharp inhale made him freeze. Callum turned, his gun still raised, to find Isolde standing just inside the kitchen doorway. Her eyes were wide, flitting from the shards of glass to the weapon in his hand.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he snarled, his voice low and edged with frustration. “I told you to stay in your room.”

Isolde’s chin lifted, her stubborn defiance flashing in her gaze. “I’m not about to let you face danger alone, Callum. Don’t waste your breath trying to scare me back upstairs.”

He stared at her, torn between anger and reluctant admiration. Even now, standing barefoot in his kitchen, her dark hair tousled from bed and her expression set in steely resolve, she was a force to be reckoned with.

“You’re going to get yourself killed,” he snapped, lowering his gun slightly but keeping his focus on the doorway. “You have no idea what you’re walking into.”

“Then maybe you should stop keeping me in the dark,” she shot back.

Callum clenched his teeth, his patience fraying. “Fine. But you stay behind me. If you don’t do exactly what I say, I’ll tie you to that damn bed upstairs. Understood?”

She glared at him but nodded, instinctively moving closer. “Understood.”

“Good girl,” he muttered, guiding her behind him as he moved through the kitchen.

Isolde’s hand brushed against his back—hesitant, instinctive—as she kept pace with him. The feeling sent a jolt through him, her trust in him both empowering and

terrifying. He couldn't afford distractions. Not when every sense screamed that there were more players on the board.

The penthouse was too quiet. The kind of silence that didn't feel natural. Callum's trained ears picked up faint noises—a soft creak, a shift of weight against the floorboards. He counted three... no, four intruders, spread across the outer rooms.

“Stay close,” he ordered quietly, his voice barely audible.

Isolde didn't argue. He could feel her trust as she kept a hand on the back of his shirt, her breathing quick and shallow but controlled. Callum moved steadily, guiding her toward the office where the panic room was concealed.

“This way,” he murmured.

They slipped inside, and Callum quietly locked the door behind them. The fireplace crackled softly, its glow casting flickering shadows across the leather armchairs and towering shelves of books.

Isolde's voice broke the silence, soft but resolute. “What's happening? Who's here?”

Callum didn't answer immediately. He walked to his desk, pulling a hidden lever to slide open the bookshelf on the far wall, revealing the secure compartment that would keep her safe. “Get inside. Now.”

“Callum, talk to me,” she pressed, but her voice wavered slightly.

Before he could respond, a voice echoed from the living room beyond the door—a voice that turned his blood to ice.

“Well, aren't you going to invite me in, Callum?”

Deirdre.

Callum went still, his jaw clenched so tightly it ached. He could feel Isolde's confusion behind him as she whispered, "Who is that?"

He ignored her question, reaching into his jacket to pocket the Glock. "Stay here," he said firmly, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Don't come out until I say."

"Callum—"

"Now, Isolde," he snapped, turning toward her with a look that silenced her protests. He pointed to the open compartment. "In. Now. If I don't return in the next half hour, follow the passageway to the right. You'll find a set of stairs. At the top is a landline. Pick it up, one of our men will answer and will arrange to get you to safety."

"I'm not leaving you..."

"Yes, you are. If I don't come back, then everything I've done to keep you safe will have been in vain. Promise me you'll stay alive, and let my people take care of you."

Reluctantly, she moved toward the hidden space, her gaze lingering on him for one final moment before disappearing inside. Callum slid the bookshelf closed.

He turned, his shoulders tight as he strode to the office door and yanked it open, his expression dark as a thundercloud.

Deirdre Lynch stood at the center of his living room, dressed in black, her red hair swept back like a flame. She looked every bit as dangerous as he remembered, her sharp smile laced with the kind of malice that had once thrilled him—and now repulsed him.

“Callum,” she purred, her voice soft but cutting. “Is that any way to greet an old friend?”

“You’re no friend of mine,” he bit out, his tone cold. “What the hell are you doing here, Deirdre?”

Her eyes gleamed, and she tilted her head slightly, as if assessing him. “I’m here to warn you.”

He barked out a humorless laugh. “Warn me? You’ve got some nerve, sweetheart.”

Deirdre’s smile faltered. “This isn’t a game, Callum. Eoin knows about the Fitzwilliam girl. He knows she’s important to you. Bradford’s been feeding him information, and they’re planning something big. You think tonight was just a coincidence?”

Callum’s blood ran cold. “What do you know?”

Deirdre stepped closer, her expression serious now. “They’re coming for her. For the Foundation. Bradford wants to position himself as a law-and-order candidate in the next election. Eoin has convinced him they can dismantle the O’Neill organization by exposing their connection to the Foundation. Bradford is willing to do whatever it takes as long as he gets the credit.

“And Eoin?”

“He hates O’Neill. He hates you. He hates Fitzwilliam and if he can destroy the Foundation, he can take his revenge and have Bradford in his pocket. Eoin likes having councilmen in his pocket.”

His fists curled at his sides. “And why the hell should I trust you?”

Her gaze softened, but there was a flicker of something else—regret, maybe. “Because as much as I hate you, I hate Eoin more.”

Callum didn’t speak for the space of a heartbeat, his mind spinning with the implications of her words. The danger was real—and it was closing in faster than he’d anticipated.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a slight movement by the office door. Isolde stood just inside, her eyes wide, her gaze darting between him and Deirdre.

Callum’s voice was a low growl as he turned back to Deirdre. “Get out.”

“Callum—”

“Get out. ”

Deirdre hesitated for a beat, then smirked. “Suit yourself. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

She turned and sauntered toward the broken door, vanishing into the night like the ghost she was, her men trailing behind her.

Callum ran a hand over his jaw, his muscles tight. He turned to face Isolde, who was still watching him, her face pale but defiant.

“Who was that?” she demanded, her voice shaking.

“Trouble,” Callum said simply, his look turning steely.

Isolde swallowed, stepping closer to him despite everything. “What did she mean? That they’re coming for me?”

Callum closed the distance between them in two strides, his hands coming to rest on her shoulders, steadying her. “It doesn’t matter what she meant. No one’s going to touch you, mo chroí. Not as long as I draw breath.”

But as he said the words, he couldn’t ignore the truth that hung between them: Deirdre’s warning had changed everything. The storm was coming. And this time, Callum wasn’t sure if he could stop it.

10

ISOLDE

The sound of Deirdre's voice still echoed in Isolde's head, her words circling like vultures over carrion. They're coming for her. Isolde hadn't been able to breathe, much less move, until Callum's hands—strong, steady, unyielding—had gripped her shoulders.

Now, she could barely keep up with him.

“Callum!” she snapped as he practically dragged her through the penthouse, his long strides eating up the floor. “Slow down! What's happening?”

His phone was already at his ear, the low rumble of his voice so sharp it felt like a blade. “We're coming in hot. Have the gates open, and make sure the house is ready.”

“Who are you calling?” she demanded, but he ignored her, his eyes scanning the windows as if expecting them to shatter at any second.

His silence only added to the suffocation she felt in her chest. Her heart thundered as he grabbed a black duffel bag from a hall closet—one that clinked ominously—and swept her coat around her shoulders before pulling her out the door.

“Callum, stop?—”

“Not now, Isolde,” he said, his tone a warning, clipped and harsh. “Move.”

The air and silence between them was almost suffocating. The slam of the door as he shoved her in the vehicle reverberated through her, jolting her spine. Callum rounded the car and slid into the driver's seat, the vehicle roaring to life beneath his hands.

"Callum," she said again, her voice shaking. "Where are we going?"

He didn't answer. He didn't even look at her, his expression set like granite, his jaw tight enough to crack as he exited the underground lot.

The SUV lurched forward, tires squealing as they hit the slick pavement. Rain hammered against the windshield, but Callum barely seemed to notice, his hands steady on the wheel as they tore through the Dublin streets. The city lights smeared into streaks of white and gold, everything outside a blur of wet darkness.

"You're going too fast!" she said, grabbing onto the door handle as the SUV swerved sharply around a corner.

"Buckle up," he ordered.

"I am buckled," she snapped back, "but that won't help if you wrap us around a lamppost!"

He ignored her again, the faint glow of his phone illuminating his face as it buzzed with a message. Without taking his eyes off the road, he swiped the screen, read the notification, and let out a low curse.

"Care to tell me what's going on?" Isolde pressed, frustration rising to match her fear. "You can't just drag me out of my life without answers, Callum!"

His knuckles flexed around the wheel, the stiffness in his shoulders evident. "I told you," he said finally, his voice a dangerous calm. "Lynch won't stop until he has

what he wants. Tonight proved that.”

“And Deirdre?” she shot back. “Who is she? How does she know so much?”

His jaw ticked. “No one you need to worry about.”

“That’s not good enough!”

Callum’s gaze cut to her, the sheer intensity he found there stealing the air from his lungs. “It’ll have to be,” he said.

The SUV took a sharp turn onto a narrow road, rainwater splashing up like waves from the tires. Beyond the city, the streets stretched into darkness flanked by tall hedges and the distant silhouettes of trees. Isolde’s pulse pounded harder as she realized they weren’t heading for her home. They were leaving the city entirely.

“Where are we?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Someplace safer,” Callum said, and that was all.

Callum backed his foot off the accelerator as he approached a massive set of iron gates looming ahead, their wrought-iron spires rising like the teeth of a beast. Isolde opened her mouth to tell him to stop—surely they couldn’t just barge in—but the gates creaked, splitting open as if they’d been expecting him.

“What is this place?” she breathed, craning her neck to see the sprawling neighborhood beyond the gates.

“Private,” was all Callum offered as he pressed down on the accelerator again, speeding through winding lanes that curved like serpents between massive estates. Through the sheets of rain, Isolde caught glimpses of sprawling lawns, hedges

manicured to perfection, and stone mansions that seemed to loom in the shadows like sentinels.

As they approached a second set of gates—these even taller and heavier than the first—Isolde’s hands curled into fists. He’s not going to stop.

“Callum—”

Before she could finish, the gates swung open, and the SUV shot through. The driveway ahead was long and sweeping, flanked by rows of massive trees that swayed violently in the wind. At the end of the lane, an imposing mansion came into view—a monolith of stone and glass, its wide windows glowing faintly with light.

Callum drove straight up to the entrance, the SUV skidding to a halt in the circular drive.

All Isolde could hear was the hammering of her heart and the steady rhythm of the rain. She turned to Callum, her mouth opening to demand an explanation—but before she could speak, movement caught her eye.

The house was surrounded.

Armed men emerged from the shadows, their weapons held close to their chests, their eyes scanning the area with ruthless efficiency. One of them approached Callum’s door and knocked twice.

Callum didn’t flinch. He turned to Isolde, his expression unreadable. “Stay close to me. Don’t say a word unless I tell you to.”

Her chest tightened as he stepped out into the rain, walking around to open her door. The storm swallowed her whole as she stepped out, her coat plastered to her skin.

Callum's hand came to rest on the small of her back, steady and possessive, as he guided her toward the house.

"What is this place?" she asked again, her voice all but drowned out by the downpour.

"Sanctuary," he said simply.

The men parted as they approached the massive double doors. One of them nodded to Callum, his voice barely audible over the storm. "All clear, sir."

Callum didn't respond. He pushed the doors open, ushering Isolde inside.

The mansion's interior was even more intimidating than the exterior—polished marble floors gleamed beneath chandeliers, and wide staircases stretched up toward shadowed halls. Isolde turned to Callum, shivering slightly as she hugged her coat tighter around herself. He halted their progression as he pulled his phone from his pocket.

"What is this really?" she demanded. "Why are there men with guns outside? Who are you calling, Callum? Who are you hiding me from?"

Callum turned to face her, his dark eyes locking onto hers. The storm outside had followed him in—it radiated from him, alive and crackling. "You'll get answers when it's safe," he said, his voice a low growl. "Until then, you listen to me. You stay close, and you don't argue."

Her chest rose and fell with her rapid breath, frustration warring with fear. "And if I don't?"

Callum stepped closer, his gaze dropping to her lips, then back to her eyes. "Then I'll

make you.”

He removed her coat and handed her a towel with which she could dry. He led her into an enormous sitting room with a roaring fire and had her sit on a lovely Chesterfield couch.

Her pulse leapt at his words, at the absolute certainty in them. She should have been furious—outraged at his arrogance—but instead, all she could feel was the heat rolling off him, the storm between them building until it threatened to consume her. There was something about the way he looked at her that sent a thrill through her system. And although she would never admit it, every time he threatened to spank her, she could feel the words in her pussy.

She’d seen the couples in Baker Street who didn’t just play at the D/s lifestyle but lived it. At first, she’d found the idea of submitting to any man abhorrent, but the more she visited Baker Street and got to know the submissives there, the more she longed to find a dominant man to whom she could truly submit. The strength of the women she’d met—JJ, Olivia, Rhiannon, and the rest—had made her re-evaluate her ideas around dominance and submission.

