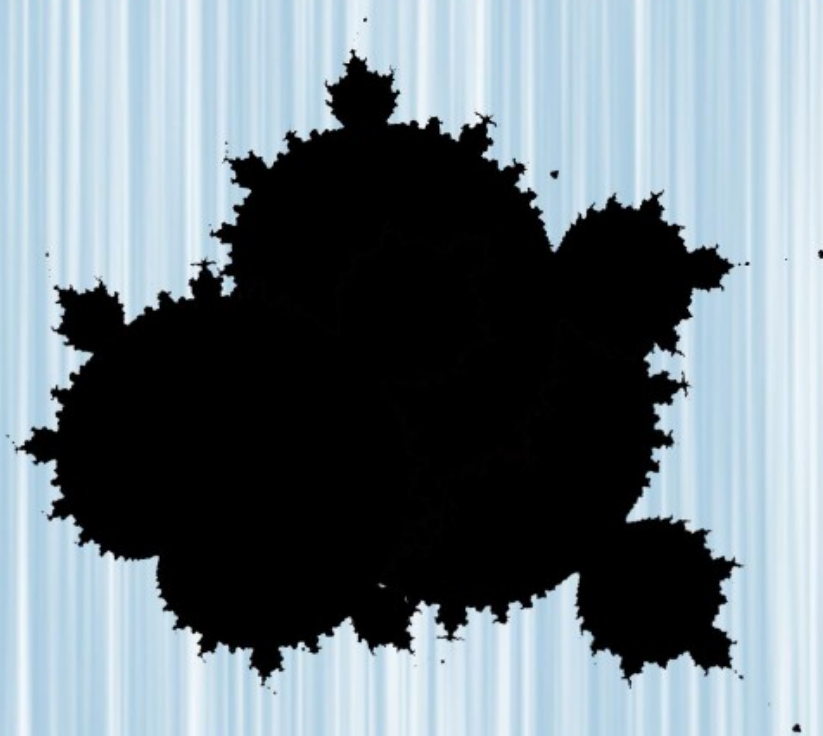


The
Weeping
Lore



Gregory Ashe

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Prologue

Pearl Morecott had her hair brushed, a fresh pair of stockings, and the two derringers in her purse. She was out for a typical Friday night. Bundled in her heavy fur coat, hood pulled up, Pearl shivered and waited—but mostly shivered—in the alley. This close to the Mississippi, the wet river smell hung in the air, mixing with the trampled garbage of the alley. Her silvery breath played hide and seek with coal and wood smoke. A footstep sounded at the mouth of the street.

With a grin and a tip of his hat, Harry Witte moved into the alley. He smiled, a smile that hit the back of Pearl's knees like a runaway horse, chafed his hands, and said, "Looking lovely, Pearl."

"It's freezing out, Harry. You're sure?"

"Absolutely. Freddy?"

At the sound of his name, a second man stepped into the alley. Where Harry Witte was young and slender and heart-stoppingly handsome, Professor Friedrich von der Ehmke was old and short and vibrated like a cold, angry wire. He held a walking cane with a silver head in one hand. The dark wood and metal matched the salt and pepper in his hair and beard. With a gesture of the cane, he motioned Harry forward.

Harry slipped his hand into Pearl's.

It meant nothing, of course, but a flush climbed Pearl's cheeks, and for a moment she forgot the wind that snapped at the corner of the alley. He led her to down the cramped lane, cutting through a passage choked with the sooty remains of a garbage fire, and helping her over—strong hands around her waist, another flare of heat—a pool of slush. On the far side, Pearl removed Harry's hands and buried her own hands in the pockets of her coat.

Harry flashed her the same sliver of a grin.

Behind them, Freddy splashed and swore, and that was enough to get them both moving again.

The alley joined a narrow street that ran along a three-story building. The city smoke had left a patina on the brick and darkened the windows. Behind the smeared glass, no light showed. The Breckenridge Institute was a small, privately funded anthropological society, and tonight, Pearl Morecott was a thief.

Freddy swallowed a cough, and buried under the sound, Pearl heard footsteps. She snagged Harry's coat and flicked a finger at the street ahead. Harry pulled back into the shadows next to her. His breath smelled of mint and thyme and was warm on her cheek.

Freddy, close behind her, smelled of cabbage and onion and wet wool.

A minute later, a watchman trundled past the mouth of the alley. His hooded lantern swept light across the snow and slush. And then he was past, the cone of light narrowing like a train moving into the night, and then gone.

"Eyes sharp, my dear," Harry whispered. He trotted towards the wall, moving swift and sure across the ice, and with a leap he closed his hands over the lip of the wall and pulled himself up and over. Freddy followed more slowly, tossing his walking cane over the wall and then dragging himself up the frost-rimed brick. And then both men were gone.

Darkness and cold settled in, and for a moment Pearl entertained herself with the image of Harry's legs and backside as he ran, and then she huddled into the fur and wished for mulled wine and a fire.

Minutes ticked by slowly. Pearl eased her freezing feet in the soiled snow, trying to work warmth into her toes. Then she heard the sound. A wet, slobbery sound. She eased one hand into her purse, closed her fingers around the first derringer, and put her back to the wall of the alley.

Silence again, filled with the rush of blood in her ears.

Then, the slobber.

Pearl pulled the derringer from her purse.

St. Louis was a city like any other. It had its share of beggars and thieves, cutthroats and rapists. Pearl Morecott had spent most of her life with eyes closed to that side of the city. Now, though, the work she did with Harry and Freddy brought her into frequent contact with tramps and trash. Normally, Harry and Freddy were there to help. When they weren't, she had the derringers.

A dog padded by in the snow, its feet making only the slightest crunch, and then disappeared. Then a burst of voices came from a nearby street, loud and bright with liquor, in spite of the laws that the bluenoses had cooked up. Pearl tried to relax, flexing her fingers on the derringer, taking slow breaths that eddied in trails of white. The voices faded down the street, stealing the last scraps of warmth and cheer from the air, and then Pearl was alone.

Pearl Morecott was a woman with a sensible head, a good eye, and a pair of derringers. She didn't need to be afraid of a drunk or even a city thug.

But she'd learned with Harry Witte that there were worse things than drunks or thugs wandering the streets of St. Louis.

Especially at night.

Especially for silly women, foolish enough to be waiting alone in dark alleys.

Damn Harry Witte for this plan. And damn Tommy Morecott for dragging her into this mad world and then abandoning her.

A shadow had grown thicker along the wall of the Institute. A trick of the light? One of the Children? Pearl pulled the derringer from her purse. The wet, slapping sound of flesh on stone came again, louder now. Pearl stayed where she was. The dark bulk pressed against the wall, moving slowly down the street, still far enough from the light that Pearl could only guess at its form.

A bullet might kill it. Or it might not. The Children were tricky like that. If it tried to go over the wall, though, Pearl would have to stop it. Keeping her back to the bricks, Pearl edged down the alley. Freezing water slid into her shoe. The smell of offal and something rotting exploded when she broke an icy casing. The shadow that pressed itself against the wall of the Institute, suckling at the brick, seemed oblivious to her.

The shape bent, gathering itself like folds of velvet. Pearl brought up the derringer.

Her hand was steady. Tommy would have been proud.

Harry would be proud.

Then a silver-handled walking stick flew over the wall and landed with a clatter on the pavement. The shadow rippled and fled, and with a shaky breath, Pearl moved into the street.

Freddy's face, flushed and sweating, inched above the bricks.

Yellow light dusted the bricks beneath Pearl's feet, and she turned. The watchman raised his lantern.

"Officer," Pearl shouted, waving a hand and shuffling towards him. "Officer, thank goodness."

A little sob in her voice. That was what it needed.

“Officer, thank heavens.”

Yes, that was better.

The man lowered his lantern as she drew closer. She caught enough of his face to see lines from cold and sun, a bushy beard, and eyes that were red and watery. When Pearl scented the whiskey on his breath, she smiled a little wider. Even watchmen needed help with the cold.

“Not an officer, ma’am,” the man said.

Pearl stumbled on purpose, arms going wide. The man reacted. The lantern dropped, the flame waved wildly, and he caught her before she hit the ground. Behind her, Pearl heard the sound of boots striking the pavement.

“Thank you, Officer. I’ve been wandering these streets for hours, lost and dying of the cold.”

“Not an officer, ma’am,” the man said again. He helped her to her feet, led her around to the front of the institute, and settled her in a chair. After a small glass of whiskey—“For the cold,” the man assured her, and Pearl agreed heartily—he flagged down a cab, and less than half an hour later, Pearl was stripping off wet shoes and stockings in her apartment, basking in the warmth of the room, and thinking of her bed. A rap at the door made her pause, pull on a pair of slippers, and draw her coat around her more tightly.

When she saw Harry Witte smiling at her, Pearl undid the chain and opened the door. Harry swept into the room, arms wide, and let out a laugh.

“Well done, Pearl. As always.”

She smiled in spite of herself.

Freddy came through the door next, stamping his feet and shaking slush across her rug. He coughed, radiating a steady aura of cabbage and onion and wet wool through the room.

Pearl shut the door and leaned against it.

“Did you get it?”

Darkness settled over Harry’s face. Then, in the light of the gas lamps, she noticed the purpling bruise across his cheek.

“What happened?”

“Some of the Children were there before us,” Harry said.

“Freddy?”

Distaste crossed the Hun’s face at his pet name, but some of the tension left him as he shook his head. “Fine, Pearl. Thank you for asking. I had gone into the Institute’s archives while Harry searched the exhibit. I thought I saw something—”

“A shadow,” Pearl said.

“Yes. How did you know?”

She told them about the alley and asked, “What about you, Harry?”

“Not a shadow,” Harry said. “The fellow who gave me this shiner was flesh and blood, sure enough. I only caught a glimpse of him.”

“And the book?”

“Gone. The glass all smashed in. By the time I was back on my feet, the fellow had cleared out.”

Freddy’s hands tightened on the walking stick. “This is the third time, Harry. Whoever they are, they are faster than us. We can’t allow this to keep happening.”

“I know,” Harry sighed. For a moment, he looked young and tired, and then his face smoothed. “We’ll do better. We have to do better. These things are too dangerous to be in the hands of the Children.”

Pearl let them out. Harry squeezed her arm through her coat, gave a weary smile, and disappeared down the stairs. When she had shut the door, Pearl said goodbye to Harry Witte for a second time, tasting his name on her lips, and shrugged out of her coat, and went to fix herself a drink.

She kept the gaslights on until dawn broke the horizon. She thought of shadows.

Chapter 1

At some point during the night, something had crawled into Cian Shea's mouth and died. A dog, most likely. A muddy, mangy mutt. His head blared with a single, unending trumpet-note that had gotten trapped inside the night before, between rounds of the cheap, hard-hitting moonshine Patrick served. The small room he rented above the sausage shop was permeated with the smells of cheap spices used in abundance, cast-off meat, and the mixture of cleaner and decay that he had, before moving to this room, previously associated with butcher shops.

Cian grabbed the basin and emptied his stomach. It was a matter-of-fact thing, business as usual for Cian Shea, and it was the proper way to start a morning. He poured himself a glass of water, pressed the chilled pitched against his forehead, and gave suicide a slow, friendly wink.

But not today.

Cian Shea was a survivor. Say what you fucking will about Cian Shea, and most everyone did, he was a survivor.

There wasn't a drop of booze in the place, which meant Cian had to drink the water in the pitcher, dress, and then carry the basin downstairs to rinse it out in the freezing cold. He dropped the basin back in his room, near the bed, where it would doubtless be needed the next morning. And the morning after that. And the morning after that.

The rest of the room left little mystery about Cian: a battered dresser that held exactly one pair of trousers, two shirts, and two pairs of underclothes. A dressing table, its mirror broken and removed ages ago. And, sitting on top of the dressing table, the Colt M1911, which had seen Cian through the Great War, and then through murder, and then through desertion.

Which pretty much summed up his life.

He tucked the gun into the back of his trousers, shrugged on his coat, and headed for the door. He'd owned a hat, once, but that had been before the war. Since then, hats didn't seem quite so important. He trotted down the stairs, his breath misting between the cracks that let in light and cold, and out onto the street. Cian had made it two steps down the street when tap-tap-tap came from the shuttered window of the sausage shop.

Burying hands in pockets, Cian went around back and let himself in. The rear half of the building held a small set of rooms—kitchen, bedroom, sitting room—used by the sausage-maker and his wife. Mrs. Molly Doyle stood at a cramped wooden table, which had one of its legs supported by the crumbling remains of a ceramic rabbit, kneading bread dough with a boxer's arms. Her frizzy red hair was streaked with gray and stood out in a long, crinkled cloud. Flour smudged her chin, and it was the only spot of her face that wasn't as red as her hair.

"Cian Shea," Molly said. Thump went the dough as it slammed onto the table. The ceramic rabbit quivered.

"I know, Mrs. Doyle. I was just coming round to talk to you about the rent."

"It's late. There's nothing to talk about." Thump again, the ceramic rabbit shivering, and then another thump. Molly glanced up at Cian, puffed a breath that disturbed the flour on her chin, and then thump. "You look like a haystack. What's wrong?"

Running a hand through his hair, Cian tried a smile. It felt like a borrowed suit. Once, before the war, Cian had been good at lots of things. That list had even included smiling. Now—

"Don't make that face at me," Molly said. "That's two months now, Cian. Mr. Doyle wants you out by the end of the week."

“Fair enough,” Cian said. He rubbed his thumb across the flour-dusted surface of the table, studied his finger, and then brushed his hands off. “If I can get some of the money before then?”

The next thump of the bread dough was softer. Molly nodded, or tried to nod.

“Don’t suppose you have anything that needs doing?” Cian asked. “Wood to chop? Coal bin filled? It’s hard days, Mrs. Doyle.”

She sniffed, and the dough resumed its ceramic-rabbit-shattering force. “Nothing today, Cian Shea. Now. Sit yourself down. I’ll fix you a bite to eat, and then I’m going to run a comb through that hair so that you don’t scare every respectable woman into hiding.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Doyle, but I’ve already eaten. I’ll be on my way. Day’s wasting.”

Watery blue eyes fixed him, eyes that didn’t believe a single word, but she didn’t argue. Cian let himself out the back door, crossed the neat yard with its vegetable patch buried under winter, and was on his way to the street when the tap-tap-tap from the window stopped him. This time, the shutters popped open, letting out a steamy burst of air smelling of yeast and the sausage works. Molly Doyle had somehow managed to work two streaks of flour into her hair, and she looked a bit mad as she stuck her head out the window.

“Cian Shea, if you need work that bad, go see Bobby Flynn at Seamus’s. He’s my godson’s cousin, and he’s a wastrel and a drunk, which means the two of you will be fast friends. And don’t you dare show your face down her until you’ve run a comb through that hair!”

She ended with a shout, slammed the shutters, and then Cian stood alone, shivering, and wondering if Molly Doyle thought she was his mother or his warden.

For a mick, he didn’t know if there was much of a difference.

When he reached the street, Cian let out a trail of frozen breath and started south. Now he could relax. Getting past the DoYLES had been the biggest hurdle of the day. If Molly caught him, it was nothing more than a bit of mothering—or wardening—and a gentle reminder. If it were Mr. Doyle, well, Cian wouldn't need to worry about running a comb through his hair. He'd be too busy trying to keep the old mick from wringing his neck.

The street Cian followed was a street only in the most general meaning of that word, like most of the streets in Kerry Patch. A muddy rut was probably a better label. Ramshackle buildings lined the rut, some plastered and painted, but most exposed to the icy December air. Occasionally, brick foundations blushed through the snow, embarrassed reminders of once-lofty plans. Brick was a luxury few in Kerry Patch could afford. With more and more families piling into Kerry Patch every day, even lumber was becoming a sign of stability—many of the immigrants made do with lean-tos and shanties.

Over this clutch of hovels rose the spires of St. Patrick and St. Michael the Archangel and St. Bridget of Erin. They stood like needles ready to pierce the scruffy gray clouds, ready to bind earth and heaven. Cian was fairly sure that heaven would need a bit more binding, though, than whatever cheap thread those churches could work up. Even God didn't want to be too close to Kerry Patch.

Being a mick himself, born and bred in St. Louis, Cian was a part of Kerry Patch. Knowing which streets to take, which boys to make a joke with, which girls to steer clear of—those things helped keep him out of trouble. For the most part. Someone who wandered into the Patch by mistake, or came looking for trouble, would be lucky to get out with his life.

As though conjured by the thought, a pair of teenage boys emerged to stand at the mouth of an alley, watching Cian. One of the boys was smoking. The other had a knife he was twirling,

in spite of the cold. Cian locked eyes with them, waited for them to make a move. It was morning, it was light out, but it was also Kerry Patch.

Deterred, perhaps, by Cian's size, or by the glower on his face that was mostly due to a hangover, or maybe simply by the wild hair Molly Doyle had called a haystack, the two boys turned away, watching for another, easier mark to pass.

Cian felt a flicker of something. Disappointment.

It would have felt good to break something.

He kept on his way. Somewhere in the world, there was probably someone who liked St. Louis. It was, by any report, one of the great cities in the world, and one of the largest in the United States. But Cian, although born and bred in the Patch, had no taste for it. In summer, the air was wet and hot and heavy, and the smoke so bad that day turned to night. In winter, ice and snow pummeled the streets, murdering the homeless by the score—although there were plenty more where they came from. The smoke didn't abate, and there were days when it filled the streets like fog and clung to the layers of snow in a sooty cape.

Today promised to be a day much like any other. The sky was bright blue, the sun a copper disc, and the wind from the northwest cut through Cian's coat and shirt and skin. He hurried south. There were places a man could get work in St. Louis. Even a man like Cian. So he went to David Fitzgerald, who had a dry goods store on the edge of Kerry Patch. Already the corner outside the store was crowded with men, and a few women, looking for David Fitzgerald's most valuable stock: jobs. The men gave Cian dirty looks. Some of the men knew him, and some of the looks were justified. The rest were simply the looks of men who feared competition. The women, on the other hand, ignored him. Cian preferred it that way. One of them—a girl who couldn't have been more than sixteen—wore a dress so thin that it couldn't

have done anything to stop the cold. She coughed into the corner of her arm as Cian passed. Her hands were bare, red and chapped from the cold.

When she looked up, her dark eyes reminded Cian of Corinne.

Cian stepped into the store and pushed Corinne and the dark haired girl to the back of his mind. He passed the bins of flour and the sacks of sugar, passed the jugs of molasses and oil and a thousand other things. David sat behind the counter, a short man with his hair clipped above the ears and eyes that had seen too much of Kerry Patch. He looked up, saw Cian, and said, “Nothing today, Cian.”

“Lot of folks outside waiting, David.”

“I told them the same thing.”