Before she could find her voice, Callum turned away, speaking to the men gathered in the foyer. “Double the security. No one gets in or out unless I say.”

The men nodded, dispersing silently as Callum turned back to her.

“Welcome to your new home,” he said darkly.

And as she stared up at him, it was as if she could feel his words settling over her like chains. Isolde knew instinctively that everything had changed, and nothing would ever be the same again.

Isolde sat stiffly on the leather couch, her hands clasped in her lap, trying—and failing—not to focus on the man pacing in front of her.

Callum hadn't said much since they entered the mansion, dragging her into this sprawling, fortress-like house. Instead, he'd ushered her to the plush leather sofa, practically forcing her to sit before pulling out his phone.

He was speaking again—his voice a low growl in his native tongue, a language that rolled off his tongue like fine Irish whiskey. Gaelic, she recognized, though she only understood a word here and there. House. Security. Trouble.

The rest was lost to her, but the sharpness in his tone told her enough: he was angry. Dangerous. And so damn sure of himself.

Callum turned sharply, his dark eyes glinting like that of a predator. He wasn't a man who belonged in soft, warm rooms like this—he was made for battlefields and violence. It was in the way he moved, every step deliberate, controlled, like he could unleash himself at any moment.

“You're growling,” she said finally, her voice breaking through the quiet of the room.

Callum's head snapped toward her, his gaze sharp. He wasn't holding the phone to his ear anymore, but his fingers flexed around it like he wished it were someone's neck.

“Stay put,” he said, his voice low, as if he hadn't even heard her observation.

Isolde scowled. “I am staying put.”

He resumed pacing without replying, running a hand through his dark hair before dialing another number. Isolde watched as he muttered into the phone again, the

sharp edge to his voice making her stomach twist. He switched between English and Gaelic so fluidly it made her dizzy, though his clipped tone in either language left no room for misinterpretation. Whoever was on the other end was getting orders—and they were taking them without argument.

“You’re barking orders,” she muttered under her breath, though she knew he heard her.

Callum didn’t stop pacing. “Because I need them followed.”

“And what about me?” she asked, the bite in her voice bolder than she felt. “You keep throwing me into situations without a single damn explanation, Callum. I deserve to know what’s going on.”

The flicker of something dangerous sparked in his gaze as he turned to face her fully, his shoulders squared, his expression unreadable. “What you deserve,” he said, his voice calm but seething with authority, “is ...” he paused and seemed to gather himself... “is to stay alive.”

The way he said it—like it was non-negotiable—made her pulse quicken.

“I don’t need you babysitting me,” she shot back, but her voice lacked the force she wanted.

He growled low in his throat and resumed pacing, muttering something in Gaelic she didn’t catch. She slumped back against the couch in frustration, folding her arms tightly over her chest.

The man was impossible.

Her emotions tangled in knots, looping over themselves until she didn’t know what to

feel anymore. Fear, for the faceless men Callum had dragged her away from. Anger, for the way he handled her—like she was something fragile and untrustworthy. But beneath it all was a heat that simmered in her veins, a slow burn she hated herself for feeling.

It wasn't fair.

She hated that she noticed the way his muscles flexed under the crisp line of his shirt every time he moved. She hated that his voice—so dark, so rough—sent an electric current racing down her spine every time he spoke. She hated that he made her feel safe, even as she wanted to slap him for treating her like a possession.

He's a predator, she thought, watching him move. Everything about him screams danger.

The set of his shoulders, the way he prowled from one end of the room to the other—it was all too controlled, like he was holding something dark and primal at bay. His sharp eyes cut to her every few moments, checking to see if she'd moved, and each time she shifted even an inch, he let out that low, irritated growl that made the hair on her arms stand on end.

"Stop growling," she snapped again, though her voice was softer this time, her pulse betraying her.

He stopped pacing. Just stopped, like his body had turned to stone. The room seemed to still with him as he slowly turned to face her.

"Then stop moving," he said, his voice quiet, lethal.

Isolde froze, her breath catching in her throat. Light danced across his features, throwing shadows over the sharp lines of his jaw and the dark scruff dusting his skin.

His gaze pinned her to the couch, and for a moment, she couldn't look away.

The room crackled with something she didn't want to name. Something dangerous and hot and far too consuming.

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips, and Callum's gaze tracked the movement, his eyes darkening.

"You're scaring me," she said finally, though her voice wavered for a different reason entirely.

Callum's expression shifted, softening just a fraction as he stepped closer to the couch. "Good," he murmured. "If you're scared, maybe you'll listen to me."

"I'm not some puppet you can control," she shot back, lifting her chin stubbornly.

"No," he said quietly, his gaze locked on hers as he loomed over her. "You're not. But you are mine to protect."

The possessiveness in his voice sent a shiver racing through her, her body betraying her again with that unwanted, traitorous heat.

She pressed back against the couch, trying to ignore the way his nearness made her pulse flutter. "You can't keep me here forever."

Callum smiled faintly, though the darkness in his eyes didn't waver. "Try me."

Neither of them moved as the atmosphere between them grew heavy, cloying and almost suffocating. Finally, Callum let out a slow breath and ran a hand down his face. "I need you to trust me, Isolde."

She blinked, surprised by the rough honesty in his tone. “Trust you? You’ve kidnapped me, locked me in your house, and dragged me into some criminal nightmare?—”

“No, you stumbled into that when you witnessed the murder at the gala.”

“Why haven’t I heard anything about that in the news?”

“Because the cops are smart enough to keep their noses out of things that don’t concern them.”

“Murder doesn’t concern them?”

“Some murders do, and some don’t. Keep in mind, I saved your life,” he answered, his voice a low, gravelly promise.

Her throat tightened as she looked up at him. “Why?” she whispered.

Callum didn’t answer immediately. Then he crouched down in front of her, his broad hands resting on his knees as he looked her dead in the eyes. “Because losing you isn’t an option, mo chroí . Whether you like it or not, you’re under my protection now. And I don’t fail.”

Her chest rose and fell with her uneven breath, her heart hammering at the intensity in his voice. He wasn’t just speaking words—he was making a promise, one carved in stone.

Before she could respond, his phone buzzed again. Callum stood, his gaze lingering on her for a beat longer before he answered it, turning away as he walked toward the windows.

Isolde stayed where she was, watching him as he spoke, his voice low and controlled. The predator was back, pacing slowly, his hand curled into a fist at his side as he listened to whoever was on the other end.

What have I gotten myself into?

### ISOLDE

But even as fear gripped her chest, her gaze stayed fixed on him—on the dangerous man who'd turned her world upside down.

The fire crackled softly in the hearth, its glow flickering over the luxurious sitting room. Isolde sat perched on the edge of the couch, her spine stiff and her hands clenched together as she glared at Callum. He loomed nearby, one broad shoulder leaning against the mantle, his gaze pinned to her like a predator studying its prey.

“You’re impossible,” she said, her voice sharp enough to cut. “You have no right—no right—to tell me what I can and can’t do.”

Callum tilted his head slightly, his lips curving into that infuriating, arrogant smile. “I don’t need a right, Isolde. I have a responsibility.”

“A responsibility?” she shot back, rising to her feet. Anger bubbled in her chest, hot and uncontrollable. “To who? To me? I never asked for this, Callum. I never asked for you.”

The smile faded slowly away. His dark eyes narrowed, his face hardening into an unreadable mask. “No,” he said slowly, his voice low and dangerous, “you didn’t. But that doesn’t matter now.”

“Doesn’t matter?” She took a step forward, her chin tilting defiantly. “You can’t just

decide that you're in charge of my life. I don't care how big or bad you think you are. I'm not some possession you can lock away."

"You're under my protection," he said evenly, though there was an edge to his tone now. "And that means I make the decisions."

"Protection?" She laughed, but the sound was brittle, unsteady. "You don't get to use that as an excuse to control me." She wasn't sure why she kept pushing at him, she only knew that it felt right to do so.

Callum pushed off the mantle in one fluid movement, closing the distance between them in two strides. Isolde's breath caught as he stopped inches away, towering over her. His presence was magnetic, suffocating, and the heat rolling off him only made her pulse race faster.

"You think this is about control?" he murmured, his voice a low, velvety threat. "Do you have any idea what would happen to you if I wasn't here? If I wasn't keeping Lynch or Bradford—or whoever the hell else is after you—off your heels? You wouldn't last a day."

Her throat tightened, but she refused to back down. "I don't care," she bit out, though her voice trembled slightly. "I'd rather take my chances than be tied to a gangster and let you lock me away like a prisoner."

He laughed—the sound bitter and with little amusement. "You wouldn't be the first Fitzwilliam tied to the O'Neill Syndicate." His gaze darkened, and she thought he might explode. Instead, he let out a slow breath, his jaw ticking as he fought for control. "You don't get it, do you?" he said softly, his tone even more dangerous in its calm. "This isn't a game, Isolde. This isn't something you can argue your way out of. If you make the wrong move—if you ignore me—you die."

The words hung in the air like smoke, choking the space between them. For the first time, she couldn't just dismiss the fear that seemed to invade the space, tangling with her anger and confusion. She swallowed hard, her heart hammering as his words settled over her.

"You can't—" she started, her voice faltering. "You can't keep me like this." She knew it was a lame thing to repeat, but she couldn't seem to come up with anything better.

Callum stepped closer, forcing her to tilt her head back to keep his gaze. "You think I want this?" he growled, the rawness in his voice taking her by surprise. "You think I enjoy dragging you around, keeping you locked away, cleaning up after your reckless decisions?"

Isolde's breath caught, her body betraying her as the space between them shrank. The energy rolling off him was electric, intense—so much so it was hard to draw air. "Then let me go," she whispered, though the words lacked conviction. What if he takes me up on it? Was he right when he said I'd be dead within the day?

His eyes burned into hers, his hands coming up to brace on either side of her, caging her in without touching her. "I can't," he murmured, the words rough, like they'd been dragged from him. "Because the second I let you go, they'll take you—you witnessed a murder and you're a threat to their plans; they want to silence you. And I won't let that happen."

The gravity of his words settled over her like chains, weighty and unrelenting. Isolde's chest tightened as she tried to hold his gaze, her anger splintering beneath the force of his conviction. She wanted to fight him—wanted to scream at him—but all she could feel was the heat of his presence, the way his nearness made her pulse flutter and her knees weaken.

“You don’t own me,” she said again, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Callum’s lips curved into a faint, dangerous smile as his gaze dropped to her mouth, then back to her eyes. “Not yet, mo chroí ,” he said softly, the words a dark promise. “But make no mistake, you are mine—whether you like it or not.”

She shuddered as she exhaled, stepping back and leaving her feeling exposed and unsteady. “I won’t be controlled by you.”

“Won’t you?” he whispered. “I think you want someone to take control.”

“I don’t,” she said without much conviction.

“I think you want a man to take control—to dominate you—so you can find a little peace in this world. I know your mother died young, and your father leaned on you for what he needed in terms of social engagements, and now he’s enjoying himself while you slave away.”

“My father loves me,” she said hotly.

“I didn’t say he didn’t, but he allowed you to take on too much early on.”

“I wanted to help.”

“Maybe,” said Callum, “and maybe not. If we’d met before this started, you’d be wearing my collar and answering me in ways I think we’d both find more pleasurable,” he purred as he closed the distance between them.

Damn the man! “You don’t have the right to talk to me like that.”

“That, mo chroí , is a matter of opinion. I suspect once I have you on your back with

my cock shoved deep inside you, you'll purr like a kitten for me."

Before he could say anything else she didn't want to think about and wonder if he wasn't correct, she brought her hand up to slap the arrogant look off his face. She whirled on her heel as her hand connected with his cheek, but it only took a moment for her to realize the critical error in judgment she'd made—or maybe it was what she'd wanted all along.

Callum's hand snaked out and grasped her upper arm, spinning her around and pushing her over the back of the sofa. Flipping her skirt up over her back, he growled appreciatively as he saw the garter belt and panties she was wearing. When she'd changed in her office earlier in the day, they and the lacy pushup bra she had on were the only clean undergarments in her office closet. In the flash of an eye, he ripped the delicate, lacy underwear from her body, leaving her bare bottom to be framed by the garter belt.

"Lovely," he murmured before bringing his hand down on the right cheek of her ass hard enough that the smack seemed to echo in the room.

Another harsh strike landed on her other cheek before he rhythmically began to tattoo her backside with an intensity that left her gasping, but oddly not crying out for help. Isolde struggled to get up, but he pressed her back down onto the back of the butter-soft leather sofa, pinning her down by placing the hand that wasn't delivering what he called his discipline in the small of her back.

"Knock it off, you bastard," she snarled as he continued to blister her behind.

"Not a chance, mo chroi," he chuckled as he rained hellfire across her buttocks.

Isolde wriggled to get away from him, but he held her in place and continued to punish her now aching globes. She continued to struggle, but she was no match for

his size, strength, and determination. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of begging him to stop, regardless of how much his spanking hurt—but worse than the pain was her growing arousal. Her nipples were stiffening, their tiny pebbles irritated, in a good way, by the lace of her bra. Isolde could feel herself getting wet... soaked.

She chewed her lower lip to keep from crying out, which made him increase the sting to her ass. Impact play had never been her personal thing, but even she could feel that Callum Kavanaugh was a man who knew how to administer a spanking. Praying he wouldn't figure out just how turned on he'd made her, she tried to tell herself fear was feeding her desire. The problem was that only a very small part of the combustible fuel his spanking had ignited was fear-based, the rest was pure arousal. Just as suddenly as it had started, it stopped, and she could catch her breath.

He rubbed the painful swell of her ass before trailing his finger between the cleft until he reached her puckered back entrance. She squirmed, trying to get away, but he had her trapped. He removed his hand and delivered another series of harsh blows, causing her to yowl.

Callum slid his hand between her thighs, pinching the sensitive skin when she didn't soften to his touch and spread her legs. He inhaled deeply, then groaned as his fingers parted her labia. Gathering the slick that had gathered there, he moved on to find her throbbing clit. He dragged his hand away from her clit and shoved two fingers into her cunt, plunging them in and out, causing her to writhe where he held her. He inhaled again—making a deep rumbling sound that seemed to reverberate from his chest and invade her body.

“God, you smell sweet,” he crooned, moving his hand to stroke her aching backside.

From the corner of her eye she saw him step back, the bulge behind his fly in clear view.

“Upstairs, last door on the left. I have things to attend to. If you’re here when I get back, I’ll teach you how this should end.” He turned without another word, his footsteps echoing softly as he left the room.

Isolde stayed where she was for only a moment, her heart pounding and her skin prickling with unwanted heat. Damn him. Damn him for being so infuriating, so arrogant, so... everything.

And damn her for wanting him anyway.

Before he could return and make good on his threat—or was it a promise?—Isolde stood up and ran to the top of the stairs. She thought briefly about taking a different room and wasn’t sure whether or not she was willing to face the consequences of doing so.

And no matter how much she wanted to deny it, part of her felt safer here, in this gilded cage of his making, than anywhere else in the world.

## CALLUM

What had he been thinking? Bending her over the end of the couch and blistering her backside? That alone would have been bad enough, but he had picked up the scent of her arousal. She might not have liked the sting, but she sure as hell had responded positively to the show of dominance. Callum shook his head. Good. She might as well start getting used to it.

He made his way to the back of the mansion and the changing rooms. The estate had high, solid walls that surrounded it and a myriad of trees. It would be difficult for anyone to spot a large black panther running across the lush lawns. As dangerous as it might be for Callum to shift and go for a run, it was far safer than remaining in the house with his fated mate and not claiming her.

As the rain stopped, the moon hung low over the O'Neill estate, its pale light spilling over the sprawling grounds like molten silver. Callum stood on the edge of a dense grouping of trees, his chest heaving as he tried to steady his breath. The confrontation with Isolde still burned in his mind, every word, every fiery look from her amber eyes, seared into his memory. She had a way of pulling emotions out of him that no one else could, emotions that left him raw and vulnerable in ways he despised.

And then there was the arousal.

It coiled low in his gut, a fire that refused to die no matter how hard he tried to smother it. Her scent—something wild and untamed—lingered in his senses, mingling with the echoes of her defiance. It was maddening. Intoxicating. Unbearable.

He needed to run.

Callum exhaled sharply, his gaze shifting to the shadowed expanse of the grounds. The O'Neill estate outside Dublin offered a perfect sanctuary for what he was about to do—isolated, sprawling, and utterly devoid of prying eyes. He didn't indulge in this part of himself often. It was dangerous, uncontrollable, and too tied to instincts he worked hard to keep buried.

But tonight, it was necessary.

He pulled off his jacket, letting it fall to the ground before unbuttoning his shirt with deliberate slowness. The cool night air kissed his skin as he stripped away the last vestiges of humanity. His shoes followed, then his slacks, until he stood bare beneath the moonlight, his body taut with anticipation.

The shift came like a thunderclap, a ripple of energy that surged through his entire body as the swirling mist arose from the ground to encompass him. His body

morphed seamlessly from man to black panther. Callum dropped to his knees, his fingers clawing at the ground as his frame reshaped and fur spilled over his skin, sleek and black as midnight. All of his senses sharpened, and the muted world exploded into vivid color and detail.

When the transformation was complete, he stood on all fours, his massive panther form cutting an imposing silhouette against the moonlit backdrop. He flexed his claws, the razor-sharp tips slicing into the earth as his muscles coiled and uncoiled with barely contained energy.

The beast inside him roared its approval.

Callum bolted forward, the trees swallowing him whole as he moved like a shadow through them. The wind rushed past him, carrying the scents of damp earth and wild things. Leaves and branches parted in his wake, his powerful body propelling him forward with a grace and speed no human could match.

He ran to silence the chaos in his mind. To chase away the memory of the way Isolde's lips trembled. To forget the way her eyes had glistened with a mix of anger and vulnerability that cut him deeper than any blade ever could.

The grass beneath his paws was soft, the night alive with nocturnal creatures that scattered at his approach. He barely registered them, his focus consumed by the rhythm of his movement—the pounding of his paws against the ground, the flex of muscle and sinew as he leapt over a fallen log and landed soundlessly on the other side.

The moonlight dappled the path along which he ran, and Callum's enhanced eyesight caught every glimmer, every flicker of motion. He ran faster, pushing himself to the brink as the burning in his veins began to fade, replaced by something calmer.

When he finally slowed, his sides heaved with exertion, his black fur glistening with a fine sheen of sweat. He came to a stop in a clearing, the world around him eerily still save for the gentle rustle of leaves in the wind. He sank to his haunches, his sharp gaze scanning the darkness as he forced his breathing to steady.

The run had helped. His mind was clearer now, though not free of the thoughts that haunted him. Isolde's face lingered like a ghost, her scent still teasing his heightened senses.

She was like a flame, and he was drawn to her heat despite knowing it would burn him alive. No amount of running would change that.

With a low, rumbling growl, Callum rose to his paws and padded back toward the estate. He would let the beast have its moment, but it was the man who would have to face her again. And next time, he would be ready.

Or so he told himself.

12

ISOLDE

The room was bathed in soft moonlight, its silver glow spilling across the ornate furniture and casting long shadows along the walls. Isolde sat gingerly on a pillow in the padded window seat in her room, her thoughts a tangled mess as she stared at the untouched book in her lap. Sleep had been elusive ever since the confrontation with Callum earlier that evening. Every sharp word and every heated glance between them lingered in her mind like a haunting refrain.

And to top it all off, the bastard had spanked her and had made sure she knew he meant it. The worst part had been the feeling of arousal that had infused her system as he did so. And the fact that she had been sent to her room without any kind of discussion or physical release from what he had done was just the cherry on top. More frustrated than she'd ever been in her life, she threw the book across the room.

A movement outside the window caught her attention and she looked to see what it might be. There, galloping across the manicured lawns, was an enormous black panther. Her pulse stuttered, and she opened her mouth to scream. A beat later, she closed it, intrigue overriding her first instinctive panic.

The sleek, black shape moved across the grounds, its powerful body gliding through the night with an otherworldly grace. Large, smooth, and utterly out of place against the carefully trimmed hedges and pristine flowerbeds. The creature moved with purpose, its tail swishing behind it as it carried something in its mouth.

Clothing? At this distance, she couldn't be positive.

Isolde gripped the windowsill, her mind struggling to reconcile the wild beast with the world she had come to know. The panther slowed as it reached a patch of moonlit grass, its form suddenly engulfed by a swirling mist that seemed to rise from the ground itself. Her breath caught in her throat as the mist thickened, obscuring the animal entirely.

And then the impossible happened.

The mist began to dissipate, and where the panther had stood, a man now emerged. Tall, broad-shouldered, and naked, his dark hair and sharp features unmistakable even from this distance.

Callum.

Isolde gripped the windowsill with all her might, her fingers cramping from the strength she was using as her mind raced to comprehend what she'd just witnessed. It wasn't possible. It couldn't be possible. And yet, there he was, standing in the moonlight, the same bundle of what she was now sure was his discarded clothing clutched in one hand as if nothing extraordinary had just occurred.

She watched in stunned silence as Callum disappeared into the shadows, heading toward the mansion with the same deliberate stride that always seemed to command the space around him. Her shock quickly gave way to a need to know. She needed answers, but a part of her already believed she had at least some of them. Siobhan had once told her tales of large black panthers that roamed throughout Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. She had even suggested that they were descendants of shape-shifting creatures that could change from an animal form to human and back again. Isolde had written it off as a fairytale, but given what she'd just seen, her friend might not have been making anything up.

Isolde rose from the window seat and made her way to the door into the hallway. The upstairs hallway was dimly lit, the soft glow of sconces illuminating the rich wood paneling and plush runner underfoot. Isolde stepped out of her room, her heart pounding as she made her way toward the staircase. She didn't have far to go. Callum was already at the top of the stairs, his shirt half-buttoned, his dark hair still damp from what she could only assume was the night air.

"Callum!" she called, her voice sharper than she intended.

He paused mid-step, raising his head so his gaze locked onto hers. For a moment, he didn't move, his expression unreadable as he watched her descend toward him.

"Isolde," he said finally, his voice low and steady. "What are you doing awake?"

"What am I doing awake?" she echoed, her hands tightening around the banister. "That's a foolish question. It's not that late. I think the better question is, what were you doing outside?"

He arched an eyebrow, his lips curving into a faint grin. "I wasn't aware my movements required an explanation."

She stepped closer, her pulse racing. "Don't play coy with me, Callum. I saw you."

"Saw me?" His smile faded, replaced by something colder. "And what exactly do you think you saw?"

Her voice dropped to a whisper, the memory of the transformation still fresh in her mind. "I saw... a panther. Running across the lawn. And then—then there was mist, and you were there. Naked. How is that possible? How could—" She broke off, shaking her head as if trying to make sense of it herself. "What are you?"

The silence between them was unsettling with things left unsaid. Callum proceeded down the hallway, his movements deliberate as he came to stand before her. His dark eyes locked onto hers, and for the first time, she saw something unguarded there. Something primal and unguarded.

He nodded. "Then once again you've seen something you shouldn't have," he said, his voice a low rumble that sent a shiver down her spine. "I suspect you have questions. I need a shower. You can either follow me to my bedroom, or once I'm cleaned up I can join you in yours."

"I think I have a right to know," she demanded softly.

"Why, mo chroi ? Because you recognize there is something more between us than either of us ever thought possible?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Callum snorted. "I think you do, but I'm too wired to take you to task for lying to me."

"Me? Lying to you? That's a crock. You turned into some kind of enormous, predatory beast. I'm pretty sure you never mentioned that. I mean, you're not human."

"I'm both," he said simply, his tone devoid of apology. "And neither. It is not something that my kind shares readily with yours. There are many..."

Isolde waved off his argument. "I can imagine the consequences, and they aren't pretty. I take it you are not the only one of your kind?"

"Isolde, I need a cold shower. Shifting only increases arousal. I thought if I took a run

and then a cold shower, it would help. It hasn't. Unless you want to share my bed tonight, go to your room and stay there. We will talk in the morning."

Isolde shook her head, her fingers curling into fists at her sides. "You should have told me."

"And risked losing the one shred of trust you have in me?" He took a step closer, his voice softening. "You're already in over your head, Isolde. Knowing this... it only makes things more dangerous."

Her heart thudded painfully in her chest as she searched his face, looking for answers she wasn't sure she wanted. "And what am I supposed to do with this? Pretend I didn't see it? Pretend you're just a man?"

Callum's lips twitched into a faint smile, though it didn't reach his eyes. "I don't expect you to pretend anything. But I do expect you to trust me. With your life. I think I've earned that."

She stared at him, her mind a whirlwind of fear, disbelief, and something she couldn't quite name. The pull she felt toward him—the heat that always simmered just beneath the surface—only seemed to grow stronger, even now.

Especially now.

"Trust," she repeated, her voice barely above a whisper. "You're asking a lot."

"I'm offering a lot," he countered, his voice a low growl. "Your safety, your survival. All of it depends on me. And you know it."

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do," she admitted, her voice trembling with truth.