“Nothing? Not even for me?”

David snorted.

Cian turned back to leave the store, but stopped when he saw the girl again. A slender little thing, like a twig wrapped up in a sheet of cotton. Corinne hadn’t been thin like that. She’d had all the right curves, all the right lines, and dark eyes. She had spoken with a lisp, and he’d only understood one word in ten, and once they had made love in a patch of strawberries, and the smell of it had followed Cian all the way back to winter in St. Louis. Mostly, though, he remembered the screams from the last night he had seen her.

“David.”

The short man glanced up, not willing to meet Cian’s eyes.

“Got a coat?”

David disappeared into the back and came out with a bulky wool coat.

“How much?”

“Two dollars.”

Cian pulled the handful of coins from his pocket and spilled them onto the counter. David sorted them.

“Dollar seventy three.”

“I’ll owe you the rest.”

David nodded and passed over the coat.

The cold hit Cian when he stepped out onto the street. He walked over to the girl, tapped her on the shoulder, and said, “Here you are, doll.” He dropped the coat into her lap.

Then he started walking. The girl shouted something after him. Cian didn’t look back.

He’d learned—he’d learned it in France, in fucking France—that it was better to keep walking.

But that didn’t mean he didn’t still hear her screams.

Chapter 2

The clay mines of Cheltenham were another dead end.

The copper-coin-sun glinted almost halfway across the sky when Cian reached the first mine.

“No work,” the supervisor said when he saw Cian.

Cian glanced at the line of men filing into the mines. “Looks like you’ve got plenty of work.”

“Not for you. Last time you finished a shift, you got piss drunk, broke two of my boys’ arms, and disappeared for a month.”

Cian tried two other mines, but word had spread, and so he started back to the Patch. When he passed David Fitzgerald’s, a dozen people still clustered outside, ghosts who refused to be driven off. The girl with the dark eyes was gone. Cian hoped she’d gotten a bit of work.

Read any newspaper, and it told you things were good and getting better—unless you were a Bolshevik or an anarchist. Read any newspaper, and it told you about the rich getting richer. It told you about the parties and the champagne. It told you about new factories and new jobs.

It didn’t tell you that if you were a mick deserter, if you were Cian Shea, you were going to have shit luck finding any of those new jobs. There wasn’t anyone to blame. Cian had made his bed. He’d made his bed in France, with a bullet to the back of a bastard’s head, and he’d never looked back.

But it made it hard to pay the rent sometimes.

And that was how, with the afternoon light glinting off the hard crusts of snow, Cian Shea found himself in front of Seamus's. The rambling structure was purportedly a private residence owned by Seamus Daniels. Anyone who had spent more than five minutes in the Patch, though, knew better. Seamus's had enough bedrooms, and more than enough girls, to be a brothel. It had enough thugs, and more than enough guns, to be a fortress. It had the slunk-down, broke-back look of a mangy dog. But most importantly, it had a steady stream of Canadian booze—the good stuff—and the men who could provide it to you.

Cian went inside. The front room was large and drafty and cold. The smell of a fire and damp wood mixed with the harsher smell of spilled spirits. Tables and chairs clustered around an iron stove at the center of the room, but the coals had gone out, and the men and women who sat playing cards and talking looked almost as miserable as Cian. A few of them glanced up when he entered; most of them didn't. At the bar stood a bull of a man whose neck had long since been swallowed by his massive beard.

The man had his hands under the bar, which meant he was holding a gun.

The Colt poked into Cian's back with every step as he crossed the room. The Colt was a good gun. A solid gun.

Like any gun, it wasn't going to do him a whole lot of good if this guy shot him dead first.

Buried somewhere underneath the man's beard was a mouth, and it said, "Yes?" The voice was soft, almost polite, and lacked any of the rough mick edges that most of Kerry Patch wore.

"I'm here to see Bobby Flynn. Molly Doyle sent me."

For a minute, there was no response, and then an earthquake happened underneath the placid surface of the beard. The man's face shifted, his mouth emerged from the tangle of hair.

And he started laughing.

"I'm Bobby Flynn," he said, stretching a hand across the bar. Cian shook it. "Why'd my auntie send you here?"

"She said you were a drunk and a wastrel and that we'd get along just fine."

Another mountainous laugh. "That sounds like Auntie Mol. Who are you?"

"Cian Shea."

"I've heard of you."

"Been going through a bit of a rough patch."

"Heard you kicked down a god-damned door at the Pink Pony looking for a girl."

"Two."

"Huh?"

"Two doors. The second one wasn't locked, but I was in the kicking mood."

"And the girl?"

"She was in the kicking mood too. Left me on the ground with my head ringing."

Bobby's mouth twitched, sending ripples through the cascade of facial hair, but he just nodded. He produced a pair of tumblers and poured them each a finger of whiskey, then slid a glass towards Cian. Bobby tossed his drink back. Cian held his by the rim, swirling the drink, scenting the air.

"What about the fellow who was with her?" Bobby asked as he set his glass down.

Cian drank the whiskey and said, "That's one of the reasons I can't find a job."

“Sit here a minute,” Bobby said, pointing to an empty table near the edge of the room.

“Let me see.”

The big, bearded man disappeared into the back. Cian took his seat and realized why the table had been empty: it was set next to a chink in the mortar of the log structure, and an icy knife of wind cut the air near Cian’s feet. One of the women near the cold stove stood up and shrugged out of a wool coat, revealing a faded pink dress that left her shoulders bare. A frayed pink ribbon tugged the front of her dress down, revealing an impressive pair of business assets. She walked over and sat down at Cian’s table, leaning forward to give him a view, and smiled. She had a nice smile, and nice eyes, and she quivered a little, like the end of a rabbit’s nose.

“Morning,” she said.

“Morning.”

“Don’t suppose you’re looking for company?”

Cian gave her a grin, and the woman’s smile broadened. “Not right now, lady,” he said. “I’m here for business.”

Her smile faded slightly, the edges sharpening, and her voice eased like a piece of over-stretched leather. “Me too,” she said, settling back into her seat. “But business is a bitch in winter.”

“Your friends are waiting for you,” Cian said, glancing over at the table she had left.

The woman snorted, chafing her shoulders, and said, “Friends. Not a single man over there is playing with a full deck of cards, if you know what I mean. Half the girls are just as bad. You don’t mind if I sit here a moment, do you?”

Cian shook his head. He stood up, retrieved her coat from where she had left it, and settled it around her shoulders before taking his seat. She cocked an eyebrow. “A gentleman.”

“I already gave away one coat today,” Cian said. “I need the one I have.”

“I’m Eileen.”

“Cian.”

“Why are you here? You owe them money?”

Cian shook his head.

“What then? Extra muscle? You look like you’re built for it.”

“Just looking for a job.”

“Want my advice?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“Walk on out of here right now. You’re not cut out for this.”

“And how do you know I’m not cut out for this?”

She smiled, and suddenly she looked nineteen and full of spring, and she propped her chin on her hand. “Your eyes, baby boy. You’ve got eyes like a man who’s hurting close to dying. Nobody here has eyes like that.” She sounded a little sad at the end.

The door opened at the back of the room, and Bobby waved for Cian. Cian stood up, looked at Eileen one last time, and said, “I think you’ve got nice eyes too.”

Her smile shrank. “That’s not what I said, baby boy. Good luck.”

Cian joined Bobby by the door. The bearded man said, “She bothering you?”

“No.”

“Come on, then.”

Bobby led Cian back along a cramped hallway. Barrels crowded one side of the passageway, with crates stacked on top, glass winking from between the packing. The air was slightly warmer here, with a hint of coal smoke, perfume, and too many bodies pressed close

together. It was enough to make Cian breathe through his mouth and wipe his eyes. The hall turned twice before it ended at a plain door, the bottom scuffed from where it dragged. A massive man—big enough that he made Bobby look small—sat on a chair, reading a book. He glanced at Bobby and held up a finger.

They came to a standstill outside the door. The sound of raised voices filtered through the wood. Shouts punctuated by the bark of something heavy and wooden coming down. The big man shifted, his chair creaking a warning, but then the door flew open. A straw-haired man, short of middle-age and with a face red as a furnace, burst out of the room and pushed past Bobby and Cian. He gave them a look, and then a second glance at Cian before he stormed down the hallway.

“Hugh O’Morain,” Bobby said. “He’s the second, and you’ll want to—”

But before Bobby could finish, the big man settled back into his chair and waved them forward. Bobby led Cian into the far room. A potbellied stove warmed the room, and Cian felt the tips of his nose and ears begin to thaw. A rumpled bed took up one corner of the room, with a pair of stockings draped over the footboard. A dresser, with a basin full of scummy water and an open razor sitting on top. One narrow window, boarded shut, to judge by the nails sticking out of the frame. And then a heavy table and chairs finished everything out.

An old man sat at the table, spinning a pistol across the wood with one hand, tugging a blanket tighter around his shoulders with the other. One eye twitched frantically, as though trying to blink something away. A longer look told Cian that the man wasn’t as old as he seemed—although his hair was white, there were only the first signs of lines around the man’s mouth and eyes, and the hand that played with the pistol looked strong still.

“Boss,” Bobby said. “This is the fellow I was talking to you about.” Then Bobby looked at Cian. “Cian, this is Seamus Daniels.”

“Pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“Get out,” Seamus snapped. The pistol came to a rest, and Seamus’s fingers closed around the grip.

Bobby started backwards, and Cian moved with him.

“Not you,” Seamus said, raising the pistol and pointing it at Cian. Then he shifted the gun, aiming it at Bobby. “You.”

Bobby disappeared. The door swung shut behind him. The pistol levitated in the air a moment longer. And then Cian noticed the palsy in Seamus’s hand. The boss lowered the pistol to the table and gave it a push, sending it spinning again.

The only sound was the scrape of the pistol, and then a quiet pop from the furnace. And then a softer sound, barely noticeable over the rattle of the gun.

Seamus Daniels was crying.

Not huge, racking sobs. Just sniffles and breaths. His cheeks were wet, though, and his eyes stared openly at nothing.

Then, with a start, Seamus gave a cracking laugh, wiped his face with his sleeve, and clutched the pistol.

“I can’t trust them,” he said. “Not a single fucking one of them.”

Cian was silent. It was the only good card in a bad hand.

Seamus looked over at him, then gestured with the pistol. “Come over here. We’ve got to settle this up.”

Keeping both eyes on the pistol, Cian moved across the room. Seamus looked up at him. He had watery blue eyes, red-rimmed and puffy. He reeked of alcohol. The twitch played along one side of his face, making the corner of his mouth leap and jerk.

“Bobby said you’re Cian Shea.”

“That’s right.”

“I knew your father. Did you know that?”

“Lots of people knew him.”

“That sounds like Niall’s boy. No shit from anybody. Your mother was older than him. Almost ten years.”

“They’re both dead.”

“She was a pretty girl. She never looked twice at me, did you know that?” Seamus waited a moment, and then went on. “Your father, he kept his word. He did what he said he’d do. Are you like that?”

Cian thought of Corinne. Of her dark hair across the side of her face, of her skirts hiked up above her waist, of her cheek pressed into the corner of the wall. She had been crying after she had run out of screams. Cian thought of the weight of the Colt, and the slow give of the trigger, and then the recoil.

He thought Niall Shea was better off dead and not knowing what became of his son.

“I’ll do the job and make sure it’s done,” Cian said.

“No shit,” Seamus said. “No shit from anybody. Just like Niall.” He bent down and lifted a wooden box from beside his chair and slid it across the table. The box looked new, the edges still sharp, with the smell of fresh-cut wood clinging to it. It took Cian a moment to realize that there was no obvious way to open the box—no hinges, no clasp, no lid. “You take this and

deliver it. No questions. No fooling around. You leave here, you go straight there, and come right back. There's a hundred dollars in it for you."

A hundred dollars. More than Cian had made in the last year. More than he would have made working for a month at the clay mines. That meant that the deal was sour; it was too good to be true.

"What kind of trouble is there going to be?"

Seamus stared at him for a moment. The twitch left his face, and he was as still as a corpse. And then he shrieked with laughter. He clasped both hands over his mouth, trying to stifle the sound, and slowly he sank back into his seat. The shrill laughter sounded painful, and it took him several minutes to get it under control.

That was when Cian knew he was dealing with a madman.

Wiping his eyes, Seamus said, "I'm sorry. Truly. I don't . . . I don't sleep well anymore. Any trouble," a nervous giggle pressed its way out before Seamus got control of himself again, "any trouble, I'm sure you can handle. Bobby says you can carry yourself."

Cian looked at the madman, and he looked at the box, no more than a foot long and six inches wide, and he thought about a hundred dollars in his pocket.

"What's the address?"

Chapter 3

Since coming back to St. Louis, time had become a series of unfortunate commitments for Irene Lovell. Three months had passed since she had dragged her suitcases through the wide, double doors, up the sweeping staircase, down the long, Turkish rug, and into her pink-and-white confection of a room that she had grown up in. Three months of soirees and dinners and fetes and dinners and masques and dinners. So many dinners. Everything scheduled in advance. An outing with the Andersons. Tea with Mary Jones and her daughters. A weekend at the lake with the King family.

Three months, in other words, of hell.

Irene had her suitcase on the bed. It was open, a hungry mouth waiting for its first bite, and it gave off the smell of leather and dirt and travel. Irene met the suitcase's gaze, stare for stare, and held her favorite blue dress in both hands. For a moment, neither woman nor suitcase dared to move.

And then, with a flap of finality, Irene folded the dress and laid it in the waiting suitcase.

The zippered teeth gave back an eager grin.

She moved more quickly after this. All her best dresses, of course. Her corselettes, her stockings, two pairs of sensible shoes, a heavy scarf, a shawl. Her hat she would have to wear, but she could have others made when she found somewhere to settle down.

San Francisco, perhaps. Or New Orleans. The east coast was out of Or Paris.

Irene smoothed a wrinkle from the blouse she was folding, straightened a crease, and thought about the City of Lights. *La belle Paris*. A croissant, a cup of coffee, a handsome French man who would whisper Baudelaire to her, or Valery, or—to be honest—anything at all. Irene

would have found a whispered version of the wine list to be romantic. It would have been a step up from anything an American man could offer.

Someone was pounding on the front doors.

Ignoring the sound, Irene studied the hatboxes in her closet, considering how many she might be able to take with her. Two? Three? If she tipped a porter at the railway station very well, maybe three.

The pounding downstairs had not stopped.

“Sally,” Irene called. “The door, darling.”

Going to the closet, Irene stretched up on her toes, hooked one finger under the lid of a hatbox, and pulled. Boxes cascaded down around her, tumbling open and spilling a rainbow of hats across the floor. The shelf was empty now. At the back, staring at Irene, was the revolver.

Irene hadn’t forgotten about the revolver. But she had wanted to.

“Hello the house,” a voice called from downstairs.

With a start, Irene moved to the hallway. “Sally,” she called again. “Who is it?”

“Hello? Is someone home?”

As Irene came to the landing overlooking the front hall, she paused. One of the doors was open, and a man was standing in the hall. He wore a shabby coat, shabbier trousers, and he had shaggy red hair that looked like the man had spent the night in a windstorm.

“Excuse me,” Irene said. “Who are you?”

“I’ve got a delivery for George Lovell,” the man said, looking up at her.

He had pretty eyes. Blue-green, like the sea. That was the only thing pretty about him. His face was rough, and strong rather than handsome, with heavy, auburn stubble covering his cheeks. The coat did nothing to hide shoulders and arms that Irene had to admit were interesting.

“Well?” he said. “Do you know him?”

Irene’s cheeks heated. “He’s my father.”

“Are you going to come down here? Or do I have to bring this up to you?”

Irene started down the stairs. Any thought of shoulders or arms or eyes was forgotten. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, the man handed over a wooden box, turned, and started for the door.

“Excuse me,” Irene said.

He didn’t stop.

“Excuse me, stop right there.”

He still hadn’t stopped.

“Tell me your name. Tell me right now, and tell me who sent this for my father. Your employer will hear about this.”

“You can tell him if you want,” the man said, throwing her a grin over his shoulder. “I don’t think he’ll care.” He looked around the front hall, studied the chandelier overhead for a moment, and then gave her a wider smile. “Pretty fancy house. I thought you’d know how to say thank you.”

He let himself out the front door and shut it behind him.

Irene’s mind poured out options: open the door and storm after him, screaming—satisfying, but childish; track down the messenger service that had sent him and ensure that the man was let go—even more satisfying, but it would take time she didn’t have; call him back, with promise of a tip, and then let him have a piece of her mind in private.

Yes.

She set the box down on a side table and opened the front door. The man in the shabby coat was still heading down the drive.

“Sir,” Irene shouted.

To her surprise, he looked back.

“You forgot your tip,” she said.

She couldn’t tell from a distance, but she thought the fool was smiling.

“Buy yourself something sweet with it,” he shouted back. “To get that sour look off your face.”

By the time Irene had recovered her speech, he had vanished into the street.

She shut the door. Her hands were shaking. She went over the table, where she had left the box, and checked it. It had no hinge or lid that she could see, so she left it where it was. Papa would deal with it. A vase of white, silk roses stood on the table as well. Irene lifted one of the roses from the vase, tore the silk petals to shreds, and then shoved the barren stem back into the vase.

She marched upstairs. Now, it would have to be Paris. She’d had her fill of American men. The delivery boy was the last straw. Before him, there had been Charlie Adair, with loose lips and a looser tongue and the nicest hands she’d ever seen. And before him, Lawrence Oxall, who had a lazy eye and had been sweet to her. But only at the beginning, of course. Ernest Pierson, who’d been her first love and had broken her heart with Alice Pierce. Ernest had thought it was funny, how closely their last names matched.

At the back of it all, Francis Derby. The music from the house, where Gertrude Howe was having her debut, and everyone was being sweet to her in spite of her crooked back. The smell of

the fountain, wet stone, and Francis's mouth on her neck, and then his hands growing rougher, and the crushed grass smell.

And then, at the end, she'd pulled down her skirts and gone home, and thrown out the dress, because the grass stains had ruined it completely.

Mama and Papa had been furious.

Irene stared at the crumpled ball of stockings she held in one hand. She shook the silk out, rolled the stockings up, and set them in the suitcase.

Paris. It would have to be Paris.

A sound came from down the hall. Irene had a sudden vision of blue-green eyes, and the look of shock in his face when she gave him a solid slap. She hurried to the landing. The front door was open, but the hall was empty.

Irene's skin crawled. She listened for a voice, a footstep, anything. There was only silence. She went back to her room and pulled the revolver from its shelf. The silver-plated handle fit easily in her hand. She chambered the rounds and made her way back to the hall.

Still only silence. The front door creaked as winter air slipped inside the house.