Callum reached out, his fingers brushing against her cheek in a gesture so uncharacteristically gentle it stole her breath. “We’ll figure it out in the morning.”

And with that, he turned and disappeared into the shadows of the hallway, leaving her standing alone, her world forever changed.

## CALLUM

Callum wasn’t sure if he’d ever been this tired—emotionally, mentally and physically. He knew shifting usually left the shifter aroused, but he’d convinced himself that a long run would help him clear his head. It had done that and now forefront in both his human and panther brain was the belief that Isolde was not only his to protect, but his to claim and possess.

After he stripped out of his clothes, he sent Con a quick message:

Isolde saw me shift. I do not believe she is a threat to our kind.

The response was immediate and not at all helpful.

Do what you want, but I suggest you claim the girl and be done with it.

Yeah, boss, that’ll go over big with her and her father. On the other hand, Con had given him the leeway to do what he thought best.

Stepping into the shower, Callum set the water as cold as it would get. It was somewhat refreshing, but it wasn’t having any effect on his cock whatsoever. The panther prowling in his mind sure as hell wasn’t helping. Usually his beast was willing to settle after a long run, but it stalked restlessly in his mind, now, growling with frustration.

His throbbing cock reminded him that it was in need of attention. A drop of pre-cum glistened and then fell to be washed away by the water going down the drain. Regardless of the temperature of the water, he couldn't get his mind to focus on anything other than Isolde's beauty and intelligence as well as the feel of her ass under his hand. He had smelled her arousal kick in and berated himself for not doing what had felt natural: stepping behind her and shoving his cock deep as he rode her to a release for both of them. He tried to focus on the fact that at they had no formal relationship, and at the time, she had not known he was a shifter.

She didn't know the first thing about him, whispered the angel on his shoulder. The devil on the other shoulder laughed. She might not understand fated mates, but her soul had recognized its master almost from the beginning. As frightened of him as she'd been, instinctively she'd known she could trust him and that he would protect her. She might say differently, but there had been plenty of times she could have gone to the cops, and she hadn't.

His cock throbbed again. The damn thing actually ached. Knowing the only relief he would get this night was from his hand, he wrapped it around his staff and began to stroke from base to tip and back again. He would get a handle on his unruly lust. He would ensure Isolde's safety and then he would consider how best to claim her.

He grinned as he closed his eyes. At least he had the boss on his side. Until they knew what Bradford and Lynch were up to, he would check his amorous intentions. Picking up the pace of his stroking, he squeezed a bit harder, thinking he would much prefer it to be Isolde's pussy clamping around him. He would put her on her belly, pull her up onto her knees and mount her from behind, pounding into her until she was thoroughly sated and he allowed himself to spill his seed into her.

Warm semen jettisoned out of his cock in a steady stream as he pumped himself empty and finally relaxed, leaning back and adjusting the shower to lukewarm to clean himself up. Feeling more in control, he stepped out of the shower and dried off

and headed for his bed.

As he laid down, he thought that sleep would be elusive, but he was wrong. Sleep and his dreams claimed him almost at once.

“You will obey me in all things, Isolde,” he growled.

She struggled against him, but she was no match to his strength and power. He growled in her ear, rumbling low, and felt her naked body quiver in response. Her defiance was palpable, but Callum didn’t care. Isolde was his, and he would take what was his. There was no way she would win, as her desire trumped her willfulness. She had known her master from the start.

He hadn’t allowed himself to fully embrace who and what she was to him, but in this dream there were no consequences. Her arousal and readiness dripped from her pussy and her clit and labia were swollen and wet. He thrust into her, making her yowl in supplication.

As he grabbed the back of her neck with his teeth, his fangs elongated and he sank them into her neck, holding her in place as he pounded into her. Callum wrapped his hands around her hips as her well-spanked ass rose and fell beneath his hips. He could feel the heat radiating off her buttocks, and it only increased his ardor.

Isolde had stumbled into his territory, put herself in danger and defied him when he thought to keep her safe.

“You’re mine, Isolde,” he said, loosening his grip before sinking his teeth in again and shaking her slightly.

“Yes, Callum,” she wailed.

With those words, any remnants of doubt or hesitation vanished into thin air. Their bodies collided into one another once more, fusing together in a dance as old as time itself. Pleasure washed over them in waves. With a primal growl, Callum thrust in and out of her, reveling in her tightness. The sensation was electric, sending jolts of ecstasy coursing through his veins.

Callum set a rhythm that matched the beating of their hearts. Every thrust brought them closer to the precipice, to the edge where bliss and oblivion merged. Their bodies moved with an innate synchrony, a harmony born from a longing so profound it transcended mere physicality. They were lost in a world of sensation, where time ceased to exist, and nothing mattered but the pleasure they gave to one another.

The intoxicating scent of sex flooded the air. The walls of her pussy encapsulated his cock, spasming and tightening with every thrust. Isolde felt like a siphon around him, begging to be filled.

He gripped her hips tighter, his fingers digging into her flesh as he thrust deeper, harder, faster. The sound of skin meeting skin filled the room, drowning out any semblance of rational thought. It was as if they'd entered a realm where only their desires mattered, where the only goal was to push each other to the pinnacle of ecstasy.

With every stroke, Callum could feel her unraveling beneath him. Her body trembled, her breathing became erratic, and he knew she was teetering on the edge. He wanted nothing more than to see her come undone, to prove to her that their bodies were in complete and harmonious sync.

Callum reached beneath her to put pressure on her swollen clit with his thumb, circling it in teasing motions that elicited a throaty moan from somewhere deep inside Isolde. Her muscles tightened around him, drawing him in further as if begging for release. And when he finally granted her wish, it was as if an explosion ripped

through both of them.

Her back arched up into his, and a primal scream escaped her lips as wave after wave of pleasure coursed through her body. Callum felt her ride out her climax, her orgasm triggering his own—a torrential flood that consumed him completely.

Callum collapsed onto the mattress, and didn't stir until the morning light awakened him. The night had seemed to provide all he needed. He would claim what was his, and damn anyone who got in his way.

### ISOLDE

The steady ticking of the antique clock filled the mansion's study, each measured second hammering into Isolde's frayed nerves. She sat at an expansive mahogany desk, her laptop open before her, the dim light of the screen casting shadows over her tired features. The taste of stale coffee lingered bitter on her tongue, mingling with the acrid tang of the chaos that seemed to surround her.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard, a desperate rhythm that mirrored the frantic pace of her thoughts. Callum had left her hours ago, slipping out of the room with a terse warning to stay put. She hadn't tried to follow him—not after a failed attempt to leave the mansion earlier that morning. That debacle had ended with her being escorted back inside by one of Callum's men, her frustration met with nothing but a raised eyebrow and a clipped order to "behave."

Behave. As if she were some errant child. The spanking he'd inflicted the night before hadn't been that of an adult to a child. No. It had been filled with the sexual tension that seemed to be bubbling higher and higher and which she feared would spill over. The question she kept asking herself was whether that was a good thing or a bad thing?

Her jaw clenched at the memory, but the anger was short-lived, overshadowed by gnawing anxiety mixed with arousal that had driven her to open her laptop in the first place. If Callum refused to give her answers, she'd bloody well find them herself.

And then to find out he was some kind of mutant? It might have been more frightening if Siobhan hadn't brought it up in more than one conversation over the years. Could it be that Siobhan had known of the existence of shifters? Callum had taken the time to explain to her this morning that for thousands of years, there had been two types of humanoid lifeforms inhabiting the earth.

Human such as her were not the only humanoids who evolved on earth. He had explained that there was another line that could shift between their purely human form and their animal form—in his case a black panther. They had hidden in plain sight and had evolved along a similar path. As humans they were indistinguishable from other humans, but as animals, they were larger and more powerful. Their animal forms also retained a human's ability to reason and think, but most could not speak. It had sounded reasonable enough, and it was hard not to believe him given what she had seen with her own two eyes the night before.

That knowledge had led her to researching the O'Neill clan and syndicate, which had led her to examining her own family tree. That search had started as a shot in the dark—a basic dive into public records and old news archives, her attempts to piece together the tangled web of names and faces that had come to dominate her life. But the deeper she dug, the more her gut twisted. The connections she unearthed were fragile at first, easy to dismiss. A coincidence here, a tenuous link there. A remembered face or name from her childhood. But then the pieces began to fit together, and the picture they painted was more horrifying than anything she could have imagined.

Her breath caught as another link clicked into place, the truth sliding into focus like a blade pressed against her throat.

James Fitzwilliam, her father, had strong ties to the O'Neill Syndicate, and might have even been a part of the organization at one time.

She stared at the screen, her stomach churning as the words burned into her mind. A decades-old photograph showed her father standing beside a younger Con O'Neill, their expressions grim but united. The accompanying article was sparse on details, but it mentioned her father by name, describing him as an 'advisor' to the Syndicate's financial dealings. The date on the article was from before she was born—before the Fitzwilliam Foundation had been established.

Her entire life of privilege, of wealth and respectability, was built on the same criminal empire she now found herself entangled with.

The room seemed to tilt around her, the walls pressing in as if to crush her with the importance of her discovery. Her hands trembled as she scrolled through more articles and more photos, each one a nail in the coffin of the world she thought she knew.

Callum's name appeared frequently in the more recent articles, his reputation a mix of shadowy myth and brutal fact. But what struck her most was the mention of Councilman Bradford—Callum's adversary, her father's one-time political ally, and, as she now realized, a man with his own score to settle.

The crusade Bradford had waged against the O'Neill Syndicate wasn't about justice or morality. It was revenge.

Her fingers stilled on the keyboard, the bitter taste in her mouth intensifying as she pieced together the threads. Decades ago, the Fitzwilliam family and the Bradfords had been close—business partners, political allies. But something had happened, something catastrophic enough to shatter that alliance and leave scars deep enough for revenge to fester for a generation.

Her father had worked for the O'Neill Syndicate. Bradford's vendetta wasn't just against Callum; it was against her family. Against her. She was a pawn to be used

against not only the O'Neill Syndicate, but her father and the foundation itself.

The thought made her heart constrict, her breath coming in short, shallow bursts. She pushed the laptop back, rising from the desk and pacing the length of the room. Her bare feet padded softly against the Persian rug, her arms wrapped tightly around herself as if that could stave off the cold realization creeping over her.

All her life, she'd believed in the illusion of the Fitzwilliam family's integrity. Their wealth, their influence, their carefully curated reputation—it had all been a lie. A lie built on blood money and criminal alliances. And now, here she was, drawn to a man who represented everything her family had tried to hide, and everything she'd been taught to despise.

Her attraction to Callum wasn't just about him—it was about the world he represented. A world that, apparently, had always been her birthright.

The door creaked open behind her, and Isolde spun around, her pulse spiking. Callum stood in the doorway, his broad shoulders filling the frame, his dark eyes narrowing as they swept over her. He was still wearing the same tailored shirt and slacks from earlier, though his sleeves were rolled up, exposing the corded strength of his forearms.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice low and edged with suspicion.

Isolde hesitated, her gaze darting to the laptop on the desk. She hadn't heard him come in, hadn't even realized how much time had passed. The antique clock chimed softly in the background, marking the hour like a ticking bomb.

“Research,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

Callum's eyes flicked to the laptop, then back to her. “What kind of research?”

She folded her arms across her chest, lifting her chin defiantly. “The kind you won’t tell me about.”

His jaw tightened, and he stepped into the room, closing the door behind him with a deliberate click. “Isolde,” he said warningly, “don’t test me.”

Her temper flared, rising to meet the storm brewing in his gaze. “Why not? You’ve done nothing but test me since the moment we met. You want me to trust you, Callum? Then stop lying to me. Stop hiding things from me.”

“I’m not hiding things,” he said, though the apprehension in his voice betrayed him.

Isolde gave an unladylike snort as she took a step closer, her frustration boiling over. “Then why does every answer you give me feel like half the truth? Why do I have to dig through old archives to find out that my father worked for the O’Neill Syndicate?”

Callum froze, his expression darkening in an instant. The silence that followed was laden with unspoken truths and dangerous possibilities.

“What did you find?” he asked, his voice quiet but lethal.

She gestured toward the laptop, her movements sharp and angry. “Everything. The articles, the photos—proof that my father was involved with your organization before I was even born. Proof that Bradford’s crusade against you isn’t about justice; it’s about revenge.”

Callum’s lips pressed into a thin line, his gaze cutting like a blade. He took another step toward her, his presence filling the room. “You shouldn’t have been looking into this.”

“Why not?” she demanded, her voice rising. “Because it’s dangerous? Because it might make me realize that my entire life has been a lie?”

“Because it puts another target on your back,” he snapped, his tone sharp enough to slice through her anger. “The more you know, the more dangerous this becomes—for both of us.”

She shook her head, her throat tightening. “I didn’t ask for any of this. I didn’t ask for you to pull me into your world.”

“No,” he said, his voice dropping to a low growl. “You stumbled into it all by yourself. I’m the one who keeps trying to keep you safe. Do you not get that there’s no going back? You can’t unknow what you already know.”

The finality in his words sent a chill down her spine, but it wasn’t fear that made her breath hitch. It was the raw intensity in his eyes, the way he looked at her like she was the only thing keeping him tethered to this storm. Just when she thought she might have gotten to him, Callum’s lips tightened, and he spun on his heel and headed out the door, throwing over his shoulder, “Stay in the house and do as you’re told.”

She could hear the sound of him barking orders to his men but couldn’t make out the words.

“In for a penny, in for a pound,” she muttered as she turned back to her laptop.

## CALLUM

The cool weight of the gun in Callum’s pocket offered little solace as he pushed through the heavy oak doors of the exclusive private club at the end of a long day. His jaw was set, his eyes dark as storm clouds as he strode past the concierge’s desk

without sparing the man a glance.

“Sir, you can’t—” the young man stammered, stepping out from behind the desk to intercept him.

Callum didn’t slow, his presence alone enough to make the air feel charged. His voice was calm, but laced with steel. “Don’t waste your breath.”

Behind him, Callum caught sight of the concierge glancing nervously toward the security stationed near the entrance. Before the guards there could move, another voice cut through the room.

“Let him in.”

James Fitzwilliam sat near the center of the lavish lounge, his hand raised to silence the approaching guards. He leaned back in his chair, his polished demeanor unruffled despite Callum’s forceful entrance. With a slight nod, he dismissed the staff, his cold gaze fixed on Callum as he approached.

“Persistent as ever, Kavanagh,” Fitzwilliam said, his voice calm and measured. “I assume you’re not here for a drink.”

Callum didn’t respond immediately. He sank into the chair across from Fitzwilliam, the leather creaking under his weight. A crystal tumbler of scotch sat untouched on the table between them, its amber depths catching the light like a warning.

“You don’t return my calls, Fitzwilliam. Thought I’d make things easier for you,” Callum said, his tone sharp enough to cut glass.

Fitzwilliam exhaled slowly, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “Because there’s nothing left to discuss. Isolde should never have been dragged into this.”

Callum's lips twitched in a humorless smile. "And yet here we are."

The silence stretched between them with unvoiced accusations. Finally, Fitzwilliam picked up the tumbler, swirling the scotch idly but not drinking it.

"I left the O'Neill Syndicate for a reason, Callum," he said, his voice quieter now, laced with something almost resembling regret. "To protect Isolde. To give her a chance at a life that wasn't soaked in blood and lies. And you—" He paused, his eyes narrowing. "You've undone all of that."

Callum leaned back, his hand drumming once against the armrest before going still. "I didn't undo anything. The Syndicate's enemies—your enemies—did that. You think hiding her behind a foundation and a name would keep her safe forever? It was only a matter of time."

Fitzwilliam's jaw tightened, his grip on the glass firm. "Don't lecture me, boy. You don't know what it cost me to get out. What it cost all of us."

"Then enlighten me," Callum said, his voice dropping to a low growl. "Because right now, all I see is a man willing to sacrifice his daughter's safety to keep his own hands clean."

Fitzwilliam's face darkened, his hand slamming the tumbler onto the table hard enough to make the liquid ripple. "You think I don't know what I've done? You think I don't wake up every day with the guilt of her mother's death on my shoulders?"

Callum stilled, his eyes narrowing. "Her mother?"

Fitzwilliam sat back, rubbing a hand over his face—he looked older, the cracks in his polished exterior showing. "Eoin Lynch ordered the hit that killed her. It wasn't supposed to be her, but me. She got in the way."

The revelation hit Callum like a physical blow, his mind racing as he tried to process the implications. Isolde's mother—a victim of the same game he was now trying to protect her from.

“And you think keeping this from her will make her safer?” Callum said, his voice cold and cutting. “You’ve lied to Isolde her entire life, and now you want me to believe you have her best interests at heart?”

Fitzwilliam's gaze hardened. “I didn't tell her because I didn't want her burdened with it. And I certainly didn't want her dragged back into that world because of you.”

Callum leaned forward, his hands resting on his knees as he locked eyes with the older man. “She's already in it, Fitzwilliam. Bradford's not just sniffing around to make a name for himself. He's working with Lynch. She saw a hit the night of the gala. My men cleaned it up so it wouldn't fall back on you, but my guess is the shooter knows she's a witness. I'm not even sure at this point if Lynch or Bradford can stop him.”

The words landed like a bomb between them, as the room crackled with electricity. Fitzwilliam's eyes widened slightly before narrowing, his fingers curling into fists.

“You're sure?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Sure enough,” Callum said, his tone grim. “Bradford wants more than just the Syndicate. He's after your Foundation, too. He's using Lynch to get both, and Isolde's the leverage he needs.”

Fitzwilliam exhaled sharply, his face paling. “God help us.”

“You're damn right we'll need help,” Callum snapped. “Because Bradford and Lynch won't stop until they've taken everything—and left nothing but bodies in their wake.”

Fitzwilliam didn't respond immediately, his gaze fixed on the untouched scotch as if the answers he sought might be found in its depths. Finally, he looked up, his expression grim.

"If you're right," he said slowly, "then we don't just have enemies to fight. We have alliances to reconsider."

Callum stood, his movements sharp and deliberate. "Then reconsider quickly. Because if you think I'll let either of them lay a finger on Isolde, you're dead wrong."

As Callum turned to leave, Fitzwilliam's voice stopped him cold.

"You care about her," the older man said, his tone laced with something unreadable. "More than you want to admit."

Callum didn't turn around. His voice was quiet, but firm, as he replied. "Care doesn't matter. Protection does."

With that, he strode out of the club, the cool weight of the gun in his pocket feeling heavier than ever. Outside, the rain began to fall in steady sheets, the dark sky reflecting the storm brewing within Callum. As he climbed into the SUV, his phone buzzed in his pocket. The screen lit up with a message that made his blood run cold:

"They've got her. Move fast."

Callum's grip tightened on the wheel, his jaw clenching as he gunned the engine. The game had just shifted, and the stakes were higher than ever.

Isolde's life depended on him. And he never lost.

14

### ISOLDE

The sound of voices filled the grand entryway of the mansion as Isolde descended the staircase, her resolve as delicate and sharp as the silk dress skimming her curves. Her decision to attend Councilman Bradford's fundraiser had come to her in the hours following Callum's departure, a bold and reckless plan that she knew could only lead to further entanglement. But it wasn't just her safety at stake anymore. The tangled web surrounding the foundation, her family, and Callum's world needed clarity. And this was the only way she could find it.

Callum's men had kept their distance, but they were always present—shadows she couldn't shake. Two of them stood near the entrance to the study now, their broad shoulders and dark suits radiating quiet authority.

"I need to speak to you," she said, her voice calm but firm.

The taller of the two men, a dark-haired enforcer named Tiernan, stepped forward, his expression unreadable. "What about?"

"I'm attending the fundraiser tonight. Councilman Bradford is hosting it at my friend Siobhan's gallery. If I don't show up, it will raise questions—and not just about me. The foundation's reputation is at risk."

Tiernan exchanged a glance with his companion, then frowned. "Callum won't like it."

“I’m not asking for his permission,” Isolde said, trying to keep her tone neutral, although her heart twisted at the thought of what Callum would say—or do—when he found out. “This is about optics. If I disappear entirely, Bradford will smell blood in the water. We can’t let him think he’s won.”

The second man, a stocky blond named Quinn, folded his arms. “You want us to take you into the lion’s den so you can what? Mingle?”

Isolde lifted her chin. “I want to gather information. If Bradford’s working with Eoin Lynch, this is the perfect chance to learn more. You’re his spies, aren’t you? You’ll be there. Keep me safe and out of trouble.”

Tiernan’s jaw clenched as he pulled his phone from his pocket. “This isn’t up to us.”

“I’m not waiting for him to?—”

Tiernan raised a hand, silencing her as he dialed. The call connected quickly, and the low, gravelly tone of Callum’s voice carried through the air like a current of electricity.

“She wants to go to Bradford’s event,” Tiernan said without preamble.

The line crackled with silence before Callum’s reply came, cold and clipped. “Let her.”

“Boss, are you sure?” Tiernan asked, his tone wary.

“I said, let her. Walsh will meet you at the gallery with backup. Keep her in your sights at all times.”

Isolde’s stomach tightened as Tiernan pocketed the phone, his dark eyes narrowing

on her. “You heard him. You’re going, but we’re running the show.”

“Fine,” she said, though her voice wavered slightly. She turned on her heel and walked away before they could see the flicker of nerves crossing her face.

That evening, the glittering lights of Siobhan’s gallery illuminated the night like a beacon, its modern, glass-and-steel facade gleaming in the rain-slicked streets. Isolde stepped out of the sleek black car, the hem of her emerald silk dress brushing against her heels as she accepted Tiernan’s arm for balance.

“You’re sure about this?” he murmured as they approached the entrance.

“I’m sure,” she said, though her heart hammered against her ribs. She wasn’t just walking into a fundraiser—she was stepping into the enemy’s lair, wearing a wire that would transmit every word directly to Callum’s team.

Inside, the gallery buzzed with life. Guests in designer gowns and tailored suits moved through the space, their voices a symphony of polite laughter and murmured conversations. The smell of champagne and fresh flowers filled the air, mingling with the faint scent of oil paint from the exhibits on display.

Isolde forced a smile as she greeted familiar faces, her fingers tightening around the clutch that concealed the device feeding her every word back to Rory, and Walsh. Tiernan was moving through the crowd unobtrusively, keeping an eye on her. Her gaze swept the room, locking briefly on Councilman Bradford near the far wall.

As she made her way toward him, Isolde could see he was flanked by aides and sycophants, his smile practiced but cold. She recognized the sharp glint in his eyes as he turned to her, his expression shifting into one of feigned warmth.

“Ms. Fitzwilliam,” he said smoothly, extending a hand. “I wasn’t sure you’d make it

tonight.”

She took his hand, her own grip firm despite the nausea roiling in her stomach. “I wouldn’t miss it, Councilman.”

“Good,” he said, stepping closer. “I’ve been meaning to speak with you about Callum Kavanagh. I understand the O’Neill organization has taken quite the interest in your foundation.”

Her pulse spiked, but she forced her features to remain composed. “A connection my father fostered, I’m afraid. That’s part of why I’m here tonight. I thought you might have advice—or connections—to help me extricate the foundation.”

The lie slipped from her lips as easily as breathing, and Bradford’s expression flickered with something predatory. She resisted the urge to glance at the clutch that concealed the transmitting device. Quinn had told her they would find it in a cursory search, and if they used a wand, she should simply put the clutch down and step away from it. Callum’s team was listening. She had to keep him talking.

The buzz of conversation and the clink of crystal glasses created a fragile symphony in the glittering room, but none of it registered with Isolde. She sipped champagne, the bubbles tickling her throat as her eyes darted across the sea of faces. Her dress—a deep emerald silk that clung to her curves and whispered over her skin as she moved—was as much armor as it was camouflage. Tonight, she was playing a part, and her life might very well depend on how convincing she could be.

Her pulse stuttered when her gaze landed on a familiar face across the room. Deirdre Lynch.

The woman was as poised and dangerous as Isolde remembered, her fiery hair swept into an elegant knot, her dark eyes scanning the room with a predator’s precision.

Deirdre stood near the edge of the crowd, her smile cool and calculating as she spoke to a man Isolde didn't recognize. The sight of her sent a cold prickle down Isolde's spine. Where Deirdre went, Eoin Lynch was never far behind.

Her hands clenched around the delicate stem of her glass, and she forced herself to breathe. You can do this, she told herself. But she was certain she could feel a faint vibration from her clutch, a constant reminder that every word, every move she made, was being monitored. Callum's men were here. Walsh was watching. She wasn't alone.

But that didn't mean she was safe.

"I wondered if that might not be why you are here..."

"Let me assure you Councilman, I am here to support my friend Siobhan..."

Bradford nodded—all smiles. "I'm sure you are. But I did wonder with all the trouble surrounding your foundation lately, if you might have better things to do than attend fundraisers."

Isolde took a sip of champagne to cover the tightening in her throat. "O'Neill and Kavanaugh have taken certain liberties, about which I've only been recently made aware. I'm sure you understand how delicate these matters can be."

Bradford's eyes narrowed, the mask of civility slipping just enough to reveal something colder beneath. "Oh, I understand far more than you think, Ms. Fitzwilliam."

The room seemed to tilt slightly, the buzz of champagne mixing with a sudden rush of fear. "I'm not sure what you mean."