Irene took the stairs one at a time. The hall unfolded below her. The series of works by lesser-known French landscape painters still hung in their proper places around the wall. The ivory and horn figurines were undisturbed. Even the torn silk petals lay where they had fallen. Irene moved over to the door. The air froze her stockinged legs. She shut the door with her hip and threw the bolt.

Now the silence was complete.

A glance to the right showed Irene that the drawing room was empty. A glance to the left—the dining room quiet and dark. She followed the hallway back into the house. Her parents had

gone out for the day. The light under the door to Mama's sitting room was out. The library door stood ajar, showing a sliver of burgundy leather covers and polished wood.

Deeper into the house. With the gas lamps turned down, and the sky bearded with gray, the house was dark. Empty and cavernous, ready to swallow every sound Irene made and breathe it back. She kept to the thick Turkish rugs, and her stockinged feet made no sound.

Sally should have been home. Sally should have answered the door.

The thought ran circles in the back of Irene's head. She came around the corner of the hall towards the kitchen. The door stood open. Warm yellow light spilled into the hall, along with the smell of lemon and what Irene hoped might be bread pudding. The tension in Irene's shoulders eased. She picked up her pace towards the rectangle of light and warmth at the end of the hall.

In her haste, she stumbled, tripped, and fell. The revolver twisted out of her hand and bumped against the plaster wall. Irene looked back to see what had caused her to trip.

Two stout, matronly legs stuck out of a doorway. There was a run in one stocking, and a stain on the serviceable brown skirt.

Irene wanted to scream, but she had forgotten how. Her fingers closed mechanically over the revolver—cold metal, finger against trigger, heartbeat hammering against her eyes.

A man darted out of the darkened room, passing over Sally's legs without pausing.

Once, twice, Irene squeezed the trigger.

The explosion of sound knocked her back. Her lungs filled with the smell of gun-smoke.

The man disappeared around the corner, and she was left alone with Sally.

Chapter 4

The police came. Sally was taken away quickly and quietly, and Irene had only a glimpse of the dark-skinned woman. Her head had been twisted to one side, and her eyes bulged out, as though Sally had been caught in the middle of trying to scratch her own back. It was slightly comical, but when Irene barked out a laugh, one of the policemen draped his coat around her shoulders and led her into the drawing room.

They found Papa and Mama. They brought them home. They took the revolver away.

For long minutes, Irene sat on the sofa in the drawing room, alone with the policeman's coat. It smelled of tobacco and sweat and starch. The door had been pulled almost shut, but through the crack came hushed voices. Mama and Papa, and then a policeman, and then Papa again, more forcefully. It was Papa's voice—the striations of anger spreading through it, the sediment of resentment, frustration, and then the snap and crack that worked their way to the surface.

He had sounded like that before. On the night she told them about Francis Derby.

That thought bulled its way through the haze of Irene's brain. She blinked, rubbed her cheeks, and shrugged off the policeman's coat. Two steps took her to an old mirror, a bit cloudy from age, but still clear enough to show Irene that she was a wreck. She wiped her eyes, wished for a bit of cool water to ease the redness, and made herself take a breath. And then another.

They had been sitting here in the drawing room when she told them.

The anger in Papa's voice. The fear in Mama's. And then her sorrow. And then her silence.

Irene had wept like a child.

One last look in the mirror, straightening a few strands of hair, and then a rather unladylike cough to clear her throat. Irene retrieved the coat, folded it neatly over one arm, and straightened her shoulders.

She was not a child any longer.

When she opened the door, Mama's face went red, and the policeman stopped talking. Papa glowered at her. He had a face like a walrus, set on top of a wobbling column of ruddy flesh, and at some point someone had caged him in a shirt and suit that looked like they pinched. Mama, in contrast, was slender to the point of sickness, and with her long nose and high forehead, she looked like one of the great beauties of antiquity passed out of her proper time.

"Are you feeling better, miss?" The policeman was the first to speak. He had wire-stiff gray hair that stood up in the back, and he looked like he might have grandchildren, or at least, like he would want grandchildren.

Irene handed him his coat. "Much better. Forgive me, I don't know what came over me."

"Hysterics," Papa said. He fumbled in his coat, as though searching for something, but his hands never reemerged. "Female hysterics. She's done this before, Officer, as I've told you."

She's done this before.

Francis Derby.

Female hysterics, Officer. The boy's a family friend. He wouldn't hurt a fly.

"Do you need my description of the delivery man?" Irene asked. "I couldn't see very well in the dark, but it might have been him."

The police officer glanced at Papa, and then at Mama, and then at the tiled floor of the hall. "Miss Lovell—"

"Oh this is nonsense," Papa said. "What man, Irene? Stop wasting the policeman's time."

It took a moment for comprehension.

“You don’t believe me.”

“As you said, Miss Lovell,” the policeman said, “you were alone in a dark house. You found the serving-woman’s body, you were frightened—”

“She was murdered,” Irene said. “I’m not fibbing, Papa. There was a man in the house.”

“She was a clumsy, troublesome woman,” Papa confided to the officer. “It’s little wonder,” he said to Irene, “that she fell on the pantry steps and broke her neck.”

“Clumsy,” Irene said. “Sally was never clumsy a day in her life.”

Red tinted the police officer’s cheeks. He had his eyes fixed on Irene’s feet.

“Take her upstairs, dear,” Papa said to Mama. “She’s out of her senses.”

When Mama reached for Irene, though, Irene pulled away. “There was a delivery man, Papa. He’ll tell you. He brought something for you. I set it on the table over there.” Irene gestured at the side table.

The box was gone.

“What?” Papa said. “What did he bring?”

“A box. I don’t know what was in it. It was only a box.”

Behind his walrus-like mustache, Papa’s face went white. “Another story, Irene? Ethel, take her to her room and call Doctor Bell.”

This time, Irene didn’t resist. She let Mama lead her toward the stairs. The policeman cast a look at Irene, his eyes sliding past hers, and Irene felt sorry for his grandchildren, if he had any. As Irene took the stairs, Mama at her side, she studied the table where the box had been, and she thought about the red haired man who had come, and the flicker of fear she had seen in Papa’s eyes.

He knew she was telling the truth.

That thought clung to Irene as Mama settled her in the pink-and-white frosted room, as Mama wiped Irene's forehead and pushed back her hair and planted a dry, tired kiss on her forehead, as Mama disappeared from the room and the muffled tap of her shoes faded down the hallway.

Papa knew. Just as he had known with Francis. And he was lying, again.

Irene sat in the high-backed chair, a scrap of pink-and-white blanket across her legs, ripping the blanket's lace edging with her thumbnail. She was waiting. For something, although she didn't know what. Maybe Dr. Bell with something to help her sleep. Maybe for the alligator suitcase, still waiting patiently on her bed. Mama must have seen it. She had said nothing. Maybe Irene was simply waiting. Maybe that was just a place she could be.

And then the floorboards of the hallway began to protest, and a moment later, the door swung open: fast, hard, but silent. It stopped before hitting the wall. Papa stepped into the room, still caught in that uncomfortable suit, his face regaining a purple sheen. He set the revolver down on the dresser and turned it so that the barrel faced Irene. It was a small gun. It almost disappeared in his thick hand. She thought he might shoot her.

Would it be terribly inconvenient for the police to come back?

"You find all of this amusing?" Papa asked.

And suddenly, to her surprise, Irene did. She laughed, tossed off the scrap of blanket with its ruined lace, and stood up. "You lied to them."

"Preposterous. You've been desperate for attention since the minute you came back, Irene. The way you carried on at the Andersons' picnic, and the late nights, and that horrible scene with Mr. King—"

“He has children who are grown women,” Irene said. “He should learn to keep his hands to himself.”

Papa looked like a strangled blueberry. Fat fingers worked at his collar. His other hand still rested on the revolver. Then he said, “I see that you and I have come to the same conclusion. It is time that you left this home, Irene. A trip is in order.” Some of the color faded from his face, perhaps the result of relief from the too-tight collar. “A good, long trip, my darling girl. Europe. Yes. I think Paris would do nicely. I will make the arrangements tonight. Your mother and I will be heartbroken, but it’s for the best.”

He patted the butt of the revolver once, as though saying goodbye, and disappeared through the door.

For a minute longer, Irene waited. Then she grabbed her hat, and her clutch, and her coat and she started for the door. Halfway down the hall, she retraced her steps and retrieved the revolver.

She had a red-haired man to find.

Chapter 5

Cian dodged a line of wagons laden with Bevo casks, and then he dodged the horse droppings that plagued Kerry Patch, and then he tried to dodge a puddle of dirty, half-frozen water. He missed this last one and plunged into the water ankle deep. Foul, oily water rushed to the top of his boot and wormed its way in through the holes along the stitching. Cian pulled himself free and continued down the street. He gave some serious thought to whistling, but then, this was Kerry Patch, and so he thought better of it.

One hundred dollars. Good, solid money. Money to quiet the DoYLES, money to put something decent in Cian's stomach, money to keep him in good, Canadian moonshine until his eyes burst. That last part was the most important. He needed something to get the clinging dust of sobriety from his mouth. His headache had faded to a pinprick at the back of his head, but that only made it easier for other things to burrow in: memories and recriminations and thoughts of that girl.

He wanted the taste of her out of his mouth too. Fine-boned, pretty if you liked a woman without a scrap of flesh on her, and dripping money and entitlement like a wet rag, the woman had put a stick up Cian's ass from the first minute. That last bit, shouting back at her from the drive, had been pretty sweet thought. Even from a distance, he'd seen the look on her face. That had almost made it all worth it.

Of course, the hundred dollars did their fair share to set everything right as well.

As he drew closer to Seamus's, the activity in Kerry Patch escalated. It was late afternoon now, the warmest part of the day, and even those folks who didn't have work had stirred from indoors and were filling the streets. At times like this, Kerry Patch came its closest to being

respectable. Cian's people, for all the drinking and fighting and robbing, had a tendency to look out for each other. If you kept clear of the worst streets, if you held your head up high, you could count on a neighbor to pass you a quartered chicken, if you were wanting, because the next day you might do the same. People like that, Cian thought, never forgot the church spires stitching the sky.

Even the atmosphere inside Seamus's had improved. The air still had the welcoming sting of spirits, but now heat and coal smoke poured from the stove, and a lively game of cards had picked up at one of the tables. Men and women crowded around the players. Eileen was one of them, a fan of cards held in front of her, her nose wrinkled in concentration. When she looked up and saw Cian, she winked and returned to her game.

Bobby stood behind the bar, a filthy towel over one shoulder, his eyes on the game.

"Afternoon," Cian said.

"Go on back," Bobby said. "He said he wanted to see you as soon as you got here."

"Something interesting?" Cian said. "These people look like they've never seen a game of poker before."

"Eileen's taking the shirts off every one of them. It's got a few of the boys so mad they can't think straight."

"Trouble?"

Bobby shook his head with a smile. "No, Eileen's done it plenty of times before. Left me without money for rent one time. My own damn fault. I don't play with her anymore, but I keep on eye on things, make sure the newcomers don't do anything stupid."

"Enjoy," Cian said.

"Always do."

Following the hall led Cian to the massive, silent man who waited outside Seamus's door. When he saw Cian, he leaned forward, his chair squeaking in anguish, and rapped on the door. A minute passed, and then Seamus's voice came. "Send him in."

Cian stepped into the room, and the big man shut the door. The first thing Cian noticed was that the nailed-shut window was open, flapping in the darkness like a broken wing and letting in streams of light and cold air. The second thing he noticed was Seamus's blank, twitching face. The third thing was the man with the gun.

He was a rail of a man with a face like a quarry, hard and pitted and eyes lost in shadow. He stood two feet away from Seamus's chair. He held a gun aimed at Seamus's head.

"Go ahead and drop that bar," the man said. He had a hard voice, like a cop or a thug, and he wore a dark suit and hat. His eyes never left Seamus.

Cian reached back and lowered the bar in front of the door.

"Good," the man said. Then he pulled the trigger.

The clap of the gun shocked Cian, but not as much as he expected. Old training took over. He hauled out the Colt, drew a bead on the man, fired.

The first shot went wide. The second clipped the man's shoulder. He stumbled back. His gun swung towards Cian.

An explosion of wood from behind Cian, splinters scraping the back of his neck.

Cian squeezed the trigger twice more, blind and panicked, and threw himself towards Seamus's bed. He hit the ground hard, rolled, and came up against the bed frame. Hands shaking, Cian took aim.

The man was disappearing through the window. Cian fired one last time. The bullet buried itself in the frame with a puff of dust.

With a last tug, pulling himself free, the dark-suited man disappeared.

Thunder from the gunfire lingered in Cian's ears. The barrel of the Colt trembled slightly. Acrid air, full of gun smoke, stung his tongue and nose. With his free hand, Cian checked his face and head, patted his chest, and then got to his feet.

Not a mark. Not a single fucking mark.

Shouting filtered through the drumming in Cian's ears. A pair of bullet holes marked the door, and the wood strained and bulged as force was applied. Then more pounding, and then voices, and the creak and crack of the planks. All of it sounded second-hand.

Cian held the Colt at his side and looked at Seamus. The bullet had entered the man's temple at an angle, and the force of the shot had tilted Seamus backwards in his chair, his head dangling over one shoulder. Blood dripped—a surprisingly slow stream.

The shouts had grown louder. Or perhaps the echo of the gunfire had faded. A long creak came from the door, and then the protest of metal, and one of the bolts holding the crossbar popped free.

Sliding the Colt into the waist of his trousers, Cian scrambled through the window. As he hauled himself into the cramped alley at the rear of Seamus's, he saw that the nails had been for show—a hidden latch kept the window shut, making it easy to admit guests that Seamus might prefer to keep secret.

Say, for example, like the man who had just shot Seamus in the head.

Cian's feet hit the mud, and he slipped once, soaking his left leg in the dirty slush, and then he was off at a run.

Behind him, the shouts faded slowly into the hustle of the Patch, and the Colt's barrel cooled slowly, but Cian still threw a glance over his shoulder at every second pace.

Because now he was a dead man.

Chapter 6

Cian took back streets and side streets and tiny, trash-cluttered lanes that weren't even streets at all. He circled the edge of Kerry Patch, keeping as far from Seamus's as he could while making his way toward the room he rented from the DoYLES. The sun lingered on the horizon with stubborn insistence, a swollen red eye that watched Cian's every step, as though refusing to go to sleep until it had seen a bullet through Cian's head.

If Cian had any say in it, though, that wasn't going to happen today.

The problem, of course, was that there were a lot of fellows who disagreed with him. Twice Cian saw men that he thought might be working for Seamus—or whoever was running things, now that Seamus had kicked it. They were big men, the kind who liked to do the hitting first and the questions later, or never. The first time Cian saw a pair of them, he ducked into a twisting passageway that took him a half-mile in the wrong direction and dumped him just short of the Mississippi. The sun, still refusing to set, smeared orange and red across the waters, as though mocking the growing cold.

The second time Cian saw a pair of Seamus's men, he spent forty minutes crouched between broken-down barrels at the back of St. Michael the Archangel, shivering. A priest Cian knew by face if not by name came out once, hauling a bucket of rubbish. He saw Cian, looked away, and went back into the church. Seamus's men didn't make their way to the back of the church, and eventually Cian peeled himself out of his hiding place and picked another route home.

At the heart of all of it, though, was the problem that no amount of hiding or backtracking could deal with: Bobby Flynn knew who Cian was and he knew where Cian lived.

When Cian finally started down the cramped dirt path that rambled in front of the sausage shop and his rented room above it, the sun had ducked its head below the horizon. A band of watery yellow outlined the houses to the west, but most of the street had fallen into shadow. Cian made his way down the street slowly, his collar turned up, hands buried in his pockets, and wishing for a hat to hide the stack of red hair that made him visible—although perhaps less so in Kerry Patch, with so many fellow micks around.

He stopped at old man Burk's place, which was a half-brick, half-timber building that gave consumptive wheezes when the wind blew. An abandoned coach, with its doors missing and the upholstery torn out, sat on the scrap of grass in front of the house. Placing himself behind the coach, Cian stared through the empty windows, studying the DoYLES' sausage shop and the street around it. A winter-fat squirrel capered across the top of the coach, chittering angrily at Cian, but no one else seemed to notice him. Dark and cold and hunger picked the street clean, until Cian, puffing on his hands to warm them, thought he might be alone.

Time to take a chance.

He sprinted up the path. In the dark, his footsteps sounded strangely loud, echoing back from the shacks on either side. His breath was a tornado in his lungs. Nothing moved in the darkness. Nothing lunged out at him. Everything bobbed and swam in Cian's vision except for the staircase, and the single lighted window of the DoYLES' kitchen, and the streamers of yellow crepe light that ran across rutted dirt.

When he reached the stairs, Cian slowed, easing his way up the old wood as best he could. His door popped open easily. The room was dark. The air was closed up, heavy with the odor of dirty clothes and bedding, and only a hair warmer than the night. Cian slipped inside,

fumbled a packet of matches from his pocket, and struck one. Wavy light made a cone around him.

Alone. So far. He grabbed a stub of candle, lit it, and the light grew steadier. Dresser drawers had been torn free, clothes scattered across the room, the bed overturned. Whoever had searched here hadn't found anything. There hadn't been anything to find.

Cian made a bundle of shirts and trousers, tossing in his last rounds for the Colt, and then blew out the candle. There was nothing else left for him in that room. A lot of bad nights, a lot of worse mornings. Once or twice, a girl he'd forgotten by the week's end.

Home was just a place to wait until the drink stopped hitting quite so hard.

As he came out onto the stairs, Cian collided with someone. A bristly beard scratched his face, and the other man stumbled. Then a jab at Cian's side, aiming for the kidney. Cian twisted back and crashed into the door. His jaw snapped shut. Cian tasted blood. Another blow from the man caught Cian in the gut. Cian's breath turned into a brick.

Then Cian's brain started working. He brought one elbow up, inside the other man's arms, and caught the man on the jaw. The man's head snapped to one side. Cian drove his foot down, onto inside of the man's knee, and then smashed his forehead into the man's face. Cian felt cartilage fold and snap and then heard a choked grunt, and the man slid back against the wooden rail.

With a low, throbbing twang, the rail snapped, the man fell. He screamed for a heartbeat. Then, at the same time, a thud and silence.

Cian's head hurt like a bitch. He felt a goose egg rising on his forehead, and split skin with blood running down his temple. His tongue had grown three sizes, and the back of his head

was throbbing, and something sick was kneading his gut with its claws. Cian pulled out the Colt, managed his way down the steps, and ran.

No raised voices. No bloom of lights. No calls for help.

In Kerry Patch, Bobby Flynn lay dead, and no one would bother until morning.

Cian hoped that would be long enough.