He stepped closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Do you think I don’t know what you’re up to?” His lips twisted into a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “You’re out of your depth, my dear.”

Isolde’s heart slammed against her ribs, her mind racing as she scrambled for a response. How did he know? How much did he know?

“I—” she began, but Bradford’s hand shot out, gripping her arm with enough force to make her wince.

“Let’s have a proper chat, shall we?” he said smoothly, his smile returning as he steered her through the crowd.

The pressure of his fingers dug into her skin as he guided her toward a hallway at the back of the gallery. Isolde’s eyes darted around the room, searching for Walsh, Tiernan—anyone—but the crowd felt like a sea of strangers, their faces blending into a blur.

“Councilman,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady, “I don’t think this is appropriate?—”

“Nonsense,” he interrupted, his grip tightening. “You wanted my help, didn’t you?”

The hallway was dimly lit, the muted hum of the party fading as he led her to a heavy oak door. He pushed it open, revealing a small, lavishly furnished office. And there, sitting casually on the edge of a mahogany desk, was Eoin Lynch.

The room spun as Isolde registered his presence. Lynch was as imposing as ever, his sharp features and cold eyes cutting through her like a blade. He smiled, a predator’s grin, as Bradford shoved her inside and closed the door behind them.

“Well, well,” Lynch drawled, his Irish lilt as smooth as silk. “If it isn’t the lovely Ms. Fitzwilliam. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you properly.”

Isolde’s breath caught as Bradford released her arm, leaving her standing in the center of the room like prey in a den of wolves. She could feel the hum of the tiny transmitter in her clutch, its presence a lifeline she desperately clung to.

“I’m not sure what you think you’re doing,” she said, forcing her voice to remain steady. “But this is highly inappropriate.”

Lynch chuckled, his eyes glinting with amusement. “Inappropriate? Oh, love, we’re far past worrying about propriety.”

Bradford moved to the desk, pouring himself a glass of whiskey as if he had all the time in the world. “Your father was smarter than this,” he said, his tone almost conversational. “He knew how to keep his head down. But you... you’re reckless. Stupid, even.”

Isolde’s pulse thundered in her ears. “Leave my father out of this.”

Lynch tilted his head, his gaze sweeping over her like a predator assessing its prey. “Your father’s very much in this, love. And so are you. The question is, how much are you willing to give to get out?”

Her stomach churned, but she held her ground, her voice sharp. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I think you do,” Bradford said, his smile cold. “You’re just like him, you know. Willing to do whatever it takes to protect your little empire. The only difference is, you’re not half as clever.”

Lynch's smile widened. "But don't worry, love. We're here to help you fix that."

The air in the room was suffocating, the walls closing in as Isolde tried to think, to plan. The wire. Walsh and Tiernan were listening. They had to be. The room smelled of stale whiskey and cold, unyielding malice. Isolde was surprised when her head snapped to the side as Lynch cracked his hand across her face, splitting her lip, the sound reverberating through the dimly lit space. Pain bloomed hot and fast, her skin stinging where his ring had scraped her cheekbone. His cold, calculating eyes bore into hers, a predator's smirk tugging at the corners of his cruel mouth.

"You think this is about power or money, don't you?" Lynch growled, his voice low and venomous.

Isolde forced herself to meet his gaze, despite the throbbing in her face. "What else could it possibly be?" she spat, her voice trembling but defiant.

Lynch's smirk twisted into something darker, his fingers curling into fists at his sides. "It was never just business, you stupid girl. The Fitzwilliams stole from my family—humiliated us. Your father robbed us of land that was ours by right, and for that, I want blood. I would've had my vengeance years ago if the bullet meant for him hadn't killed your mother instead."

The words landed like a punch to the gut, knocking the air from her lungs. "My mother..." she whispered, her voice breaking. "You—you killed her?"

Lynch leaned closer, his breath hot against her skin as his voice dropped to a whisper. "She wasn't supposed to die. That was on him—on your precious father. He should've taken that bullet, and you know it."

Isolde's hands trembled, but her fury burned brighter than her fear. "You murdered her. And now you want me to pay for it?"

“No, love,” Lynch sneered, straightening and adjusting the cuffs of his jacket. “I want your father to pay. And you... you’re just the perfect leverage to make that happen.”

The room swirled around her as the gravity of his words settled in her chest like a stone. But even as fear threatened to overwhelm her, a spark of defiance flickered in her heart.

“You’ll never win,” she said, her voice low but steady. “Not while I’m still standing.”

Lynch chuckled darkly, his eyes glinting with cruel amusement. “Oh, we’ll see about that.”

And with that, he turned away, leaving her to fight the storm raging inside her, she couldn’t fail to see the predatory glint in his eyes and wondered if help would come in time.

15

CALLUM

The dim glow of the monitors in Callum's SUV bathed the cabin in eerie light, his dark eyes glued to the surveillance feed streaming from inside Siobhan's gallery. The fundraiser bustled with activity—polished guests, flutes of champagne, the hum of laughter and conversation adding to the undercurrents of energy already there.

But none of that mattered.

All he could see was her .

Isolde, stunning in that emerald silk dress that clung to her curves like sin itself, moved through the crowd with a practiced poise that belied the danger she was in. Her every step made his jaw tighten, his fists clenching on his knees as he resisted the instinct to storm inside and drag her out of there, kicking and screaming if need be.

Through his earpiece, Tiernan's voice crackled. "Bradford's making a move. He's got her near the east wing."

Callum's pulse roared in his ears, drowning out everything else. His gaze darted to the second monitor, where a camera feed captured Councilman Bradford's smug smile as he gripped Isolde's arm, steering her away from the gallery's main floor. The sight made Callum's blood run cold.

"Stay close, but don't engage," Callum growled into his comms, his voice a blade of

barely restrained fury.

“Understood,” Tiernan replied, though his hesitation was almost tangible.

Callum forced himself to inhale slowly, the rhythm measured and deliberate. His fury wouldn’t help her now—not unless he could control it. He turned his attention back to the monitors, flipping through camera angles until he caught sight of Padraig in the gallery’s security room.

“Padraig,” he barked, “give me audio. I want to hear everything.”

The line clicked, static hissing before the sound of muffled voices filtered through. He caught fragments of conversation—Bradford’s sickly sweet charm, Isolde’s measured replies. Then, clearer than anything else, her voice.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

Defiance laced her words, and Callum’s chest tightened. God, she was brave, but this wasn’t the time for courage. Bradford wouldn’t hesitate to break her if he thought it would serve his ends.

“She’s holding her own,” Tiernan murmured through the comms, clearly trying to reassure his boss. “Bradford’s got her rattled, but she’s not giving him much.”

“She’s given him too much already,” Callum growled. “I’m done waiting. Be ready to move.”

“No,” Padraig interrupted, his voice steady. “She’s wired. Every word they’re saying is intel. You go in now, we lose whatever edge we’ve got.”

Callum bristled but stayed silent, his gaze snapping back to the monitors. His heart

stopped as he spotted a new figure entering the frame—tall, sharp, and unmistakably dangerous. Eoin Lynch.

The man who had taken so much from him. The man who had killed Isolde's mother. The man who now stood mere feet away from her.

Callum's teeth ground together so hard he thought they might shatter. Every nerve in his body screamed to move, to crush Lynch beneath his boot and drag Isolde away from this nightmare. But he couldn't risk it—not yet.

"She's about to be in the same room as Lynch," he bit out, his voice low and lethal. "Tiernan, Quinn, get into position. I want her out the second this goes south."

"Yes, boss," came Quinn's clipped reply.

On the screen, Isolde was led into a small, lavishly furnished office. Her spine was ramrod straight, her shoulders squared as if she were marching to her own execution but determined to do it on her terms. Her chin lifted, defiance blazing in her eyes even as Lynch's predatory smile cut through her composure like a knife.

Callum's chest ached at the sight. She didn't belong in this world—his world. She was light, fierce and untouchable, yet here she was, standing her ground in front of monsters.

"Padraig," Callum barked, his tone icy. "Seal the exits. No one gets in or out without my say-so."

"You've got it," Padraig replied, the sound of rapid typing in the background.

Callum shifted in his seat, his gaze glued to the screen. Lynch stepped closer to Isolde, his words inaudible but his intent unmistakable. Callum's vision tunneled as

his hand went to the Glock holstered at his side, the cool metal grounding him.

“She’s still wired,” Tiernan said softly, as if reading his thoughts. “We’ll have the proof we need against Bradford and Lynch if we hold our ground just a little longer.”

“I don’t give a damn about proof,” Callum growled. “If either of them touches her?—”

“She’s playing her part,” Padraig interrupted, his tone calm but firm. “You go in guns blazing now, she’ll never forgive you.”

Callum closed his eyes briefly, the significance of Padraig’s words settling over him. He didn’t care about forgiveness. He cared about her. About the way the room suddenly felt too small whenever she was near. About the realization that everything he’d built—the Syndicate, his alliances, even his loyalty to O’Neill—paled in comparison to the need to keep her safe.

On the screen, Lynch reached for her arm. Isolde flinched but didn’t retreat, her chin lifting higher.

“Defiant to the end,” Callum muttered, his lips curving into a faint, humorless smile. She was going to be the death of him.

His earpiece crackled with Tiernan’s voice. “We’re in position, boss. Say the word.”

The pressure in Callum’s chest wound tighter. He leaned forward, his voice a low growl. “Wait for my signal.”

The room seemed to still as the feed showed Bradford pouring himself a glass of whiskey, his posture casual but his expression anything but. Lynch leaned in closer to Isolde, his lips moving as he spoke words Callum couldn’t hear. But he saw the way

her fists clenched, the way her jaw tightened.

She was terrified. And still, she didn't back down.

The sight of her courage made something inside him shift. It wasn't just fury driving him anymore. It was something deeper, darker, and far more dangerous.

"Padraig," he said quietly, his voice cold and calm. "Shut it down."

"You sure?" Padraig asked, hesitation flickering over the line.

"Do it."

The monitors flickered as the security feeds went dark, the room plunging into silence. Callum stood, his movements fluid, lethal, as he checked his gun and adjusted his jacket.

"I'm going in," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

He didn't wait for a response. As he stepped out of the SUV into the rain-slicked street, one thought consumed him: nothing would keep him from reaching her. Not Bradford, not Lynch, not the entire world.

Not when she was his to protect. His to claim.

The storm was coming. And Callum was ready to bring hell with him.

ISOLDE

The air in the room felt thin, stifling, as Isolde stood between Lynch and Bradford, their gazes predatory, circling her like wolves toying with their prey. The dim light

cast shadows across the lavish office, but there was no mistaking the menace in their postures. Her heart pounded in her chest, a relentless drumbeat of fear and defiance.

Lynch's voice was like gravel, low and cutting. "You have a choice, love. Save your father and his precious foundation or save Kavanagh." He stepped closer, his cold eyes boring into hers. "But you can't have both."

Isolde's breath caught, the gravity of his ultimatum crashing down on her. Her gaze darted to Bradford, whose smug smile only deepened her dread. This was a game to them, a cruel spectacle where her agony was their entertainment.

"I—" Her voice wavered, but she swallowed hard, forcing herself to stand tall. "You're asking me to choose between the people I care about. That's not a choice. That's extortion."

Bradford chuckled, sipping his whiskey as if they were discussing the weather. "Call it what you like, Ms. Fitzwilliam. But we both know the foundation is the only thing your father has left. Without it, he's nothing. Just another rich man in disgrace."

Lynch leaned in, his breath hot against her ear. "And Kavanagh? He's already a dead man walking. You just have to decide if he falls now or later."

The mention of Callum made her chest tighten. At some point, without her even realizing it, he had become more than the dark and dangerous man who'd upended her life. He had become someone she needed, someone she couldn't bear to lose. The realization hit her like a lethal knife wound—sharp and unforgiving.

Her mind raced, searching for a way to buy time. "What if I give you the foundation?" she said, her voice steadier now. "All of its assets, all of its influence. It's worth more than my father's reputation or Callum's life. Surely, that's enough for whatever vendetta you're nursing."

Lynch and Bradford exchanged a glance, their expressions unreadable. She caught the flicker of uncertainty in Bradford's eyes, the way his jaw tightened as he considered her offer.

"And what about your father?" Bradford asked, his tone calculating. "You'd sell him out so easily?"

"I'm bargaining for his life," Isolde snapped, her voice sharper than she intended. "You leave him alive, even if his name is tarnished. That's the deal."

Lynch smirked, crossing his arms as he leaned against the desk. "And Kavanagh?"

Isolde's stomach twisted, but she held her ground. "He walks free. Both of them do. That's the deal, or you get nothing."