Chapter 7

Night moved into St. Louis like an old, female relative with cold feet. An aunt, perhaps. Or maybe more like Irene's own grandmother, on Papa's side, who was missing a toe and had insisted on having Irene share her bed until Irene was twelve. That was how tonight was: clinging and icy and smelling like death.

The heavy fur coat Irene wore buffered her from the worst of the cold, but it also drew unwanted attention, especially in this part of St. Louis. More than a few men had stared after Irene as she passed—men in trousers worn out at the knees and coats with more patches than a mangy dog. Men who were not, Irene was fairly certain, admiring anything below the coat. It was slightly offensive. The weight of the revolver in her clutch kept Irene walking though, as did the thought of Papa's face, and the absolute certainty that he was lying.

Irene had never been to Kerry Patch. It wasn't safe for decent people, and while Irene hadn't thought of herself as decent since she'd gone to Oberlin, she'd never had a reason to risk the Patch before tonight. The man who had come to deliver the box, though, had had all the rough edges of the Patch, and he'd looked as Irish as they came, and so Irene thought her best chance at finding him was to start in the Patch. The Irish clung together like pups at a teat. One of them would know him. If she were lucky, one of them would be willing to point Irene in his direction.

And Irene wanted to find that man, because she was certain the red-haired man had been the one to murder Sally and steal the box. It made sense, after all. He had come to the house, he had seen her, and he must have thought she was alone and that the house would make an easy

mark. Then he'd gone around to the back, to steal the box and anything else he could carry. He'd stumbled across Sally. She'd been surprised, never had a chance to make a sound.

The red-haired man was a brute. It would have been easy for him to snap Sally's neck.

As Irene moved deeper and deeper into the Patch, the street lamps dwindled, tiny sacks of flame and warmth swallowed up by the growing darkness, until only the moon and the stars held a chilly vigil over the streets. From the deeper shadows that fell in the alleys came muffled sounds that might have been fighting or love-making or both, and watchful eyes, and the occasional clatter of something small and furry scraping through piles of refuse. The smell of coal and wood smoke mixed with burnt garbage, and the odors clung to Irene's hair, to the fur coat, to her skin. She wanted a bath and her bed and, although she wouldn't admit this to anyone else, her Papa. Instead, she slipped her hand into her clutch, felt the weight of the revolver again, and thought about Sally.

Ahead, a blackened lantern hung in front of the place she was seeking. One term for the place might have been speakeasy, but this deep in Kerry Patch, there was no need for pretense. To judge by the swell of voices from inside the rambling log building, there was no need for speaking easy either. A wooden sign above the door had been carved with a lone clover, its green paint chipped, and the name Patrick's.

If you needed to find someone in Kerry Patch, you started at Patrick's. That's what the paperboy had told Irene, and she hoped the boy had known what he was talking about.

She pushed open the door, stepped inside, and was hit by a wave of sound and heat. The roar of voices seemed to be on an eternal crescendo, rising and rising, fragmented into laughter and shouts and swearing and then laughter again. Bodies packed the low-ceilinged room, filling the air with the scent of sweat and lust and men who worked twelve hard hours. There were

women too, more than Irene had expected, many with the fair hair and coloring she expected in the Patch, but plenty of women with hair and eyes as dark as Irene's own. Against the far wall stood a row of massive casks, and between the press of bodies Irene glimpsed the bar, and she began to push her way towards it.

More than one man tried to intercept her—fingers sliding off her arm, fingers trailing down her back, fingers that pinched (more than once) her bottom. One man tried to slip an arm around Irene's waist. She twisted away, saw a flushed, grinning face and a smile like a piano keyboard, more blacks than whites. Then the man disappeared back into the sea of bodies, and Irene continued her fight against the tide.

Perhaps it was the coat. Perhaps that was what provoked the touches.

But to judge by the number of hands that aimed for her hindquarters, probably not.

By the time Irene reached the bar and slotted herself between a pair of men in rough spun, clay-stained clothes, her face was red from heat and embarrassment both. The man to her right coughed into her face. The one on her left leered, staring down at her chest as though his eyes were knives, ready to skin her. Irene kept her own eyes fixed on the man behind the bar, and when he turned her way, she raised a hand.

He was a good-enough looking fellow, dark-haired and fair-skinned and with a smile that made him look more boyish than he probably was. The barest hint of surprise wrote itself in the way he bit the inside of his cheek when he saw her. He passed a mug of beer across the bar, wiped his hands, and came down to where she was standing.

"Miss," he said. "Something to drink?"

"A sidecar," Irene said, pulling coins from her clutch.

The barman was already shaking his head. “This might not be the right place for you, miss.”

“An old-fashioned, then,” Irene said. She slid a half-dollar across the slick wood.

A moment’s hesitation, and then the man scooped up the coin, nodded, and wandered back down the bar.

Hot breath from the man on the right scalded Irene’s neck. He had decided to join his partner in staring at her. The heat and the press of bodies combined with the fur coat to make Irene feel short of breath. Trying to make the movement seem natural, she leaned forward, supporting herself with the edge of the bar.

The dark-haired man came back with a drink in his hand. “It’s rye,” he said. “That’s all we’ve got.”

“Thank you,” Irene said, taking the drink. “I need to speak with Patrick.”

This time the surprise was more visible on the bartender’s face. “I’m Patrick.” He looked at the men on either side of her and said, “Liam. Angus. If you two aren’t going to spend another penny, you can clear some space for the lady.”

The faces of both men might as well have been molasses—surprise and resentment trickled across their features in viscous streaks. After a moment of pointed silence from Patrick, though, the men shoved their way into the crowd, leaving Irene alone. She sipped at the drink, and the rye whiskey hit her stomach like a hot coal. Another sip, and then she set the glass down, feeling the heat rumble up through her arms, her chest, her neck.

“Thank you,” she said.

“They’re cheap and mean and they don’t have a set of brains between them,” Patrick said. He smiled, and Irene felt the whiskey rise to a boil, and she made sure not to take another drink. “What can I help you with, miss? This doesn’t look like your part of town, if you’ll pardon me.”

“I—” Irene began, but Patrick’s eyes widened when he saw something over her shoulder.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Just a moment.”

He moved to the far end of the bar and leaned forward to speak with someone hidden by the cramped bodies. Irene turned the glass in her hands, ran a finger through the beer and water and whiskey that made tiny lakes on the surface of the bar, and thought about the sliver of Patrick’s bottom she could see. He was a good-looking man, and God, that smile, and it had been a long time since Charlie Adair, and a longer time since she’d had a kiss that knocked her stockings off.

It had been a long time since she hadn’t felt alone.

She leaned forward, trying to get a better look at Patrick, hoping that she wasn’t being terribly obvious. And then she saw whom Patrick was talking to, their heads close together, every line of their bodies showing nerves and something that came close to fear.

The deliveryman.

Her old-fashioned forgotten, Irene pushed her way down the length of the bar, ignoring the angry looks and scattered swears. The red-haired man looked twice the wreck he’d been earlier that day, and his rough features were pale and knotted, as though he’d been put through the wringer. The noise of the bar, in its eternal crescendo, swarmed in Irene’s ears like angry bees. Her legs had become distant, ghostly echoes, and the only things that were real were the tendons and joints and muscles of one arm, then her fingers, and the silver-plated grip of the revolver.

Patrick was saying something, and the words were swallowed up in the storm in Irene's ears, and the red-haired man had closed his hand over something on the bar. Irene pulled the revolver from her clutch.

No one saw.

She jammed the muzzle of the pistol into the red-haired man's side. He jumped, his eyes wide, and went stiff. Patrick's lips froze, caught in mid-syllable.

The noise of the bar continued unabated. Someone was laughing, and it seemed impossible to Irene that someone would be laughing today with Sally dead. Irene wished the gun were a spear, and she ground it against the man's ribs, wanting him to move or resist. Wanting to pull that trigger, because of this man, and Charlie Adair, and all the rest of them down the line to Francis Derby.

It took a moment to realize that Patrick was talking to her.

"Miss, just put that away for a minute. No need to do anything mad. Put that away and we'll have a nice talk."

He was repeating the words, his tone as even as the Mississippi in summer, talking the way a man might talk to a rabid dog. The way Papa talked to Mama, sometimes. Or to Irene.

The red-haired man, on the other hand, was just staring at her. His eyes weren't so pretty up close, Irene decided. They were blue-green glass, like street jewelry, and had something dark and empty falling down behind them. Looking into them, Irene felt a wave of vertigo, as though she too were about to fall, and she didn't like it one bit.

"Be quiet, Patrick," the red-haired man said.

Patrick went silent.

"You," Irene said.

“You’re the girl from the house,” the red-haired man said.

“You’re coming with me.”

“Why?”

“You know why. Did you think you’d get away with it?”

This time, confusion in those blue-green eyes. Irene felt a moment of doubt and covered it by jabbing him with the revolver again.

“No,” he said. “I don’t know what you mean, but I haven’t gotten away with much. Why would this be different?”

“Come on,” Irene said. “Let’s go.”

“Cian,” Patrick said.

The red-headed man—Cian, Irene supposed—shook his head. “Thanks for the help, Patrick. I’ll let you know when I’m settled. And I’ll get you your money.”

Patrick frowned, but he spoke to Irene. “Miss, this is a big misunderstanding. Let me—”

Irene grabbed Cian’s arm, turned him towards the door, and set the barrel of the gun to his back. She stayed close, using the heavy fur coat to hide the revolver. At her prodding, Cian started moving. He was a big man, even for the Patch, and he left a nice, clear path in his wake. Within moments, they emerged from the bar. Dark and cold clamped down around them like a vise. The sudden silence left Irene lightheaded.

Cian turned around, keeping his arms raised slightly, like an ungainly bird about to take flight. There wasn’t any fear in his face. Something about him—his eyes, Irene thought—made her angry. It was the emptiness behind those blue-green flecks. His offered a small, quiet smile that eased the roughness of his face.

“Are you going to keep that on me the whole way? Your hand will freeze.”

“I’ll keep it on you until you’re locked up.”

“Mind telling me why?”

“What?”

“Why all this? You’re pretty enough that I don’t think you need a gun to get men to follow you around.”

“You think you’re funny.”

“I think a pretty woman has a gun on me and I don’t even know her name. I’m Cian.”

“You killed her. You killed her, and you stole, and you stand there making jokes and smiling.” Irene shook her head. The cold had settled into her hand, and she wanted to stretch frozen fingers, work warmth back into them. The temptation to flex one finger, to feel the give of the trigger, settled over her like a heavy coat.

He had killed Sally.

Cian’s smile faded. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I told you that before.”

“We’ll see what the police think,” Irene said. But she wasn’t thinking about the police. She was thinking about Papa. “I don’t understand. Was the delivery all just a ruse? A way to get inside the house? If not, why deliver the box at all? Why not just keep it?”

“Wait. The box. Someone took it?”

“Enough games. Let’s go.”

But he didn’t move. He was staring at her, but his thoughts were clearly elsewhere. In the weak light of the lamp, Irene was suddenly aware of how much bigger than her he truly was, and she fought the urge to take a step back. The voices from the bar seemed far away, as though she and Cian stood in a tiny island of light, adrift on an unknown sea.

And then she heard the steps. Slurping, dragging steps, like a man hauling himself through thick mud.

Cian turned towards the sound, and then back to her. “Who else did you bring with you?”

“No one,” Irene said. The foolishness of her answer struck her a moment later, but it was too late.

Cian scarcely seemed to hear her. He searched the darkness. A second sound of steps joined the first. Cian propelled her towards the door and said, “Get inside. Now.”

Irene swatted his hand away. “No more tricks. This is—”

He shoved her towards the door as the first man came into view. “Now,” he shouted. He pulled a pistol from under his coat.

Nervous laughter swelled in Irene’s mouth. She bit it back.

He was defending her.

The first man was nothing more than a shambling shadow: a dark trench coat with the collar pulled up, a wide-brimmed hat tilted low over his face, and gloved hands. A second, wearing identical clothes, emerged from the street, and then a third. They formed a loose arc, closing on Cian and Irene.

“Stop right there,” Cian said. The gun was steadier than his voice. “I’ll shoot.”

No sound from the men except the squelch of their boots in the mud. Something was tickling the back of Irene’s brain, something desperate for her attention, but she was too busy with the men in front of her. They were big, bigger even than Cian. The one in the lead had almost reached Cian.

“Not another foot,” Cian said.

One heavy hand came up and latched onto Cian's shirt. Cian fired. The sound of the shot ricocheted through the darkness. The force of the bullet rocked the trench-coat man back on his heels. Then, as though undisturbed by the bullet lodged in his gut, the man lifted Cian into the air.

From somewhere else in the world, a thousand miles away, Irene heard screams.

Irene fired without thinking. The revolver snapped in her hand like a dragon. Over the crash of the gun shot, she heard a crack. And then the man's hand parted at the wrist, and Cian landed hard on the ground. A black-gloved hand still clung to the front of his shirt.

In the weak light of the lantern, Irene caught sight of the face hidden by the hat. It was a featureless mass, shiny like wet clay. Her first thought was that the man had been terribly burned, and she felt a moment of pity.

And then the back of her brain perked up and told her that this section of the street was brick, and that there was no mud to make the squelching noise she had thought came from booted feet.

Cian was staring at the men in the trench coats. Irene knew the look on his face, because it was the same thing she was feeling. Terror that was one step short of madness.

She grabbed his arm and pulled him into Patrick's.

The bar had turned to chaos at the sound of gunfire. Many of the patrons were jammed together in frantic queues for the back door. A few, more enterprising souls had started climbing through windows.

At least a dozen men still sat at tables, drinking, and trying to look undisturbed by the mess. One of them glanced up at Cian and Irene, and recognition lit up his face.

He drew and fired.

Irene had already shoved Cian to the right. It felt like shoving a mountain. He stumbled, teetered, and then went over like Babel. They hit the ground together, a tangle of arms and legs, one of Cian's arms encircling Irene as he rolled to put himself between her and the gunmen. Cian shook one leg free of her, kicked, and overturned one of the heavy tables. It crashed against the floor.

Bullets whimpered and cracked against the wood.

"All right?" Cian asked.

Irene shoved him off. "I saved you, you fool. Now do something useful."

"Cian Shea, you've got piss-ant brains. What are you doing in Kerry Patch? You're a dead man."

The voice was almost friendly, but it was followed by another storm of gunfire. Irene's ears rang like the bells on St. Patrick's Day.

Cian had put his back to one of the wooden pillars, and he kept an eye on the open door. Irene could practically hear his thoughts. Would those men—she had to think of them as men, no matter how deformed, because to do otherwise was to risk madness—would they come into Patrick's?

So far, the answered seemed to be no.

Patrick's voice cut through the silence. "Boys, I don't want trouble indoors. Take it outside."

"Shut your mouth, Patty," one of their attackers said.

"He killed Seamus. This is justice," another said.

From what Irene could see, the bar had almost finished emptying. The windows along the closest wall were open, and the back door revealed a glimpse of darkened alley. If they could get outside, into the warren of the Patch, they might have a chance.

And if she abandoned Cian, would the other men let her leave?

It didn't matter. She needed Cian. Needed him to make Papa face the truth.

Besides, Cian had tried to protect her.

She crushed that last thought and checked her revolver. Three rounds left. Firing blindly wouldn't do anyone any good. Irene risked a look at Cian. He had his eyes on the door still. He'd knocked the black-gloved hand from his shirt, and now it lay a few feet away, the fingers frozen in their grip.

It wasn't bleeding.

Irene pushed that detail away too.

"We already sent one of the boys out the back, Cian," the first man said. "Another ten minutes and you'll have half of Kerry Patch trying to put a piece of lead in you. Might want to think about making a run for it. You could even have a chance."

"Bobby Floyd's dead," Cian shouted back. "He died bad. Begging. I took my time with him. I'll do the same with you boys, unless you clear on out fast."

"You piece of—" one of the men shouted.

Cian spun, fired, and pulled back to his position.

The thud of the falling body was the only sound. Then another series of shots, tearing through the flimsy barrier in front of Irene and Cian. A bullet snagged Irene's sleeve, and another whizzed past her ear like an angry bee, and then silence.

Cian let out a muffled oath. Irene looked over.

For a moment, she had to squeeze her eyes shut.

The hand was clutching his leg. Just a hand. No arm. The severed hand was tight around Cian's muscular calf, clamped down like a tourniquet, and when Irene opened her eyes, the hand was still there. Pain and fear wrote themselves large on Cian's face as he pried at the fingers. He couldn't seem to get them loose.

Irene crawled over to him, pulling and clawing at the hand, but the fingers were like iron. The hand flexed, tightened, and Cian's gave a quiet gasp. Irene set her revolver against the back of the hand. Cian shook his head, but she couldn't tell if it was the pain or an attempt to tell her no. The bullet might pass through the hand and into his leg.

Sloshing steps came from the doorway.

The hand on Cian's leg tightened, and this time Cian grunted. Irene shifted the angle of the gun, setting the barrel against the base of the index finger, lining the shot up so that the bullet would tear through the fingers and strike the floor.

Cian nodded.

She squeezed the trigger.

Severed fingers toppled to the ground. With a shaky hand, Cian brushed off the rest of the hand. Dark stains—mud, Irene thought, before blocking the word—marred his trousers. Irene raised herself on her knees.

And then she heard the scream.

The first note was pure surprise, before it deepened and widened into true terror. There was a flurry of gunfire. Cian grabbed Irene's hand and hauled her towards the back of the bar. She glanced over her shoulder. She knew she'd regret it for the rest of her life.

A scruffy little bird of a man was suspended in the air by one of the men in trench coats. The scruffy man struck twice with his empty gun. The other men had pulled back, holding their fire and waiting for a clean shot. One of them noticed Irene and Cian and fired once.

Irene barely heard the shot. What she saw, instead, was the trench-coat man grip the scruffy man by one arm and one leg and then rip him in half. There was a spray of red mist, wet, glistening coils falling to splatter against the floor, and a flash like sheet lightning inside Irene's head as the world went white.

The cold air revived her. She found herself in a dark alley, ice crackling under her feet as Cian held her around the waist and dragged her around a pile of rotting garbage. Irene fumbled at his hand, and Cian stopped and let her go. She braced herself against the wall. The brick clung to her hands like two icy kisses.

She vomited, wiped her mouth, and vomited again.

Cian waited.

Irene wiped her mouth again, then pulled a handkerchief from her clutch, cleaned her fingers, and dried her eyes. She put the revolver away along with the handkerchief. And then she turned to look at Cian.

Those pretty, blue-green glass eyes were calm. Almost understanding.

"Whatever are you waiting for?" Irene said. "Don't you have another crime to flee?"

"I thought I was your prisoner," he said, risking an almost smile.

"I think there are other people more interested in you. You'd better hurry."

He didn't move though. He just stood there.