Her ears caught the faintest sound then—a soft pop, like champagne corks in the distance. Silenced gunfire. The realization sent a shiver down her spine, but she kept her face neutral, refusing to let them see the flicker of hope that she felt ignite in her chest. Callum's team was here.

She pushed forward, keeping their attention on her. "This isn't a negotiation where you hold all the cards," she said, her voice gaining strength. "The foundation's resources could ruin you both. Take my offer, or risk me walking out of here and exposing everything."

Bradford's smile faltered, but before he could respond, Lynch's icy laugh rang out. "Bold of you, love. But boldness won't save you."

Isolde's pulse thundered as she watched him, waiting, calculating. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the faintest movement near the doorway. Deirdre Lynch stood there, her expression unreadable, but her subtle nod sent a jolt through Isolde's veins.

She wasn't alone.

Lynch took a step closer, his hand brushing against her arm as his voice dropped to a whisper. "You don't have the stomach for this game, Fitzwilliam. You're prey, not predator."

His words hung in the air, but Isolde's mind snapped into focus. She thought of Callum, of the lessons he had tried to teach her. Survival sometimes requires becoming the monster others fear.

She straightened, squaring her shoulders as her gaze locked with Lynch's. "You're wrong," she said, her voice low but deadly. "I'm both."

There was a strained silence before the door burst open, and chaos erupted. Gunfire rang out, sharp and violent, as Callum's men stormed the room. Isolde ducked instinctively, her heart racing as she felt the heat of bodies and the crack of bullets.

When she looked up, Callum stood in the doorway, his dark eyes locked on hers, a predator unleashed. And for the first time, she felt not fear, but power.

The storm had arrived, and she was no longer the prey.

### CALLUM

The air around the gallery erupted in chaos as the flashbangs Padraig had planted earlier in the day triggered in unison, each explosion a blinding burst of light and sound that sent screams and confusion rippling through the crowd. Callum's ears rang from the shockwaves as attendees stumbled into the rain-soaked streets, their panicked cries mingling with the wail of car alarms and the distant hum of sirens. Smoke curled through the air, acrid and choking, stinging his eyes and burning his lungs. He welcomed the pain. It sharpened his focus.

"Move," he barked into his earpiece, his voice low and deadly. "Clear the way to the office. Tiernan, take the west corridor. Quinn, cover the exits."

"Copy," Quinn replied, his voice steady despite the pandemonium. "Explosions were clean. No casualties, just chaos. You've got a straight shot—if you can get past the remaining guards."

The remaining guards. Callum smiled malevolently, the weight of his Glock heavy and familiar in his hand.

He moved like a wraith through the gallery's smoke-filled halls, his every step deliberate, every movement calculated. As he rounded a corner, he was confronted by a black panther he didn't recognize. She snarled at him.

"I don't know who you are, but I mean you no harm. My mate is in danger, and I

must get to her.”

He moved past the beautiful shifter, and as he turned into the hallway leading to the office, he heard from behind him. “Go to your love, Callum Kavanaugh, and remind her that I told her stories of our kind.”

He turned back, but the shifter had vanished into the smoke. He whirled around as gunfire erupted ahead, flashes of light illuminating the twisted shadows. His tactical mind worked on overdrive, cataloging threats and opportunities. The chaos played to his advantage, forcing Bradford’s security into defensive positions that left gaps he could exploit.

Isolde’s image burned in his mind. The thought of her trapped in that office, surrounded by enemies, was the only thing that mattered. The primal need to reach her consumed him, sharper than the pain in his muscles. She wasn’t just a pawn in this game anymore—she was the queen he would protect at all costs.

Callum took cover behind a marble pillar as two guards advanced, their voices muffled by the smoke and their rifles trained on the hallway. He moved quickly, firing off two precise shots. Both men dropped soundlessly, their weapons clattering to the floor. He pressed forward without hesitation, his boots crunching on shattered glass.

“Deirdre’s in position,” Tiernan’s voice crackled through his earpiece. “But we have a couple of complications.”

“What complications?” Callum growled, his tone icy.

“Bradford has slipped away, and it doesn’t appear as if Deirdre is playing for Lynch anymore,” Tiernan said.

Callum's jaw clenched as understanding dawned. Deirdre's every move suddenly made sense—the whispers, the double-crosses, the calculated alliances. She wasn't working for Eoin Lynch. She was working against him.

“Understood,” Callum said curtly. “Stay sharp. This isn't over.”

The sound of a gunshot sliced through the air, freezing Callum in his tracks. His heart thundered in his chest, and for a split second, the world fell away. The office was only meters ahead. He forced his body into motion, crashing through the door with his gun raised.

The scene before him sent a surge of emotions—relief, fury, and something far darker—coursing through his veins.

Deirdre Lynch stood over her husband's lifeless body, her fiery hair disheveled, her breathing ragged. The gun in her hand trembled slightly, but her expression was resolute. Blood pooled beneath Eoin's twisted form, his lifeless eyes staring blankly at the ceiling.

Isolde was backed into a corner, her arms wrapped around herself as she stared at the scene, her wide eyes flicking between Deirdre and Callum. Her dress was torn at the hem, a bruise blooming on her cheek, but she was alive.

“You're late,” Deirdre said, her voice tinged with bitter amusement.

Callum ignored her, his gaze locking onto Isolde. “Are you hurt?” he asked, his voice sharp but laced with concern.

Isolde shook her head, her voice barely a whisper. “I'm fine.”

“Fine,” Callum repeated, his lips pressing into a thin line. His fury at the situation

threatened to boil over, but he tamped it down. He crossed the room in two strides, his free hand brushing against Isolde's arm as if to reassure himself that she was real, that she was safe. She didn't flinch, though her body trembled beneath his touch.

Deirdre cleared her throat, drawing his attention. "He was going to kill her," she said simply, gesturing to Eoin's body. "So I killed him first."

Callum's eyes narrowed, his grip tightening on the Glock at his side. "And what's your play now, Deirdre?"

Deirdre's lips curved into a faint smile, though her eyes held no humor. "I think we both know I'm done playing games, Callum. Eoin was a monster. My loyalty died with him."

The energy in the room was suffocating, the silence broken only by the distant sounds of chaos outside. Callum's mind raced, assessing the risks, the angles. Deirdre had removed one threat, but her motives were far from altruistic. Still, for the moment, she wasn't his enemy.

He turned back to Isolde, his voice softening just a fraction. "We're leaving. Now."

Isolde hesitated, her gaze flicking to Deirdre. "What about?—"

"She can take care of herself," Callum interrupted, his tone brooking no argument. "You're my priority."

Deirdre stepped aside, her expression unreadable. "Go, Callum. Before Bradford's men regroup. This isn't over, and you know it."

Callum didn't respond. He wrapped an arm around Isolde's waist, guiding her out of the office and into the hallway where Tiernan and Pdraig were already waiting.

As they moved through the smoke and chaos, Isolde glanced up at him, her voice trembling. “Callum...”

“Not now,” he said gruffly, his focus on getting her to safety.

Callum wasn't sure what tomorrow would bring but one thing was for certain: Isolde was worth every risk. Every drop of blood. Every goddamn bullet. And he would burn the world to keep her safe.

ISOLDE

Callum crushed her body to his and kissed her brutally. Despite everything she'd just been through and his rough treatment, her body lit up like a flash of lightning across a midnight sky. The kiss ended as abruptly as it had begun, and he turned, dragging her out the back exit of the building.

Surrounded by his men, they headed back to his penthouse. Once upstairs, his men took positions down in the lobby and just outside the door.

Once inside, Callum towered over her, his sharp gaze calculating and dangerous. But despite the danger he exuded, she couldn't help but feel drawn to him like a moth to a flame. She met his challenge with defiance, her stance unwavering as she stared back at him. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, mixing with the heady scent of arousal that hung in the air. In that moment, nothing else mattered except for the heat between their bodies.

His rough hand cupped her jaw as he leaned in to capture her lips in another searing kiss. She melted against him, her fear mingling with longing as his hands roamed over her skin. For a brief moment, they were lost in each other, seeking solace and salvation in the midst of chaos.

But even as they clung to each other, they knew their time was limited. Outside the walls of the penthouse awaited a harsh reality that threatened to tear them apart. And yet, in that fleeting moment of intimacy, she found a sense of hope, a spark that promised both destruction and redemption in equal measure.

Callum ripped her dress from the neckline to the hem, tearing it from her body so she was clad only in expensive lingerie. He reached behind her and unfastened her bra, taking it off before snatching the wisp of lace that served as her panties, leaving her exposed and naked. Isolde gasped as he pressed her against the wall, his touch sending shivers down her spine as she arched into him. The urgency of their union fueled the flames of desire between them, igniting a passion that burned brighter with each fleeting moment.

“Callum,” she moaned against his lips. “We can’t do this, not here. Not like this.”

His mouth dropped to her collar bone, then lower until he sucked a hard nipple into his mouth. Raising his head, he growled “You and I are meant to be together. In my world there are some that are gifted with a fated mate.

“Fated mate?”

“One with whom we are destined to be together through many lifetimes.”

“You don’t honestly believe that, do you?” she scoffed, secretly hoping he did and that they were indeed ‘fated mates.’ It would certainly explain her growing feelings for him.

“I do. I’ve known it from the beginning. That too is something I should have shared with you some time ago.”

“So what does that mean?”

“It means you’re mine, and I’m not waiting any longer. I’m taking what belongs to me.”

When he dropped to his knees before her, he was confronted with her naked and wet pussy. His groan helped to steady her and rid her of shyness or hesitation. She wanted his mouth there. She wanted him to taste her.

Isolde quickly looked around the room and noticed two guards standing outside the balcony entrance into the penthouse. Did he really expect someone to rappel down from the roof to attack them? One was watching them, while the other had his back to them. Should she tell Callum? Before she could think any further his mouth closed around her clit, sucking hard, and rational thought became impossible.

“Callum,” she cried out. Her hands went to his hair, pulling.

The sound of her voice, raw and needy, reverberated through the room and seemed to awaken something primal in Callum. He knew what he wanted, what they both craved in that desperate moment, and he was more than willing to take it.

As his fingers probed her entrance, she quivered with anticipation. Her eyes locked onto the guards at the door, her mind racing with thoughts of what would happen if they were seen. The danger they’d been in and being watched by his men only heightened her passion, stoking the flames of her desire.

Ignoring the looming threat, Callum continued his relentless assault on her sensitive flesh. Her moans grew louder, her body arching towards him in response to his touch. The guards at the door seemed like mere shadows, distant and unimportant compared to the intensely focused world they had created together.

She gasped as Callum inserted one finger, then two, deep within her. His fingers worked in sync with his mouth, driving her closer and closer to the edge. Her heart

pounded in her ears, drowning out everything but the man who seemed intent on possessing her. She forgot everything but Callum and the overwhelming pleasure he brought her.

Just as she felt herself on the brink, Callum stopped, withdrawing his fingers and his mouth. "Callum, please," she begged, her voice hoarse. "I need you."

He stood up, his eyes locked onto hers, filled with a burning intensity that made her heart race even faster. "Trust me," he whispered, his voice a low growl that sent shivers down her spine. "Trust me, Isolde, and you'll be all right."

With that, Callum lifted her onto the table that dominated the foyer, positioning her against its cool surface. She stared into his eyes, her breath coming in short, ragged gasps. There was no turning back now.

Callum's hands were everywhere at once, exploring her body with fiery intensity. His fingers found her pussy again, rubbing, teasing, driving her wild with need. Her hips bucked against him, begging for more.

And then, without warning, Callum opened his fly, freed his cock, and drove inside her. The sensation was both shocking and exquisite, filling her completely in a way that she had never felt before. Her hands clutched the edges of the table, wanting to hold on to something, to ground herself in the midst of this overwhelming experience.

He moved inside her, slow and steady, his strokes deep and firm. His mouth found hers again, their kisses as passionate and intense as the rest of their encounter. She could feel the urgency in his movements, the fierce desire that threatened to consume them both.

And then, just when she thought she couldn't take any more, Callum began thrusting harder, his hips pounding into her with a force that sent shockwaves through her

entire body. She cried out, her voice hoarse with pleasure, her body convulsing around him as she reached the peak of her ecstasy.

Callum continued to move inside her, his own release close at hand. The sound of their bodies mingling, the steady beat of their hearts, and the distant echo of gunfire created a symphony of desire and danger.

When Callum finally stilled, his body pressed against hers, she felt a sense of completion that she had never experienced before. It was as if they had become one, their hearts beating in unison, their souls intertwined in the most intimate of ways.

Neither of them moved—time seemed to stand still as they clung to each other, basking in the afterglow of their passion. But then, with a low groan, Callum pulled away, leaving her feeling cold and exposed as he put his cock away.