"Go on. Go."

"Are you ok?" he asked. "You don't look ok."

Irene realized her eyes were watering in the cold. Or she was crying. Her brain couldn't seem to tell which. She dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief again. "What a thing to say."

This time he did smile, and it was the same small, quiet smile. The smile of a man who'd been beaten for smiling too often. The smile of a man who had only ever stumbled across smiles in refuse bins. It broke something in Irene's heart and kept on breaking it.

"That—what he did—he tore that man in half," Irene said.

"I know. I saw. I'm sorry."

"You didn't do it, did you? Kill Sally, I mean."

He shook his head.

Irene folded the handkerchief and put it away. She wouldn't need it again. Not tonight. Maybe not ever. The cold was settling into her, as though she'd drunk from Lethe. The only problem was the shivers.

Cian had one arm around her again, and he led her down the alley.

"I'm perfectly fine," Irene said through chattering teeth. "Just a case of the jitters."

"Of course," Cian murmured, helping her into the street beyond. "You won't mind if I stay close, though. Just for warmth."

Another flash of the smile that didn't touch his eyes.

"Just for warmth," she agreed.

And then her brain said good night, and dimmed the lights, and Irene let herself stumble along through the slush and snow, worrying about the stains to her shoes.

Chapter 8

Irene blinked winter-dry eyes. Ahead of them, for the third time tonight, the street began to widen. Street lamps made firefly lights a few blocks ahead, marking the end of Kerry Patch and the beginning of civilization. Cian paused, though, stopping her at the edge of another alley as he studied the street. He had been true to his word, sticking to her side, helping her keep her feet as he guided her through the nightmare twists of the Patch. For what seemed like a long time, Irene's thoughts had been a fuzzy patchwork. Now the night seemed clear again. More than anything, she was aware of Cian's presence. Irene liked the feel of him next to her, warm and solid, and she didn't like that she liked it.

"What are we waiting for?" she asked. "We've been wandering forever."

"We've been wandering, as you call it, for a little over an hour," Cian said. "And only that long because Seamus's men have ringed Kerry Patch and I can't find a way out."

"My feet are freezing. This street looks clear enough. Let's go, before they find us."

"Look over there," Cian said. He reached over her shoulder to point, and she caught of a whiff of his scent, masculine and the slight heat of whiskey. Irritating and pleasant at the same time. Rather like man himself.

A thought that needed to be trampled.

Irene focused on Cian's gesture. He indicated a rooftop on the next block. The building sagged towards the street, outlined only by the wavering streetlights, and its roof had the sagging lumps of an old quilt. No different, really, from any of the other shanties that comprised the Patch, and Irene couldn't understand why Cian was being so insistent—

One of the roof's lumps skittered forward, forming a black bulk against the sky.

It wasn't a person.

"What is that?"

"God knows," Cian said. He had the pistol in his hand again. "We'll find a different route." He motioned her back into Kerry Patch.

As Irene turned around, though, lights appeared at the far end of the alley. Men began to move into the alley, carrying flashlights and guns, and Irene took a step back.

"Seamus's men," she said.

Cian shook his head.

"Hold right there," a voice called from the end of the alley. "Federal agents. Stop where you are."

"Federal agents," Irene said. She laughed and clapped a hand over her mouth. "Cian, I've been drinking."

"I don't think they're worried about a bit of whiskey," he said.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her into the street. A stiff breeze pushed away coal-smoke and cut through Irene's coat, carrying the smell of mud and water from the river. Her thin shoes slipped and turned in the slush, and more than once Cian's grip kept her upright. As they ran, Cian traded glances between the street and the rooftops. Irene pulled the revolver from her clutch.

Two shots left.

Behind her, she heard another shout, "Federal agents of the Bureau of Prohibition. Stop!"

She was laughing. The wind stole the sound from her lips, filled her mouth with ice, but she didn't care. She laughed. The revolver weighed a hundred pounds, and her legs were mint jelly, but she laughed at that too.

When the first shadow leaped from overhead, Irene fired.

The kick of the revolver surprised her, and she slid on a patch of ice. Cian kept a hold of her. Overhead, there was a splat, and then the clatter of twigs. Something the size of a hound hit the ground.

The street was dark. Fear made Irene doubt her eyes.

But she saw eight legs curl up in agony as the thing writhed in the shadows.

Behind Irene, shouts filled the night. She risked a look. Men were settling into defensive positions, training guns on Irene and Cian.

“It was a spider,” she shouted back to them, still laughing. “Just a spider!”

Cian’s grip tightened on her hand as he yanked her down a side street.

They went two more blocks, twisting and turning through the madness of Kerry Patch, Irene limping on bruised and frozen feet. Her cheeks were flushed, her skin tight and tingling, and laughter lurked just below the surface. The laughter rode on top of something else, like an oil slick, and Irene didn’t want to know what was waiting below. Something that wanted to sink cold teeth into her.

At last they came to a wedge between two log dwellings. The smell of wood-smoke and roast chicken lingered on the air. Irene’s stomach rumbled. Cian moved to stand in front of her, tilting her face up to his. They were only inches apart, and heat poured off him like a furnace. Irene felt an epileptic smile teasing her face as she stared at him.

She thought Cian might be worried.

“It was a spider,” she said, feeling another storm of giggles on the horizon. “The size of a dog. Papa never let me have a dog.” A spatter of giggles. “Maybe he’ll let me have a spider.”

Yes, that was definitely worry on Cian’s face.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“You’re in shock,” he said. “Or you’re cracked.”

“You saw it too,” Irene said. “Don’t lie. You saw it. You know I’m telling the truth.”

“Sh,” Cian said. “Fine. I saw something. I don’t know what. Don’t shout.”

“Don’t you dare say I’m making it up. Don’t you dare.”

Irene pushed him away and went to stand at the edge of their hiding spot. The sudden flare of anger had burned off the spate of crazed energy, clearing her thoughts, dragging her back to the cold, squatting night. Her mouth tasted like blood. She had bit the inside of her cheek.

Irene tried to focus on where they were. She wanted home and dinner and bed and enough sleeping powder to keep her there for a week. If she could figure out where she was, she could still force Cian to go back home with her. He could confirm the delivery of the wooden box. Then Papa would have to admit she was telling the truth, that she wasn’t making it all up.

She hadn’t been making it up about Francis Derby either.

Ahead, several blocks distant, Irene saw the sparkle of moonlight on the river. The buildings here were more of the same: scabrous wood and leper-plaster, ready for a common grave. Something darted across the street, and Irene’s hand tightened on the revolver’s grip, but it was only a speckled tabby that disappeared between a pair of homes. Further down the street, to the right, a mass of folded shadows broke the sky. From its size and shape, Irene guessed it was a church—more solid than anything else in the area. If she could figure out which church it was, she’d be able to get home.

With Cian, whether he liked it or not.

“Let’s go this way,” Irene said. “It looks clear.”

Cian joined her. He watched the street for a minute and then nodded.

They picked their way down the frozen ruts. Once Cian helped Irene over a pool of frozen waste, but she pulled her hand free as soon as she was clear. He didn't respond except to shove his hands deep into his pockets, hunch his shoulders against the wind, and stay at her side.

Everything about him was a dozen times more irritating than it should have been.

The church grew by inches. The river swept an arm out, hugging a point of land, and the church stood out along this curve of land and water. As they grew closer, Irene began to pick out things that looked more familiar. Shopfronts put on brick and glass and rose to two and three stories. The river air cleared the worst of the smoke, and overhead the stars had taken on depth and brilliance. Irene felt a surge of energy. She was almost out of this mess.

The whine of motors came from the next street.

Without speaking, Irene and Cian moved into the deeper shadows that clung to the storefronts. A pair of cars pulled out into the street and stopped. Men emerged from the cars. Eight men. Half of them carried guns.

The other four were very big and wearing dark trench coats.

Cian took her hand.

It didn't seem wise to protest, so Irene kept silent.

With a nudge, Cian started Irene moving, keeping their backs pressed to the brick as they walked.

"They said they were coming this way," one of the men with the guns said.

"Bugs. You can't trust bugs. We shouldn't have waited so long."

"You can tell him that, then. For now, get your mangy hide down that street and keep an eye out. They're coming this way, believe it or not."

By now Cian and Irene were almost even with the men and the cars. Irene's heart had climbed up her throat. Her fingers were sweaty in Cian's. She studied the men in front of her as they split up. The darkness made it difficult, but she was fairly sure they weren't the men from Patrick's. They also were most certainly not federal agents.

So who were they?

She met Cian's eyes and mouthed, *Seamus?*

He shook his head.

The church towered over them now, and it sat on the next block. From here, there was no doubt. The Old Cathedral. Night hid the tarnished copper steeple, but the stone pillars and the classical façade were unmistakable. Irene had a vision of herself hammering on the massive door, crying, "Sanctuary," but this time she didn't have to fight any giggles. Nervous energy had run its course. Now she only felt tired, her eyes sandy from the cold.

While the men with the guns separated to cover both ends of the street, the four men in trench coats remained motionless near the cars. Although the wind set their coats flapping, the men didn't seem bothered by the cold. They stood erect, shoulders wide, staring out at the night. Irene remembered the horrible face—burned, she told herself—and wondered what they saw.

Nothing good, she imagined.

And then her toe caught a rock. It skipped across the sidewalk, cracked against the brick paving, and slid into a pool of starlight.

"Shit," Cian said. He shoved her into a run.

The men in the trench coats started moving too, but they weren't as fast. The sound of sloshing footsteps filled the street, and Irene swore she felt tremors through the paving stones,

but the big men were still a good dozen yards behind Irene and Cian. Cian steered her towards the back of the church, away from the main street.

“The river—” Irene managed to gasp. “We’ll be trapped.”

Gunshot chipped one of the stone walls of the church. Cian said, “Better trapped than dead.”

Perhaps it was the sudden burst of wind off the river, like a grandmother’s slap to Irene’s face. Or perhaps it was her own exhaustion, making her stumble, fraying her pace. All Irene saw, though, was a coiled black ball launch itself toward her from the roof of a cooper’s shop to her left. It missed her, landing in a spray of eight thin legs as it came upright on a patch of grass and turned towards Irene. Glistening pincers snapped.

Irene fired. The bulbous black body collapsed, and drops of something dark and viscous spattered grass and stone. Irene felt something brush her coat, and then the smell of burning fur filled the air.

Another spider jumped from the wall of the church.

Cian fired, catching the thing in mid-air.

They kept running. The men in the trench coats were closing on them now.

Frustration filled Cian’s face. He turned aside, toward a door set in the back of the church.

It would be locked, of course.

They were as good as dead.

Cian yanked on the door. It held.

Irene turned to watch. The trench coat men kept coming at full speed, like runaway trains. Black shapes crawled along the walls of the church and on the rooftops across the street.

She didn't have a single bullet left. Irene flipped the revolver around, holding it by the barrel, and got ready to swing it like a club.

And then Cian grabbed her arm, dragged her back a pace, and she fell inside the church. The door swung shut behind them.

A moment later, the door vibrated as something crashed into it. A few splinters shook themselves loose and dusted Irene's stockings.

Another crash. A crack came from the wooden door.

Cian helped Irene to her feet. They stumbled down the narrow service hall. Behind them, blows continued to rattle the door. It wouldn't last long. A few more minutes. The trench-coat men were strong.

Irene had a half-remembered vision of the man being pulled apart in Patrick's.

Ahead, another door opened onto the nave. The main altar was a bulk in the shadows to their right. Pews bivouacked along the length of the room. The delicate stonework, the sculptures and tiled floor, even the beautiful paintings, all were lost in the darkness. There was only a tight jacket of winter cold, and their breaths like the plumes of exotic birds, and the two of them scrambling across the stone.

A crash made Irene look back, and while she was doing so, Cian skidded to a halt. He dragged Irene back half a step before she managed to turn around.

Floating in front of them, a shade of a woman stretched out her hands and smiled.

Chapter 9

A ghost.

Cian still carried his Colt in his free hand. Irene's hand filled his other. He had three shots left.

The world had collapsed down to those facts, and to one other, significant detail: a ghost.

She was a round-faced woman, her hair covered with a kerchief, her features pleasant and middle-aged. She was as substantial as a piece of gauze—through the woman's figure, Cian could make out the cathedral doors—and she was suffused with an icy radiance. The illumination shed no light on the rest of the nave. She was still smiling, and she floated towards them a pace, hands reaching out. She reminded Cian of his mother.

Cian fired.

The shot passed through the ghost without a ripple, but the floating woman paused.

Behind him, Cian heard the heavy, sucking steps of the men in the trench coats. He squeezed Irene's hand and said, "The altar. Keep your eyes on the back door."

Irene shuffled back, and Cian trailed after her, keeping his gaze on the ghost.

The plump, translucent woman huffed, and her skirt puffed up and settled, and then she drifted to sit in one of the pews.

"Is this better?" she asked. Her voice was rich and deep and had a foreign accent. Spanish, maybe. Or French. "I forget, sometimes. I was so happy to see you."

"Delighted to see you too," Irene murmured. "Next time, bring your body."

The ghost threw her head back and laughed. The sound was full of life. "You," the woman said to Irene, "you I have been waiting for. You, young man, are a surprise."

“If I stay much longer, you’ll realize I’m actually more of a disappointment,” Cian said. He nudged Irene, because she had stopped moving, and then another nudge.

Irene stayed still.

“Sorry to bother you,” Cian said. “We’re leaving.” Then, in a low voice, “Let’s go, Irene.”

With a clap, the door behind them shut. The wet-mud steps of the men in trench coats faded. The ghost leaned forward, folding firefly hands on the back of a pew and studying Cian and Irene. Mostly, though, Irene.

“Where will you go?” the ghost asked. “The Children surround this cathedral. Their golems already stalk the halls.”

Cian had enough sense to feel the trap closing around his ankle. He gave Irene’s arm a shake. “We need to go now.”

Irene pulled her hand free and stepped forward. “Who are you?”

“Marie-Thérèse. I know you, Irene Lovell. And I know that the Children think you have something very important. And I know that they will rip every strip of skin from your pretty face before they realize you have no idea where it is.”

“The box,” Irene said.

Marie-Thérèse smiled like a cat with a bowl of cream.

“Damn the box,” Cian said. A blow shook the rear door of the nave. He grabbed Irene’s arm. “She wasn’t lying about those golem things. They’re going to be in here any minute. We should run while we can.”

“My feet hurt,” Irene said. “And I’m tired of running. You run. I’m going to—”

“What? You’re going to fight?” Cian laughed. “You’re out of rounds and you weigh less than a wet cat. Those things will snap you like a piece of kindling.”

Irene’s cheeks reddened. Before she could answer, though, Marie-Thérèse said, “There’s another way, of course. I am not entirely without resources. I could provide safe passage.”

“How?”

“How is not the right question, my dear. How much is the right question.”

And again that look, that Mediterranean smile that made Cian feel the snap of metal teeth around his leg. Run, his brain said. Leave the girl.

It was the smart thing to do. Irene was pretty enough, if you liked your girl thin as a sheet of ice and with all the sharp edges, but she didn’t mean a wooden penny to Cian. Without her, he’d be faster, and he could lose himself in the Patch. By morning, he could be on a train and out of this city.

He hadn’t been smart in France. He’d come back for Corinne.

And look how that fucking fairytale had turned out.

For some reason, though, he was still standing there.

“How much?” Irene asked.

A blow split the rear door of the nave. Wooden slats toppled to the floor, and the hulking form of a man in a trench coat—a golem, Marie-Thérèse’s voice said in Cian’s head—forced its way through the opening.

Marie-Thérèse’s smile had widened.

Cian put himself between the golems and Irene. Run, run, run. He could still run. And then his brain shut down, and the only thing left was the Colt and three shots.

The first golem made its way down the center aisle of the nave. Tremors ran through the ground, snaking up Cian's boots. His hand, though, as he drew a bead on the golem, was steady.

Maybe he had learned something in France after all.

Irene was screaming something, but Cian couldn't take his eyes off the golem. He squeezed the trigger. The bullet knocked off the hat, exposing a lumpy knob of flesh where there should have been a face. Chips of something that looked like dirt flaked from the hole in the center of that monstrous face.

No blood though. And the damn thing didn't stop.

Cian readied himself to fire again, but hesitated when he saw someone sprinting between the pews. It was a man, and he headed straight for the golem. The lumbering creature noticed the newcomer a moment too late. The man slipped behind the golem, stretched up on his toes, and dragged a knife across the back of the creature's neck. Then the man gave the golem a shove, and the creature toppled over. When the golem hit the granite floor, it shattered. A chunk of mud the size of a man's head slid free from the trench coat and came to rest against Cian's boot.

Cian took a step back.

"Don't take the deal," the man called to Irene. And then he ran towards the back of the nave, where another of the golems had burst through the ruined door. With a laugh, he feinted at the golem, slashing at its face and pulling back.

Not fast enough. One of the golem's massive hands caught him in the chest and sent the man sliding across the cathedral floor.

"Harry," a woman's voice called.

"I'll get him," said another man. A Hun's voice. Cian turned and saw a short, gray-haired man striding down the aisle. He carried a silver-handled cane and had his hat under one arm, and

he passed Cian without a second glance. A dark-haired woman stood at Irene's side, her body turned so that she could stand between Irene and Marie-Thérèse while still keeping an eye on the cathedral doors.

Irene met Cian's gaze and shrugged. She had her revolver out.

Good girl.

"They'll be alright," the woman said, looking towards the altar. The old man cracked his cane across the back of a golem and danced back, more spry than he looked, and the golem turned away from the man called Harry. Harry was back on his feet in a moment, and another quick slice-and-shove sent the golem to the ground in a hundred pieces. "Between them, Freddy and Harry can handle just about anything," the woman added.

"Just about," Marie-Thérèse said.

The woman gave the ghost a pointed look and patted her clutch. This time, the look on Marie-Thérèse's face had nothing to do with cats and cream. There was murder in those winter-lightning eyes. She didn't move against the dark-haired woman, though.

"I'm Pearl," the woman said to Irene, holding out one hand.

"Irene."

"Nice to meet you."

Another crash shook the nave as the last golem hit the floor. The Hun—Freddy, Pearl had called him—was brushing dirt from his suit. Harry sheathed a long-bladed hunting knife in his boot and then started poking through the rubble that remained from the golems. Freddy moved to join Pearl. He gave Marie-Thérèse an iron glance, turned to Irene, and kissed her hand with all the grace of an automaton.

“Friedrich von der Ehmke,” he announced. “Professor of comparative anthropology, at your service.”

“Professor?” Cian said.

“Yes, sir. And you are?”

“Cian Shea.”

Cian didn’t offer to shake hands. Neither did Freddy. Up close, Cian had an instant dislike for the man. Beady eyes, his hair in a stiff part, a close-trimmed graying beard, the man looked like a pest, never mind the fact that he was a Hun too. The accent was unmistakable.

“Nice to meet you, Cian,” Pearl offered.

Cian gave her a bare nod. Before he had to say anything, though, Harry had reached them. He held four metal plates, each no longer than Cian’s thumb, hanging from individual wires. Freddy’s eyes brightened, and he took the plates when Harry offered them and moved a few paces away to study them. Cian watched him carefully.

He didn’t like the Hun. Not one bit.

“I see you’ve met Freddy,” Harry said, as though reading the expression on Cian’s face. Harry laughed, clapped Cian on the shoulder, and said, “Don’t worry. He grows on you.” Then Harry turned to Irene, gave a huge smile, and held out his hand. “Henry Witte, although everyone calls me Harry.”

“Irene Lovell.”

It took Cian a moment to realize Irene was smiling. Smiling. And she hadn’t let go of Harry’s hand.

Cian was fairly sure she wouldn't have objected to having Harry Witte kiss her hand the way the Hun had. He snorted and caught Pearl looking at him. There was something in her face, hidden as soon as he looked at her. Wistfulness? Loss?

Cian didn't care.

"Thank you for your help," Cian said.

Harry finally let go of Irene's hand, although his smile hadn't faded. "Happy to help. Golems aren't so bad once you know the trick. Those little plates are hidden in the back of the neck. You have to cut them free. Piece of cake."

"So he says," Pearl said. "Did that one break any ribs when it got you? Or will you just be bruised for the next pair of weeks?"

Harry probed his chest and side, winced, and his smile slipped. "My own fault. I was careless."

"You're hurt," Irene exclaimed. She stepped forward, closer to Harry, and held out one hand. "I didn't—oh, this is all our fault."

"Of course he's hurt," Cian said. "Pearl just pointed it out."

Harry laughed, closed one hand over Irene's, and then let go. "I'm fine, honestly. Thank you, though."

And there it was again, that flicker of something on Pearl's face. Cian wasn't sure what it was. But he knew what he was feeling. It was the strong desire to knock some of Harry Witte's perfectly white teeth loose.

"Marie-Thérèse," Harry said, moving around Irene to stare at the ghost. "We've had words about this before. I heard you offering this woman a deal. You know what I told you the last time I was here."

“You’ve made a name for yourself, Henry Witte,” Marie-Thérèse said. “Will you test me tonight?”

“I’ll rip you to shreds and send you howling back to hell.”

“You’re hurt, and tired, and you have all these others to protect. And I am not one of those wisps of thought and memory that you pride yourself on putting to rest.”

Harry drew himself up, straightened his coat, and said, “Freddy.”

The Hun glanced up from his examination of the metal plates. When he saw Harry and Marie-Thérèse, he tucked the plates away and walked over to join Harry.

“Against all three of us, Marie-Thérèse?” Harry asked. “Pearl knows enough now.”

Waving one hand, Marie-Thérèse floated into the air. “Enough. We have no quarrel tonight, Henry. I have a claim on the girl and the right to make her an offer.”

Harry studied Irene for a moment.

“What does she mean?” Cian said to Pearl.

Pearl shrugged.

“Very well,” Harry said. “Goodnight, Marie-Thérèse.”

Marie-Thérèse faded like dust caught in sunlight.

Harry motioned them towards the door, and as they reached the threshold, Marie-Thérèse’s voice caught them in a blast of arctic chill.

“The offer still stands, my darling girl.”

Irene was pale as the moon.

When they were outside, Harry forced the door shut, clapped his hands, and said, “Who feels like a bite to eat?”

Chapter 10

Irene followed her rescuers along the darkened streets of St. Louis. The cold had settled into her ears and, combined with exhaustion and hunger, made her head feel like drum. In her mind, she reviewed the evening, projecting scenes against the sheets of shadowed houses. The men in the trench coats—golems, her brain said—and then that poor man being ripped apart in the bar, and the spiders, and the church. Marie-Thérèse leaning forward, whispering, the words as flat and still as the church's air.

Irene pushed away the last bit. If she never saw any of those things—golems, or massive spiders, or Marie-Thérèse—again, she would live and die a happy woman. Especially Marie-Thérèse.

Cian glanced over at her. “Ok?”

She nodded.

Ahead of them, their rescuers walked together. Pearl looked back occasionally, to make sure they were still following, but otherwise the three were engaged in a quiet conversation. Cian tilted his head at them and said, “We should go. While they're too busy to notice us.”

“What? Why?”

“They're dangerous. You saw them back there.”

“They saved us.”

“Yes, they did. Why?”

“Because they're decent people.”

Cian raised an eyebrow. It made him look even more of a dolt. “And how did they know we needed help? We were in a church in the middle of the night?”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I’m saying you’ve been off your rocker all night and you’re not thinking clearly now. I don’t trust them. Especially not Harry.”

Irene smiled. “You’re jealous.”

“No.”

“You are. I can see it in your face.”

“You’ve spent half the night laughing like a girl in a fun house, and the other night frozen so you could barely walk. Your judgment might be in question.”

Irene’s smile dropped. “And why don’t you trust them, besides their timing?”

For almost half a block, Cian said nothing. Then, “He reminds me of someone I knew.”

“You’re worse than a fool,” Irene said. “And I know a jealous man when I see one.”

She picked up her pace and left Cian straggling behind. As she came up beside Harry, the conversation ended up. Irene slipped her arm through Harry’s, smiled up at him, and said, “You don’t happen to have a cigarette, do you, darling? I’m dying.”

Harry smiled back at her. It was the kind of smile any woman would have given her right eye for: bright and warm and genuine. The face behind that smile was equally appealing, handsome and dark-eyed, with the fine-boned, effortless good looks of an English aristocrat. He shook his head. “Sorry, not a single one.”

“Drat.”

“Miss,” the awful old Hun said. He took a silver cigarette case out of his pocket and passed it to her. “I am never without them.”

Irene took the case, helped herself to a cigarette, and then paused while the Hun lighted it for her. For a moment, she feared he would try to kiss her hand again—those cold, withered lips

against her flesh—but instead he gave a short, stiff bow, and they resumed walking. Irene offered a small smile and took a long, relieved draw on the cigarette. The flare of red at the tip seemed like the last spark of warmth in the world.

She turned her head, breathed out a line of smoke and freezing breath, and smirked when she caught Cian's eye.

So. He was still there. Shuffling along, the big brute. He had a frown on his face a mile wide. Irene waved the cigarette. Cian's frown deepened.

A few blocks later, Harry let them into a modest brick building and led them up a flight of stairs. On the third floor, they left the stairwell, waited for Harry to unlock a door, and entered a warm, dark room that smelled of wood polish. Gaslights flickered to life a moment later. It was a small parlor, with a sofa and a pair of upholstered chairs. A few tasteful paintings—river landscapes, and one that might have been of a lake, or perhaps the sea—hung around the room, and books lined a pair of shelves. Everything bore the stamp of good money and good breeding.

"Please sit down," Harry said. "I'll get us something."

Pearl and Irene took the sofa, while Freddy sat in one of the chairs. Cian lingered near the door with a face like a thundercloud. Irene didn't bother looking at him, although she could tell he was trying to meet her eyes.

He had said her judgment was in question. Irene squeezed the butt of the cigarette in her fingers and wished she had her hands around Cian's neck instead.

"This is a lovely apartment," Irene said to Pearl. "You'll have to tell me where you found those paintings."

A faint smile creased Pearl's mouth. "I don't live here. This is Harry's apartment."

Irene felt a surge of something. Satisfaction? Triumph? She leaned back into the sofa, studying the room anew.

“He has excellent taste.”

“He does indeed,” Pearl said. Her tone was neutral, but her eyes—her eyes were the eyes of a woman in love. “Harry is excellent at everything he sets his hand to.”

“Truly?” Irene asked. “Freddy—it is Freddy, isn’t it?”

“I prefer Friedrich, miss.”

“Friedrich, how do you know Harry?”

The old Hun rotated thin shoulders. “We met several years ago. I was investigating a cult operating in a village northeast of here. At the time, it was part of my research. You may have heard of some of my books, perhaps? *Parting the Golden Branches*, or *The Cup and the Spear in Norse Fertility Rites*?”

Irene shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

“Of course,” Friedrich said. “Of course.”

“Freddy is a renowned scholar,” Pearl said. “His work is often cited with Frazer and Malinowski.”

Irene nodded and made a polite sound of appreciation, but the names meant nothing to her. Friedrich, on the other hand, stiffened in his chair. His wrinkled cheeks reddened. “Frazer,” he said. “Malinowski. Blind, self-congratulatory fools. Both of them. Their acclaim is based on an admittedly impressive accumulation of data. But where is the spark? Where are the Muses in their work? Where is the passion, or the madness?”

“Madness?” Cian said. He still lurked by the door.

“At its roots, all great intellectual work is tied to madness,” Friedrich said. “To see something no one else has seen before—to see all the new angles and hidden sides of the world—that is true genius.”

Cian grunted.

Friedrich gave Cian a long, dark look and then set about pulling off his coat. Pearl gave Irene a slow wink.

Irene smiled in spite of herself.

Harry returned with a tray loaded with cheese and bread and slices of roast beef. He set the tray down, said, “Bon appétit,” and disappeared again. A moment later he came with a second tray, a steaming kettle, several mugs, and a bottle of whiskey.

“For my Irish friend,” he said, lifting the bottle and gesturing in Cian’s direction. “This is an Old Bushmills, straight from your motherland.”

Cian stayed by the door. His face could have broken rocks.

Irene helped herself to a sandwich and did nothing to hide her general satisfaction.

Eventually, though, Harry’s persistent good cheer won Cian over, and he joined them—although not graciously. When they’d all eaten, and the men had relaxed with their drinks, Irene felt warm from head to toe, exhilarated, and floating in a cloud of happy exhaustion.

“What in the world was all of that?” Irene asked. “Tonight, I mean. How did you know where we were? And what we saw—that woman in the church, those men who attacked us—was it real?”

Her words dispersed the fragments of warmth and good cheer. Friedrich hunkered into his chair, his thin face filled with new wrinkles, and Pearl played with her long, dark hair. Only

Harry seemed unmoved. He propped that very handsome face on one hand and studied Irene for a moment.

“It was real. Can you believe that?”

Before Irene could answer, Cian slammed his glass down and said, “Now hold on. That girl was scared to death tonight. We both were. I’m not afraid to say that. I’ve been to war, and I’ve been in a lot of rough places, but nothing came close to this. But frightened or not, I know what I was dealing with: bootleggers and mick gangs, no matter what kind of tricks they have. If you start telling this girl all those things were real, you’re liable to rattle her for good.”

The silence lasted a moment. And then Irene said, “I am not a girl. And I don’t need you to talk for me.”

Cian’s cheeks blazed.

“I believe you,” Irene said. “That woman, she was a ghost? Who was she?”

Harry nodded. “She was a ghost. Her name—”

“This is madness,” Cian said. He got to his feet. “I’m thankful for your help, but I won’t sit here and listen to lies, and I won’t let you shake Irene up. Come on, Irene. Let’s go.”

“It’s true,” Pearl said. She looked up and met Cian’s gaze and repeated, “It’s true. All of it.”

“Come on, Irene,” Cian said.

“No. I’m staying.”

For a moment, she thought he would drag her from the apartment, but instead he just snorted and started for the door. “My thanks again,” he said and slammed the door behind him.

Pearl reached over and patted Irene's shoulder, and Irene let out a laugh that, even to her, sounded brittle. "I scarcely know him," Irene said. "I—" She paused, fumbled. "I scarcely know him at all."

"How did you meet?" Pearl asked.

"The truth," Harry said. "I'm sorry, Miss Lovell, but we need to know why they were after you."

And that, of course, meant she had to go all the way back to the beginning. When she had finished, the three exchanged glances, and Pearl said, "We didn't know it was Seamus, but it fits the pattern."

"And the Prohibition agent?" Harry said. He ran a hand through his hair and poured himself another finger of whiskey.

"I think I have it," Pearl said. "Give me a bit more time."

"What? What do you have?" Irene asked.

It was Harry who responded. "For weeks now—"

"Months," interrupted Friedrich.

"Months," Harry said, "we've known that someone was trafficking in cult objects. Primarily Indian, although there were pieces from all over Europe and even a few from the Levant. At first, small things—trinkets and rings, statuettes, prayer mats. Then, more valuable items, like rare books, sacrificial implements, vessels. We couldn't trace any of our thefts to the usual suspects, so we assumed it was someone new."

"Seamus," Pearl said, picking up the thread. "We knew it was someone who had hands all over the city, but we didn't know who. Tonight, we heard that a group of Children was trying to

intercept the delivery of an ancient artifact that had recently arrived in St. Louis. That's how we found you—we were tracking the Children, and they led us to you."

"But why?" Irene said. "What do I have—" She stopped. "The delivery."

"So it seems," Pearl said. "Although why Seamus would entrust this artifact to your father remains a mystery, unless you can provide some answers."

Irene shook her head. "Why would Seamus even want these things?"

"We have no idea. Such artifacts are dangerous on their own, but they have no true power unless they're in the hands of someone who has delved deeply into cultic practices. If Seamus had been dabbling in cultic magic, I think we would have noticed him before now."

"Dangerous?" Irene said. "How? Murder and the like? Human sacrifice?"

Friedrich snorted, but his features softened when Irene looked at him. "My apologies. It's just that so often, people assume that cultists are nothing more than simpletons, deluded rustics, perhaps the weak-blooded dregs of centuries of intermarrying. When people hear of satanic worship, of dark magic, they think of witchcraft in distant forest glades, or in the teepees of savages. They don't realize that there is a great difference between the poor fools who light candles on the Black Sabbath and the Children."

For a moment, Irene didn't know how to respond. Then she laughed. "You're not serious, though? Dark magic and secret cults? You don't really believe all this."

"You already said you believed in what you saw tonight," Harry said.

"Yes, and I do. Those men, I know there was something strange about them. I saw what they did. And the spiders, of course. But those things can be explained. They aren't—they aren't —"

"I think we've reached the end of this conversation," Harry said.

Friedrich, however, leaned forward in his chair and said, “You make a grave mistake, miss, to say that those things were men. They are no more men than a statue, or an automaton, or one of Henry Ford’s contraptions. They are the product of sorcery, clay given breath and life, and they are the work of the Children.”

“What are these children?” Irene asked.

“That’s enough, Freddy,” Harry said.

“The Children of the Therkenstrind,” Friedrich said. “That is what they call themselves. That is how they were known to the Angles, for long dark centuries, when the light of Christ was nothing more than a candle on a sea of endless night.”

“Enough, Freddy,” Harry said. “I said enough.”

“No,” Irene said. “I want to hear more.”

Harry stood, fetched his coat and hers, and shook his head. “You don’t need to know more.” A smile flickered on his face. “You wouldn’t sleep a wink if you did. It’s better for all this way. You go home, go about your life, and don’t look back on tonight if you can help it.” With another, more confident smile, he held up her coat.

Irene slid her arms into the coat, buttoned it up, and said, “Thank you for everything.”

“I’ll see you home,” Harry said. “Now that your companion has left you.”

“He was not my companion,” Irene said. She offered Harry a chilly smile, squeezed Pearl’s fingers, and retreated from Friedrich with a quick nod before the Hun could kiss her hand again. Then she moved to the door. When Harry joined her, she shook her head.

“Not necessary, Mr. Witte. I’ve seen myself home on later and colder nights than this.”

“I insist, Miss Lovell.”

He hailed a cab, and they rode together in silence to her house. Irene watched the patches of lamplight pass over the lumpy upholstery of the cab, over the fine wool of Harry's trousers, over his face. There were secrets in that face. Many secrets.

Not the least of which, as far as Irene was concerned, was Pearl.

When they pulled up in front of Irene's house, Harry got out and held the door for Irene. When she had freed herself from the cab, she extended her hand, and Harry took it for a heartbeat.

"Be safe, Miss Lovell. It was a pleasure meeting you, but I doubt we'll see each other again."

"My thanks again, Henry. If I find out anything about Papa—"

He was already shaking his head. "Just let it go, Miss Lovell. Better for everyone."

Then he got back in the cab, and the car pulled away, leaving Irene standing at the end of the frosted drive. She took mincing steps across the ice, let herself in at the kitchen door, and sat for a moment in the darkness at the cold hearth. The space felt different—larger, emptier—and the copper pots hanging above the stove were dull-eyed mourners. Irene sat there for a long time, waiting for something besides the blunted ache in her chest, thinking of Sally.

And eventually she grew tired, and her feet had thawed, and she went upstairs. The suitcase still sat on the bed, its zippered teeth glinting in the ambient light, and a hat box sat on the chair.

Paris.

Irene shoved the suitcase from the bed, spilling clothes across the floor. She kicked off her shoes, dumped her coat on the chair, crawled into bed.

Sleep waited like a cliff at the edge of the sea. She came close once or twice, daring herself to make the leap, and then at last she was sailing, and flying, and falling.

On the way down, she thought about a red-headed man, and a wooden box, and the emptied suitcase.

Paris.

Chapter 11

Something new—something different—had crawled inside Cian’s mouth during the night. This wasn’t the familiar, trampled-and-rotten-cat taste of a too many passes of Danny Bancroft’s moonshine. It wasn’t even the acidic after-burn of fresh vomit. It was cold and dry as an iron file and made his tongue taste like snakeskin.

Later, when his eyes were open and he’d had a cup of coffee, he’d know it was fear.

But for the moment, Cian hadn’t had a cup of coffee—or, for that matter, a drop of booze. What he had was that taste in his mouth, and a pain in the back of his neck, and two feet like blocks of ice. The smell of wood-smoke drifted past him, becoming clearer as he woke, and then voices percolating through the miasma of sleep. Not angry voices. Not shouting, or the sounds of chase. Normal, everyday voices. Voices of cabbage and salted pork and linens needing washing. Kerry Patch voices.

The pain in his neck had not faded. So, all things considered, Cian opened his eyes.

The light of day had not improved the squat length of alley where he’d spent the night. Cian peered out from under the crude lean-to he’d assembled from broken crates and a ratty length of blanket that had been a lucky find. Snow draped the top of the lean-to, and between the snow and the boards and the scrap of woolen blanket, Cian was halfway warm. Only halfway, though.

A bent nail turned out to be the source of the pain in his neck. Cian turned himself about and found a spot where the nail couldn’t reach him. From the strip of the alley he could see through the crack in the boards, it was early morning. The sole of an overturned boot was white with snow, but everywhere else the snow had already turned into the muddy slush that marked a

Kerry Patch winter. Smoke continued to tickle Cian's nose, and mixed with it now was the scent of fried ham. The smell set a hook in Cian's stomach and pulled him out of the lean-to inch by inch, until he was stomping the feeling back into his feet, grateful for boots that had kept him dry if not warm. And then he set off into the Patch, looking for the piece of ham that had lured him out.