He shucked out of his shirt and draped it around her, sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her to his bed.

“You will be one with me,” he growled.

Not knowing what to say, Isolde nodded, knowing she no longer cared what the consequences might bring as long as she would remain with Callum.

17

ISOLDE

During the night, Callum flipped her onto her belly and then dragged her up onto her knees. He positioned himself between her legs, and the large, bulbous head of his cock began to breach her from behind.

Pleasure and surprise intermingled in the gasp she made as he pressed in. His cock was enormous, and she could feel the raised nubs he'd warned her about all along its length. He meant to truly claim her in the ancient ways of his kind. Isolde knew once he was inside her and drew back, the barbs that covered his cock would score the inside of her pussy.

As incredibly aroused as he'd managed to make and keep her, he didn't seem to be in a particular hurry. He thrust in carefully, a slow, almost gentle motion. With each forward movement of his hips, he went a little deeper before drawing himself back. He hadn't relinquished control and gone feral, as the barbs had yet to release.

She moaned and purred in supplication and surrender. There was something about the way he fucked her that made her feel more alive than she ever had. He had explained that he meant to claim her with a claiming bite to the back of her neck. No matter the circumstances that had brought them to this time and place, she wanted Callum in a way she'd never wanted anyone.

He wrapped his hands around her hips, holding her firmly in place. Callum growled as he surged in, drawing forth an orgasmic response. Isolde cried out as he shoved

himself inside, all the way to the base of his cock. For a moment he held himself still, but Isolde wasn't having it. She couldn't stand it. She needed him, and she needed more. She wanted to feel him thrusting inside her, possessing her body as his teeth sank deep into the nape of her neck, claiming her soul as he claimed her heart and body.

He gripped her hips tighter as the barbs protruded along his length, digging into the tender flesh of her wet heat. He dragged himself back, and she yowled as she climaxed again. She'd never felt anything like the exquisitely painful pleasure of his barbs raking her inner walls. She almost managed to catch her breath before he pushed back in. He flattened the barbs more closely to his length, only to draw back, causing them to stiffen and score her flesh once again.

Callum plunged deep, setting up a rhythm that was hard, rough, and possessive. The barbs were pain and pleasure morphed into one. He fucked in and out, pounding her pussy, his cock finding that sensitive spot inside her as he hammered away.

He leaned over her back, covering her body as he rode her ruthlessly, seeming not to care that she barely had time to breathe between orgasms as he took her higher and higher. Her body stiffened in anticipation, dreading what she knew was about to come, but he drove the fear from her as he continued his relentless possession. Nosing her hair out of his way, he surged into her a final time with a brutal thrust as his teeth sank into the nape of her neck, claiming her as his own.

Callum grasped her neck in his teeth as he held himself tight against her. His body shivered, his cock pumping his seed as he came. She felt the warmth of his cum fill her and soothe the ravaged walls of her pussy. It seemed to take forever until he was empty and only when her pussy had milked the last of him from his staff did he release her neck, then run his tongue over the bite mark again and again.

"You're mine now," he rumbled deep.

“An ‘I love you’ wouldn’t go amiss,’” she managed to quip.

“I thought that went without saying.”

“It doesn’t.”

“I apologize. I love you, Isolde.”

“Good. Then I love you, too.”

He chuckled but remained inside her long after he’d come, as though he were reluctant to leave her.

The warm sun bathed the garden in a golden glow, the light catching on the dew still clinging to the velvety petals of her mother’s roses. Isolde stood in the shadow of the trellis, her back pressed to Callum’s chest, the solid warmth of him grounding her as the heady scent of flowers wrapped around them. His heartbeat, steady and strong, thudded against her back, matching the slow, measured breath she took to calm her nerves.

From their vantage point, she could see her father standing near the fountain, his familiar silhouette a stark reminder of the life she once led. James Fitzwilliam’s hand was outstretched, clasping that of Conchobar O’Neill in a gesture that was both solemn and symbolic. The reunion of their families under a new arrangement marked the end of decades of fear and animosity and the beginning of something entirely new.

“Are you certain about this?” Callum’s deep voice rumbled against her ear, his arms tightening slightly around her waist. His breath tickled her skin, and despite everything they’d endured, a faint smile tugged at her lips.

“It’s too late to turn back now,” she replied softly, her gaze fixed on the men in the

distance. “Besides, I think we both know this is the right thing—for the foundation, for Dublin... for us.”

Callum hummed low in his throat, the sound a mix of agreement and possessiveness. “You’ve changed, mo chroí .”

She tilted her head to look up at him, her amber eyes catching the sunlight as she studied his sharp features. “Of course I have. I’m a shifter now. But you’ve changed, as well.”

A faint smirk curved his lips. “Not much.”

Isolde arched a brow, her tone teasing despite the truth woven into her words. “Oh, no? The man who couldn’t let anyone close now stands here, his hands wrapped around a woman who’s turned his world upside down.”

Callum chuckled, the sound rich and full of something she couldn’t quite name. “Upside down, indeed.”

The past month had been a whirlwind—a chaotic dance of survival and transformation. Bradford’s arrest had unraveled a web of corruption that stretched further than anyone had imagined, his downfall punctuated by the revelation of his alliance with Lynch. Eoin’s death at Deirdre’s hands had been a turning point, a moment that underscored just how far they were all willing to go to protect what mattered.

And then there was Isolde herself. She had shed the skin of the naive socialite she once was, embracing the survivor within—and, more recently, the shifter. Her new reality, marked by her first hesitant transformation and the raw power that came with it, had reshaped her in ways she was still coming to terms with. She had fought tooth and claw—both figuratively and literally—to emerge stronger than ever.

“Siobhan’s still out there,” she murmured, her gaze flickering to the distant horizon. “Gone without a trace. Padraig says her assets have been liquidated, and her trail has gone cold. Why would she go? Do you think she’ll come back?”

Callum’s lips brushed her temple, a gesture as protective as it was tender. “It’s unusual for a she-cat to be out on her own. She obviously wanted to keep her secrets. She could have kept them from the human world but keeping it from those in the shifter community would have been impossible. But don’t worry, we’ll keep looking for her. Con’s trying to figure out who she is and which clan she came from. If she needs us, we’ll be there for her. But for now, we need to focus on other things.”

Her concern rested firmly in the present, where her father and Con were sealing an agreement that would merge the Fitzwilliam Foundation and the O’Neill Syndicate’s influence into something entirely unique. The foundation would continue to operate cleanly, its charitable work untouched by the darker dealings that had once shadowed her father’s past. But it would also be protected—by Callum, by her, by the family they had forged in blood and fire.

She shifted slightly, the sunlight catching on the diamond ring now gracing her finger. It sparkled like a beacon, a symbol of the bond she and Callum had forged through their dangerous obsession with one another. It wasn’t just love—it was something deeper, something unbreakable.

His arms tightened around her, pulling her closer as he followed her gaze to her father. “He looks content.”

“He is,” Isolde said softly. “I think he just wanted peace and wasn’t sure how to get it.”

“He should have trusted Con.” Callum’s lips quirked. “And you?”

She turned in his arms, her hands sliding up to rest against his chest. The intensity in

his eyes burned into hers, dark and consuming, but there was something else there now—a softness, a vulnerability he reserved only for her.

“I never thought I’d find peace in someone like you,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “But here we are.”

He leaned down, his forehead brushing hers. “You’re mine, Isolde Fitzwilliam,” he said, his voice a low growl that sent a shiver down her spine. “And I’ll burn the world down to keep you safe.”

She smiled, her fingers curling into his shirt. “Let’s not burn it just yet. We have a wedding to plan.”

The sun cast the garden in hues of amber and rose, Isolde leaned into Callum’s embrace, her heart steady and sure. Whatever lay ahead—danger, intrigue, power, love—they would face it together.

And together, they would shape their world into something worthy of the obsession that had brought them here.

The sun dipped low over Galway Bay, casting the abbey in hues of amber and crimson as the evening breeze swept across the hills. The ancient stone ruins stood sentinel on the cliffside, a place steeped in history and whispers of old magic. Isolde stood at the edge of the cliff, the wind teasing the loose strands of her dark chestnut hair as she stared out over the expanse of water and jagged rocks below.

Callum moved behind her. She could feel his presence even before she felt his hands settle on her hips. His touch was firm, possessive, and it sent a shiver down her spine that had nothing to do with the cool air.

“You’re restless,” he said, his voice low and gravelly, carrying just enough of his Irish lilt to make her stomach twist in that way it always did.

Isolde glanced over her shoulder at him, her lips quirking in a faint smile. “So are you.”

His dark eyes met hers, their intensity a steady flame that never seemed to waver. “Maybe I am. But tonight isn’t about me.”

Her pulse quickened at the significance of his words, the promise beneath them. There had been so much danger, so much bloodshed over the past month. And yet here they were, standing together above the world as if nothing could touch them.

“You brought me here for a reason,” she said, her voice softer now, the wind stealing the sharp edge from her tone. “What is it?”

Callum’s lips twitched in the faintest of smiles, and he stepped closer, the heat of him seeping into her even as the chill of the cliffside bit at her skin. “I thought you’d enjoy the view.”

She huffed a soft laugh, shaking her head. “Try again.”

His hands tightened on her hips briefly, a subtle reminder of the control he wielded so effortlessly. “You’ve been caged for weeks, Isolde. It’s time to run.”

Her heart skipped a beat at the implication in his words. The shift was still new to her, a wild and exhilarating part of herself she was learning to embrace. But Callum? He wore his nature like a second skin—lethal, confident, unrelenting.

“Here?” she asked, her gaze sweeping the hills and cliffs, the beaches far below.

“Here,” he confirmed, his voice like a dark promise. “No one to watch. No one to judge. Just us.”

Her chest tightened as she searched his face, looking for something—assurance,

encouragement, maybe even a hint of doubt. But Callum was unreadable, his expression calm but charged with the same energy that thrummed in her veins.

“Let’s see if you can keep up,” she said, her tone playful despite the nervous flutter in her stomach.

Callum’s smirk widened, his hands sliding away as he stepped back, his movements deliberate and predatory. “Don’t fall behind, mo chroí .”

The transformation came easier now, the pull of her panther form as natural as breathing. Isolde felt the ripple of energy race through her as the mist swirled around her, her body shifting as her senses sharpened, her vision bleeding into vivid hues of gold and green.

When she looked up, Callum was already in his panther form, his sleek black fur glinting in the fading light. He stood on the edge of the cliff, his emerald eyes locked on her, waiting.

The wildness of the shift surged in her chest as she stepped forward, her own panther form fully realized. She gave a low growl, testing the stability of her paws against the rocky ground before springing forward.

Callum took off like a shadow, his powerful muscles propelling him across the uneven terrain with effortless grace. Isolde followed, the wind whipping past her as they raced over the hills, her heartbeat matching the pounding of her paws against the earth.

The cliffs gave way to rolling fields as she chased him, her own movements growing more confident with each stride. Callum slowed just enough for her to catch up, his gaze flicking toward her with an expression that was almost teasing.

You’re holding back , she thought, the words forming instinctively in her mind.

Callum growled low, the sound vibrating through her. Maybe. Show me what you've got, kitten.

The challenge ignited something primal in her, and she surged forward, her body coiling and springing as she shot past him. The exhilaration of the run swept through her like wildfire, the freedom of the moment a balm to the chaos that had so recently consumed her life.

They reached the cliffs above the beach just as the moon began to rise, its silver light painting the waves in shimmering streaks. Isolde skidded to a halt, her sides heaving as she took in the view.

She simply stared, her panther eyes taking in the sharp lines of his jaw, the dark hair ruffled by the wind, and the raw power that radiated from him. When she shifted back, the air around her seemed to hum with the energy of their transformation.

"You didn't tell me it would feel like this," she said, her voice breathless as she turned to face him fully.

The mist rose up to envelop Callum and when he emerged, his lips curved in a faint smile, his gaze sweeping over her in a way that made her acutely aware of her bare skin. "Some things can't be explained, Isolde. They have to be felt."

She stepped closer, the salty breeze tugging at her hair as she tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. "And this? What is this we're feeling?"

His hand came up, his fingers brushing against her cheek with surprising gentleness. "Obsession. Need. You've always been mine, even when neither of us knew it."

Her breath hitched as his other hand settled on her hip, pulling her flush against him. The heat between them was undeniable, the pull magnetic as his mouth descended on hers in a kiss that was as consuming as the wild run they'd just shared.

The kiss deepened, his dominance and her defiance colliding in a way that left them both breathless. When they finally pulled apart, Callum's forehead rested against hers, his voice a rough whisper.

“Run with me again, mo chroí . Always.”

Isolde smiled, her fingers curling into his hair as she whispered back, “Always.”

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