He found the ham—or a close relation—at a beaten-down diner two blocks south. Cian sat near the window, with his breath frosting the glass and his hands shaking until the coffee arrived. Ham and eggs came next. The place had the smell of accumulated cooking grease, of unwashed bodies, of burned beans. It was a place where no one would look twice at Cian.

He was grateful for that much. Grateful that no one looked twice at him, grateful that he had five dollars in assorted coins, grateful that he had a thick piece of ham and a pair of sunny-side-up eggs staring back at him. Grateful that he hadn't gotten shot to pieces last night, grateful that he hadn't frozen to death, grateful that—so far—there was no sign of Seamus's men still looking for him.

Hell. He was even grateful for Harry Witte saving his life.

But gratitude was one thing. What Cian couldn't figure out, as he ate and drank and felt his internal bead of mercury rising, was why he still hadn't gotten on a train. Or, maybe better, a boat.

Why he was still in St. Louis.

Run. That was the part of his brain that counted the loose coins in his pocket, that kept an eye out the frosted glass, that made sure the pair of old men in the corner, their beards sweeping gravy-laden plates, didn't look at Cian too long or too hard. Run far and run fast.

Because when you stick around, things go to shit. As they had in France.

Another part of him—the part that was continually getting him into trouble—said stay. Stay and find a way to deal with the rest of Seamus’s men. It meant finding the bastard who had shot Seamus and turning him over to the gang, but that would be enough to buy Cian his life. It meant he could stay in St. Louis.

See Irene again.

And where in the hell had that thought come from?

Cian finished up his meal, paid, and left. The sun was out today, the sky blue, frost-melt dripping from the dog-eared eaves. People were out too, taking advantage of the relative warmth, shopping or looking for work or doing all the things people did from day to day. Ahead, a mud-spackled dog chased a cat through a fenced lot, and a red-faced woman shouted and waved a broom, and a pair of boys sat huddled together in a doorway, whittling and whistling when they ought to have been at home or at school.

Run or stay.

Before long, Cian stood at Union Station. The massive structure of gray limestone with its red roof looked like an ant nest. People swarmed the doors, and trains chugged slowly into the terminal, and the air was a thicker, grittier gray than the rest of the city. Cian plunged through the crowds. Well-dressed men and women with expensive luggage waited on one side of the sidewalk, flagging down cabs and bell-boys, and sprinkled with folk who looked more like Cian: rumpled, dirty, and hungry. The crowds eased somewhat as he entered the station itself, passing through the vaulted Grand Hall with its stained-glass windows and landing himself in front of a desk with a gray-haired woman and a pile of paperwork.

“I’d like a ticket,” Cian said. “The cheapest you have.”

The woman played with her cheaters, looked at him once, and consulted a map. Then another look at Cian. And then at the map again.

Then, still toying with her cheaters, at Cian.

“I believe that’s to Kirkwood,” she said. “Let me check.”

She stood up, smoothed her blouse, and stepped behind a glass-and-wood partition. Cian watched her through the glass. Her neck was stiff, her shoulders hunched, as though she were trying to look natural and couldn’t quite manage. Cian risked a look to his left. At the next counter, a stout man held a ticketing book in one hand while he watched Cian. When he noticed Cian’s gaze, he flushed and looked down at the book.

Cian’s skin prickled, and he caught himself glancing up and down the terminal. A red-headed lady was speaking to a messenger boy, and the boy looked once at Cian. Something wasn’t right. Cian turned his attention back to the woman who had been helping him. On the far side of the partition, the woman was speaking to a stout, balding man in a cheap suit, who was studying Cian openly.

Cian dropped his head, turned around, and started back towards the Great Hall.

He needed to get lost in a crowd.

“Sir,” the woman called behind him. “Your ticket, sir.”

Cian didn’t look back.

Run or stay, he thought as he slipped back out onto the street, hoping the crowd would put a screen between him and the station. Running was the smart choice. The right choice.

But someone knew he was trying to run. It was only a feeling, but Cian trusted his gut. Someone had paid off the staff at the terminal.

Someone was trying to stop him from leaving.

And that made Cian want to run all the more.

Chapter 12

As Cian made his way to the docks, he kept his eye open for anyone who might be following him. This deep in the city, the streets were packed with men and women, rich and poor, working and idle, mick and American and black. Cars and trucks and even a few horse-drawn wagons turned the roads stagnant, and twice Cian slid through the stalled traffic, hoping to lose any pursuers in the maze of automobiles.

He never saw anyone. Cian wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

The muddy stain of the Mississippi grew, spreading until the far side was a glimpse of green and brown in the distance. The waters were choppy today, and chunks of ice bobbed and flopped as they were torn free by the warmer weather. River smells filled the air, dead fish and tar, and the wind off the water sliced through Cian's coat. He didn't like rivers. They were untrustworthy things.

But untrustworthy or not, the river was the fastest way out of town now that he knew the station was being watched. There was something wrong about it. It was too big a job. It was too much money. Seamus's gang might want Cian dead, but they didn't have that kind of influence.

So who did?

He should have left town last night. He should have left the girl, hit the road, and never looked back.

But, as history proved time and again, Cian Shea was as stupid as they came.

If men from Seamus's gang—or whoever it was—had locked down Union Station, then it was a safe bet that the main wharf would be watched as well. Cian slowed as he drew closer to the wharf, walking at the rear of a horse-drawn wagon. He studied the port. At first, the wharf

seemed no different from any other day. Plenty of men and boys hard at work, loading and unloading the boats, engaged in loud conversations, shouting for traffic to clear.

But for a winter day—even a relatively warm one, like today—there were at least half a dozen extra boys sitting on pilings and lounging on stacks of crates. Boys that seemed to be in no particular hurry to find a bit of work.

Boys who were watching the wharf.

Right then, Cian stepped into a pile of horse droppings and cursed. He paused long enough to wipe his boot clean on the curb, and when he looked up, the wagon had moved on without him. One of the boys—a rat-faced, wiry thing with a mop of blond hair—was staring at Cian.

The boy whistled.

Cian sprinted back up the wharf, away from the docks and the river. A patch of icy straw gave out from under his boot, but Cian kept his footing, launched himself up the steps and away from the river. Shouts followed him as he shoved his way through the crowds, and then he hit an empty side street, turned down it, and sped into the network of alleys that curled behind the main streets of St. Louis.

When he could no longer hear the shouts, when the only sound was the clap of his boots on the brick pavement, Cian slowed to a walk. His heart pounded, sweat stung his face, and his breath came in gasps. He took in his surroundings. A quiet, narrow street of quiet, narrow houses. An old German woman in a bonnet and a patchwork coat watched him with mouse-eyes as she swept her stoop. The smell of the river had faded. Here, Cian smelled the leftover, yeasty odor of fermentation. Perhaps the smell lingered from the days before the Volstead Act. Perhaps some of

St. Louis's finest were still making their own beer. The smell turned Cian's stomach, though, and he dropped to sit on a stoop.

The old German woman kept sweeping and watching him. Her face was a wrinkled apple. A sour, wrinkled apple.

Old German women, though, were the least of Cian's problems. With trains and boats both closed to him, Cian would have to leave town on foot. Or, if he were lucky, perhaps hitching a ride, although that seemed unlikely.

Run, the smart part of Cian's brain was still saying.

But now another part of him had woken up. The part that had seen the lieutenant, that night in France, and pulled the Colt, and squeezed the trigger, and never thought twice about it. The part that had been glad—glad—to see the bastard's brains and bone spattered across the wall.

Cian's life wasn't worth a wooden penny. He was a murderer, a deserter, and a drunk. Most jobs wouldn't take him, and the ones that did, he managed to screw up. But it had been his life. And someone had taken it from him.

Then he knew who it was.

The thin man, the one who had shot Seamus and left Cian to take the fall.

That's when everything had gone wrong.

Cian got to his feet and started walking. His feet hurt. His head hurt. The ham from that morning had taken a bad turn in his stomach.

He had less than five dollars in his pocket, but he found someplace warm, a little Hun soda shop in Dutchtown, and he bought himself a bottle of Bevo, an egg salad sandwich, and then a second sandwich to eat on the road. His head had settled by the time he'd finished eating.

He thought Mrs. Doyle might even be proud of him, if he hadn't left Bobby Flynn dead in her back yard. Two days now and he'd woken up sober. Even St. Patrick might find that hard to believe.

It took Cian longer than he thought to find Eileen's apartment. One reason was that he didn't know her last name, and Eileen was a common enough name in the Patch. The other reason was that, even in the middle of the day, the Patch was still the Patch, and Cian had to keep to back streets and places where Seamus's men didn't have a handhold.

By mid-afternoon, though, Cian had wandered into the courtyard of a rickety log structure. It was a cold, dark, quiet spot of the Patch, walled away from sunlight and fresh air, and doors studded both stories of the courtyard. He guessed that women like Eileen tended to live in place like this: little, one-room hovels with nothing more than a bed. It was better than what some folk in the Patch had. Cian stood on the ground floor outside a rough door. He hammered on the door and heard movement inside, and a moment later, the door popped open a crack.

A red-rimmed eye looked out at him, widened in surprise, and the door started to shut.

Cian wedged his foot into the crack.

"Morning, Eileen. Afternoon, really."

"Get lost," she said. "You're bad news, Cian Shea. You should leave town."

"See, that's really funny, Eileen. I thought the same thing." Cian gave the door a shove. Eileen fell back, landing on a narrow cot. The room was as spare as Cian had imagined it: the cot, a lone chair with clothes hanging off the back, and a three-legged table with a pitcher and basin. Cold winter air mixed with the smell of Eileen's body. Cian closed the door and stood with his back to it.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

Eileen grimaced and pulled her flimsy dressing gown closer. She watched him for a minute. She was still throwing off those tiny shivers that Cian remembered from the first time he met her.

“You’re sick?” he asked.

No answer.

“You might as well get under those blankets. I’m not here for business. At least, not for your business.”

Without a word, Eileen crawled back under the bedding. She still shivered. She still said nothing.

“I tried leaving town. Someone’s got the station watched, so I can’t get a train, and the docks are crawling with Seamus’s men. Or whoever is running things now that Seamus is dead.”

“Byrne.”

“What?”

“Byrne is running things now. And he’s put a hundred dollars out for your head.”

The name didn’t mean anything to Cian. “What about another fellow? A man who visited Seamus, but not by the front door? Someone Seamus trusted enough that he’d meet with him in secret?”

“Seamus didn’t trust anybody.”

“He wanted to meet this man without anyone else knowing. Who could it be?”

“What do I know? I’m just a whore. The last person Seamus met with was you, and you shot him dead.”

“No. There was another man back there.”

Eileen watched him for a moment. She had eyes as green as a summer field, and they were bright now. She nodded. “You didn’t look like the type anyway.”

“So who could this other fellow be?”

“I have no idea. But there’s been trouble for weeks now. Fights along the river, new folk moving in from the north and the east. Pushing Hogan’s boys, the Cuckoo Gang, Egan’s Rats—all of them. Whoever they are, they’d been hitting Seamus hard. Then Seamus started going queer on us. Screaming in the night, at first, and then twitching like he’d looked up the Devil’s skirt. You saw him. He wasn’t right in the head.”

“He looked frightened.”

“He was mad. Totally out of his mind. Everyone’s breathing a sigh of relief that he’s dead.”

“Everyone except me.”

Eileen offered a narrow smile. “Everyone except you.”

“So who’s this new gang?”

“I don’t know that they’ve got themselves a proper name yet. But everyone talks about the Dane.”

“Where?”

“South Tiffany.”

“Tiffany? What are they? A bunch of ladies in fur stoles?”

“I told you, Tiffany. South side. That’s all I know.”

“Thanks.” Cian paused. “Who hit you?”

Eileen traced a shadow of a bruise on the side of her face. “Bobby. Said I was working with you. Said nobody would get a whore’s coat for her otherwise.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nobody paid him any mind, and Bobby left me alone after he knocked me around a bit.”

She shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”

“He’s dead.”

“Who? Bobby?”

“Thanks for the help.”

“They’re looking for you, Cian. They’ll kill you. And they’ll do it mean and slow if they can, just to make an example.”

“Take care, Eileen.”

She huddled deeper in her in blankets and watched him leave. When Cian opened the door, the weak light of the courtyard revealed bruises scattered across Eileen’s chin and cheeks. Cian left, his fists in his pockets, and wished Bobby Floyd had survived the fall.

Then he went south, into Tiffany.

Chapter 13

The sun balanced itself on the rim of the world, a rusted penny, and the sky was a flavorless peach. The respectable homes of Tiffany stood at attention along the street. A few cars ambled past Cian, and a middle-aged woman with a string of six children gave him a nod, but for the most part, he was alone. Alone gave him time to watch the two- and three-story brick homes on their slender lots, to look at the curtains lit with warm yellow light, to smell wood-smoke and frying onion and to hear the gravel voice of the evening news on the radio.

Tiffany was the good side of St. Louis. Respectable Americans—not the micks, not the Huns, but the good colonial stock—with good jobs and warm houses and even an automobile, if they'd saved their pennies. Kerry Patch with its frozen poor, with its hunger, with bruised-up Eileen, Kerry Patch might as well have been Siam, or the moon, for all the connection it had with this place.

Kerry Patch had monsters. Not the unbelievable, fantastic things that Cian had half-imagined the night before: men that could rip a scrawny thug in half, giant spiders, ghosts. Not things out of children's stories. Kerry Patch had the only kind of monsters that counted: men and women, flesh and blood. Monsters like Seamus Daniels, and Byrne, and Bobby Flynn.

Tiffany—well, Tiffany might as well have been heaven, and micks like Cian Shea would never end up there. Micks started in the Patch and ended in the Patch. That was life.

Cian found the apartment building. It sat at the end of a cul-de-sac, two brick wings ready to take flight, with a cement staircase running up the center. If this were the disreputable side of Tiffany, there was no sign of it. The sidewalks were free of litter. The yards well-kept. On the air

came the smell of baking bread and the sound of a girl singing scales. Cian took the steps two at a time. In the growing gloom of winter, the noise of his boots was crisp and clear.

The hallway was open to the outside, and at the far end of the building, a wrought-iron grille allowed a chill breeze to enter. Cian stopped outside the last door, right up against the grille. This was the Dane's door, according to Eileen. For a moment, Cian thought he heard a sound from the stairs. He drew the Colt. Waited.

After a pair of minutes and nothing but the cold slipping up the back of his coat, Cian knocked. Steps came from the other side, and then silence.

Cian put his back to the grille, stepping away from the door.

Buckshot tore the wooden door to pieces and sprayed the far side of the hall. Through the gaping hole in the door, a shotgun barrel emerged and fired again, knocking holes in the door that stood opposite. Cian swore, kicked the barrel, and heard a shout from inside the apartment. He kicked again, wrenching the barrel up and to the side, and felt the shotgun come free.

Cian threw his weight into the damaged door, shattering the damaged wood. Splinters raked his hand and arm, but Cian found the bolt, drew it, and kicked the door. Someone tried to pull the shotgun back, but Cian slammed the door open. A wiry man with a stiff mustache fell to the floor, wringing one hand and gazing at the shotgun, which was still halfway through the ruined door. His hand went for a pistol. Cian fired once and took the man in the chest. He screamed and dropped.

Cian grabbed the man's pistol before moving further into the apartment. A filthy kitchen stood to the right, the sink full of dirty dishes, the floor and counters soiled with grease and dirt. From the next room came shouts. Another man darted around the corner and fired. Bullets struck

the wall, and shards of wood and plaster tore at Cian's coat. Cian fired. He missed. He let off a second shot.

The round caught Cian's attacker in the shoulder. The man spun, slammed into the wall, and tried to fire again.

Cian's next shot took the man in the head.

Three rounds left.

After the concussive noise of the gunshots, silence stuffed Cian's ears. He tasted gun-smoke and blood and the metallic mixture of exhilaration and terror. He checked the first room. It was a small living room, with a radio and a table covered in clothes and old newspapers. A sofa sat underneath a window, and outside, the city was frozen in sheets of blue and charcoal. The next room held a pair of lumpy pallets on the floor and an empty closet.

The bathroom was empty. And in need of serious cleaning.

At the back of the apartment, one door remained. Cian kept his back pressed to the wall as he tried the doorknob.

"It's open," a voice said from inside. "You can come in. Just don't shoot.

"No surprises," Cian said, turning the doorknob and urging the door open with his foot. "Keep your head."

"Don't worry," the voice said. "I'm not going to cause any trouble."

On the other side of the door was another bedroom, this time with an actual bed. A dresser lay on its side, exposing a hole that had been cut into the plaster, offering a hiding spot. The far wall of the room had a window. Through that window, Cian saw the city again, silhouetted against the deepening amethyst of the sky. More importantly, though, he saw a man.

And then Cian tried not to laugh.

The man was sandwiched between the sill and the window, his legs hanging inside the room, his upper half propped on the fire escape. He had twisted around and was giving Cian a hopeful smile. Bright blue eyes stared out from under a mess of sandy hair, making the man's face look young, almost boyish. He was missing a tooth, but it didn't stop his smile one bit.

On the fire escape rested a small box without any apparent opening.

Cian walked over to the window, tapped the man's leg with the Colt, and said, "Problem?"

"Shoddy construction," the man said. "Don't suppose you'd mind helping me? Damn thing almost broke my back, and now my trousers are caught on a nail."

"Sure," Cian said. He pulled a knife from the back of the man's trousers and tossed it to the bed. Then, with a firm grip on the man's ankle, Cian said, "No tricks."

The man shook his head. "Promise."

Cian unhooked the man's trousers from the nail and raised the window. With a sigh of relief, the man rubbed his back. Cian hauled him through the window, and the man got to his feet, cradling the box with one arm and massaging his back with the other.

"Thanks, friend. Name's Sam."

"Nice to meet you, Sam. Now, I think I'm going to take that box, and then we're going to have a long talk about the Dane."

Sam winced. "Listen, pal, I really appreciate the help, but I don't think you're going to be taking the box."

"And why's that?" Cian asked.

The muzzle of a gun prodded his back, and a feminine voice—a suspiciously familiar feminine voice—said, "Because I am."

Chapter 14

Paris, as far as Irene was concerned, was no longer an option.

She woke early, in spite of the late night, and found herself cocooned again in the pink and white frills of childhood. There was something cloying about the room in the morning light. A confectionery sweetness, gritty to the teeth. This was the room of a girl who had been meant to grow up sweet and silent, marry young and marry well, and die from the inside out for the next forty years.

Maybe, at some point, Irene had been that little girl. But along the way, her path had taken twists and turns. Oberlin. Her father would say it had been Oberlin, that young women had no need of college, that it upset their delicate systems. He had told her as much when she had left to go to school. He had told her so, many times since, in letters and in person. He would tell her again, given half a chance.

But he had been so relieved that she was leaving St. Louis that he hadn't stopped her.

Oberlin was a part of it, but not all of it. There had been Oberlin, and there had been the suffrage movement, and there had been the pamphlets and fliers Irene sneaked into the house and read in secret. Books had been a part of it all too—reading the classics, seeing the outlines of worlds that were so different from her own, and underneath it all, the heartbeat of a single question: why?

If Irene were honest, though, at the heart of it all was Francis Derby.

So this morning she lay in bed, thumbing the chamber of the revolver, one hand cupping her right breast, and decided Paris was no longer an option. Paris meant running, just as Oberlin had meant running. Running from Papa, running from the Andersons and the Townsends and the

Derbys, running from tea and soirees and marriage and death. Irene was sick to the core of running.

She got up, bathed, and dressed herself. Her closet was full of clothes, but only a handful of them were truly Irene's. Most of the clothing was composed of modest, elegant dresses in silk and good English wool—all of them tasteful, all of them tailored, and all of them dreadfully expensive. The handful of other garments were the only ones that Irene considered hers. A few dresses she had managed to get at college by saving her allowances, with hemlines at the knee and low waists and simple, straight lines. She dressed in one of these now, a shimmering green that left her shoulders bare. It was rubbish for the cold, but she had her coat, and she liked how she looked in it. Not like a matron, or even a respectable daughter. She looked like an independent woman. She looked like herself.

Irene pulled on her coat, noting a bare patch on the shoulder where the fur had been burned away, and then her *cloche* hat. She took her clutch, and the empty revolver, and stuffed every bit of jewelry and cash that she had into a bag. Then she made her way down to the study, where Papa was sitting in a dressing gown and an enormous pair of fluffy slippers. A pot of coffee sat next to him, and a cup, and the morning paper. He looked old, right then—sagging into the folds of the dressing gown, his features long and drawn, and every inch of him gray and washed of life. A bit of color returned to his face when he saw Irene.

“What in the world do you think you're doing?” he asked. “I arranged for your travel. You leave this afternoon. For Paris.”

“I remember, Papa.”

“You didn't come home last night.”

“I was busy.”

“Well you’re not going out today. You’ll spend the morning with your mother—apologizing, I hope, and making the best of things—and then you’ll be on a train for New York. If you care to spend a few days in the city, I can have your travel changed.”

“No, Papa.”

“Very well. It was merely an idea.”

“No. I’m sorry, I mean, I am not going.”

Red started its march up Papa’s face. He folded the paper and slapped the desk with it.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m not going.”

“This is not your decision, Irene. I’d hoped that a few years at school would settle your head, but you’ve come back and made a perfect ruin of everything. At this rate, you’ll be lucky to find anyone to take you for a wife. Perhaps a lonely expatriate in Paris will like your spirit.”

“I don’t plan to marry, Papa.”

Papa stared at her for a moment. The red darkened to maroon, until his face looked purple and ready to burst. And then, after an explosive breath, he started to laugh. He folded the paper again, tapped his chin with the crease, and kept laughing.

“Not marry,” he said, when he had finished. “Of course, dear.”

“It’s a perfectly reasonable choice, Papa. Many women are doing it. Independent women.”

He smiled. Not angry, not even frustrated. Amused.

“Of course. Well, darling, you are indeed an independent woman, and I see that your time at school has given you something of a backbone. Let us speak plainly with each other. Today, you will leave this house. Either you will board a train to New York, or you will be out on the

street, with nothing but the clothes on your back.” His features softened, and he tapped his chin with the paper again. “Independence is a wonderful thing, Irene, but everything has its price.”

“I know, Papa.” Irene started from the doorway and then paused. “Papa?”

“Yes, my darling girl?”

“I’m going to find the box. I know you’re lying. I don’t know why you are, but I know that you know that someone brought a box to this house yesterday. I’ll find it. And I’ll find the man who killed Sally.”

Papa rose from his chair. Gravity dragged him down, and he leaned on the desk with one hand. “You must forget all that nonsense, Irene. Let it go. You’re only making things worse for yourself.”

“Goodbye, Papa,” Irene said. She blew him a kiss, gave him her jauntiest smile, and felt her heart like winter glass.

“Irene, stop right there—”

But Irene didn’t stop. The last piece of solid ground had given out from beneath her, tumbling away into the abyss, and she was falling. Or flying.

She made her way to the door and let herself out, ignoring her father’s shouts.

The sky was a blue that would only grow brighter, and Irene started down the drive.

Falling. Or flying. Maybe there wasn’t any difference.

Maybe.

Chapter 15

On second thought, Irene decided that her bid for independence might have been better after breakfast. The edge of the sun had cleared the horizon, and already the streets were full of men and women, most of them dressed in clothes that were patched and stained from work. Some of them noticed Irene, watching her as though she were a summer bird that had forgotten to fly south for winter. The rest seemed oblivious to her.

Half a block later, her feet already frozen in her thin-soled shoes, Irene decided that while walking out of the house had been a very fine gesture of independence, there was nothing stopping her from taking a cab. It took longer than she thought, and by the time she'd arrived at the Louisiana Grand, it was almost eight in the morning. The hotel was as busy as ever, with the richest and brightest of St. Louis's guests pouring through its high-ceilinged lobbies like a river. Crystal chandeliers hung over Carrara marble floors and thick Turkish rugs. Gold leaf gleamed on the pilasters and capitals. The restaurant on the second floor was busy, but not overly so, and Irene found herself ensconced in a leather booth, at a white linen table, within minutes.

Independence was not so bad.

She ate, paid, and lingered a bit longer in the quiet bustle of the Louisiana Grand. The noise was like rubbed velvet. Irene loved it. When her toes had thawed, and when the coffee had done its work, Irene knew what she had to do.

She didn't like it one bit.

The only other person who could reliably confirm the delivery—and, subsequent events notwithstanding, might be able to lead Irene to the murderer—was an annoyingly obtuse Irishman named Cian.

She took a cab to the edge of Kerry Patch.

“Miss,” the cabbie said as he took her fare, “if you don’t mind my saying so, the Patch isn’t the right part of town for a lady like you. If you want to see some of St. Louis, I can drive you out along the riverfront or take you to the old World’s Fair grounds.”

“Thank you, but no.” Irene slipped out of the car before the man could insist. The cold wasn’t as bad today, and the sky had deepened to crystalline blue. Irene plunged into Kerry Patch, amazed at the rapid change as she left the rest of the city behind. Brick streets turned to freezing, ankle-deep mud. People huddled on the street corners—mostly women and children—obviously cold and even more obviously hungry. Irene kept her clutch hidden inside her coat, and she kept her fingers on the revolver, but mostly she tried to keep her eyes on the ground.

A whistle behind Irene made her glance back, but she saw nothing out of the ordinary. As she turned around, she crashed into someone. Strong hands closed over her arms, pinning her elbows to her sides and steering her towards the mouth of an alley.

“Lady, keep your mouth shut and you’ll be just fine,” a voice said. The reek of alcohol coated the words. Irene glanced up, but all she saw was a bristly beard and bloodshot eyes. The alley loomed closer. Irene threw pleading looks at the men and women walking past her, but they turned their faces away.

Irene let her legs give out.

The man holding her stumbled, and one foot caught in a frozen trough of mud. As the man’s weight dragged him off balance, Irene twisted free. She brought the revolver up, swinging as hard as she could, and slammed the barrel of the gun into the man’s mouth.

Bone cracked. The man spat blood. It landed on Irene’s cheek. Hot and cooling quickly.

She pulled free as the man fell and then she ran. Behind her, the man howled.

Her shoes had little purchase on the frozen ground, but Irene ran as fast as she dared. Dilapidated buildings raced past her. She glimpsed signs, but caught nothing more than fragmented images. Fear made thought difficult.

Memories of the previous night surged up. The golems tearing a man apart. The spiders. The chase.

There. Ahead of her, a sign she recognized.

Patrick's.

Irene threw herself at the door. It refused to open. She pounded on the wood.

"Patrick," she shouted. "Open up. Patrick! Open up!"

Behind her, the surface of the crowd roiled like troubled waters.

And then the door opened, and Patrick stood there with mussed hair and sleepy eyes.

"What—"

Before he could finish, Irene darted inside, slammed the door shut, and put her back to the wood.

Patrick slid the bolt home. A moment later, the wood thumped, and Irene swallowed the noise in her throat. Her hands closed manically around the grip of the revolver.

"Go away," Patrick shouted. "We're not open."

"Open the fucking door," a voice said. "I saw her."

"Get lost before I break your head," Patrick said.

One last, frustrated thump came through the door, and then silence.

"Well," Patrick said. "You again." He wore a rumpled undershirt that showed off a nice pair of shoulders—very interesting shoulders, to Irene's way of thinking—and a pair of trousers.

His feet were bare, and he moved from foot to foot on the freezing floor. “Come on,” he said.
“It’s cold, isn’t it?”

Patrick led her back to a small room at the rear of the bar. He stirred a pot-bellied stove to life, stoking the flames with coal from a bucket, and the room began to warm. Waving Irene into a chair, Patrick sat on the unmade bed, pulling the blankets around him.

“I don’t think I caught your name,” Patrick said. “Seems like I should know the women who come pounding at my door begging for help.”

“Has there been more than one?”

Patrick smiled. “No. Just the one.”

“My name is Irene.”

“Did you kill Cian Shea?”

Irene laughed and shook her head. “You saw what happened. He saved my life. Those men—” She cut off, feeling a wave of nervous dizziness sweep over her. “I wouldn’t have hurt him anyway.”

“You looked pretty serious to me.”

“It was a misunderstanding.”

“Are you and I going to have a misunderstanding? I’d hate to be shot before I have my breakfast.”

Irene laughed in spite of herself, and Patrick’s grin spread. “No,” Irene said. “No misunderstandings. I need your help.”

“Since I’m not going to be getting any more sleep,” Patrick said, “give me half a minute to get dressed and I’ll see what I can do for you.”

Irene moved back into the chilly main room of the bar with a twinge of regret as she saw Patrick tugging off his shirt. Good as his word, Patrick followed her a few minutes later, dressed in coat and shirt and shoes, his hair wet and combed. He toasted a few slices of bread at a gas stove and asked, "What can I do for you, Miss Irene? Besides save your life from the everyday trouble of Kerry Patch."

"Thank you," Irene said. "I'm sorry I didn't say that earlier."

Patrick handed her a piece of toast, which Irene took and picked at. "You looked a bit rattled," Patrick said. "I told you the first time that this wasn't your kind of place."

"I'm starting to think you were right."

"You're looking for Cian again."

"Maybe. I don't know."

Patrick piled his toast on a plate and joined her at the bar. "Maybe?"

"Maybe. Cian brought my father a box. Within the hour, someone had come to the house and stolen that same box. I thought, at first, it had been Cian. Now I'm not so sure."

"I can help you there. It wasn't Cian. He's not the dishonest sort."

Irene nodded. "I was afraid of that. Then how do I find the person who stole it?"

"Why do you need to find it?"

"It's a long story. Besides, it belongs to my father, not to some thief."

Patrick ate his toast in silence, and Irene continued to tear pieces of crust from hers.

"Well," Patrick said after a few more bites, "I can think of a few ways to start. You can ask some of the local fences, see if the box has shown up. You don't know what was in it?"

Irene shook her head.

“Pity. Whoever took it probably tossed the box at the first chance and kept whatever was inside. Still, you can ask. If they have it, it’ll cost you. Especially looking the way you do.”

“What’s wrong with the way I look?”

Patrick’s grin threatened to split his face. “Nothing, doll. Nothing at all. You might as well have a dollar sign on the back of that pretty little coat, though. You look like a million bucks, and a few of the boys might think you should share the wealth.”

“Aside from the fences, what can I do?”

“Well, you can ask Cian who hired him to deliver the box. If you know that, you might have an idea of what was in it and who might steal it.” He took another bite, chewed, and swallowed. Then he said, “That’s a bit more dangerous, Miss Irene. You might want to let this go.”

“I can’t let it go. I do have an idea, though, of what was in the box. Something to do with a secret cult. I’m not sure on the details, but it might have been a talisman or a ritual tool.”

Patrick sighed. “I was afraid of that. When I saw the golems—” He stopped and waved a half-eaten piece of toast.

“You knew those were golems? You know about golems?”

“What I know would probably fit in one of your tiny little hands, Miss Irene. But I know enough to keep my head down when golems show up. Whoever is making those things means serious business. I thought they were here for Cian, but if you’re right—well, they might have been here for you.”

“And how do I find out who made them?”

“You don’t. The smart bet, the safe bet, is to hop a train out of town and lie low for a few weeks.” Patrick dropped the last piece of toast on his plate, looked at her, and sighed. “You’re not that type, though, are you?”

Irene shook her head.

“The pretty ones always get me in trouble. Start with the fences, then. I’ll do a bit of asking. No promises, but if I hear anything, I’ll send word. Where can I find you?”

“The Louisiana Grand. I’ll be taking a room there.”

Patrick whistled. “A million bucks, doll. A million bucks. If you ever need a good-looking man on your arm, just say the word.”

“I will,” Irene said. “As soon as I find him.”

Patrick feigned a wince, smiled, and devoured the last piece of toast.

Chapter 16

An hour and a half later, Irene was safely outside the Patch, having been escorted by Patrick. He left her with a name and an address, and a quick cab ride took Irene to a row of respectable brick shops on Grand. One of the shops had a velvet-lined tray of watches in the window, above which hung a sign that read, *H. S. Lawrence*. The name matched the one that Patrick had given her. Irene opened the door. A bell jingled, a burst of warm air met her, and she found herself inside the shop.

Glass displays made a U, offering an array of watches, for men and women, some with leather straps, others with delicate metal bands, and many set with precious stones. Behind the displays sat a more serviceable workbench covered with tiny pieces, all placed with obvious care. A stout man with a long white beard emerged from a back room. He was dressed in a dark suit, but there was something jolly about his face, an almost Santa Claus-type smile that hovered on the edges of his mouth.

“Good morning, ma’am,” he said. “How may I help you?”

“A friend sent me,” Irene said. “He told me to ask if you had a 1904 Le Deniau. For my godmother.”

At the coded request, the man’s face showed a hint of surprise, but he simply nodded. “Of course, ma’am. I am Hugo Lawrence. How may I help you?”

“I’m looking for a box that was stolen from my home. Perhaps the box has been sold. Or perhaps its contents.”

Hugo frowned. “Do you know what the box contained?”

Irene flushed. “No. Unfortunately, it had been delivered only a short time before.”

“I’m sorry,” Hugo said. “Without an idea of the contents—”

“It was a small box,” Irene said. “No more than a foot long. It didn’t have any obvious way to open it. I was thinking that such a box might be sold as such, without opening it.”

The color drained from Hugo’s ruddy cheeks. “Ma’am, I do not have this box, nor have I seen it.”

“But you’ve heard of it.”

Hugo hesitated and then nodded.

“Why? What do you know of it?”

“Very little, ma’am. Important men in the city have made it clear to me that the box, should it come into my hands, was not to be opened. I was given instructions on how to deliver the box, should someone try to sell it to me.” He paused again. “I was also told a second time, most explicitly, not to open the box.”

“Who wants it?”

“Ma’am, my clients are always confidential. I cannot—”

“Please,” Irene said. “I can pay. The box belonged to my father, and I simply must get it back for him.”

Hugo drummed his fingers on the glass display. He began to shake his head, but before he could speak, Irene stepped forward, pulled out her purse, and drew out a heavy gold bracelet set with sapphires. She placed it on the glass. Hugo’s eyes widened.

“Surely this is enough for a few names,” Irene said. “Along with my promise of total discretion, of course.”

“Of course,” Hugo murmured. He pointed to the bracelet. “May I?”

Irene nodded.

Hugo retrieved a jeweler's loupe and studied the bracelet for several minutes. His long white beard was trembling with excitement by the time he had finished. Irene wondered how the man ever managed to get a good deal—his eagerness for the bracelet was palpable.

"Perhaps, with a bit more compensation," Hugo began.

"I think not." Irene snatched the bracelet from his hand and turned to walk towards the door. "I was not told that you would waste my time, Mr. Lawrence."

"A moment, ma'am. Wait just a moment." Hugo hurried out from behind the displays. "I was simply wondering—"

"Mr. Lawrence, I'm a bit pressed for time. Please forgive me for being abrupt. Do we have a deal?"

Indecision flickered once more in the old man's eyes, and then greed stamped it out. With his white beard quivering, Hugo Lawrence held out his hand and nodded.

"Wonderful," Irene said. "I'll need addresses as well. And then I have a few additional pieces you may be interested in. All of strictly legal provenance, which, I'm sure you'll agree, drastically increases their value."

With a look of bewilderment, Hugo Lawrence nodded, leading Irene to the back of the shop.

That was when Irene began to haggle in earnest.

Almost two hours later, still flushed with excitement, and her clutch heavy with the bundle of cash that Mr. Lawrence had produced in exchange for several of the more valuable pieces of jewelry, Irene left the shop. Hugo Lawrence stood in the doorway watching her. His

face had lost its Santa Clause shine, and now he looked like a man who was certain he had been taken advantage of, but he was not exactly sure how. Irene gave him a smile and a wave, and then turned and hurried to call a cab.

If Mr. Lawrence had been honest—and Irene was fairly sure that he had—the two men who had contacted him about the box were notorious gangsters. One, named Byrne, led the men who ran Kerry Patch. The other, who was known as the Dane, was a newcomer to the city and pushing hard against the older, more established criminal factions. None of it meant tops or tails to Irene, who had no knowledge of that side of the city. Aside from her two forays into Kerry Patch, the closest she had come to illegal behavior was Francis Derby, who had walked away from his actions without so much as a slap on the wrist. At the very least, though, that experience had showed her that law and order were as much an illusion as anything else.

The revolver Irene carried, on the other hand, was quite real.

A third visit to Kerry Patch in two days seemed unnecessary, and Irene didn't like the thought of running into the man who had accosted her. Instead, she ordered the cabbie south, towards the neighborhood known as Tiffany. The address Mr. Lawrence had given her was on the south side of the neighborhood. Tiffany, as far as Irene knew, was yet another solid, middle-class neighborhood. The kind of place Irene had never spent much time, if only for the reason that she had no need to.

The sun had lowered in the sky by the time the cab dropped her off two blocks west of the address. Irene was surprised; the day had gone quickly, and the cold was settling in. She stowed her clutch and her larger purse inside her coat, but she transferred the revolver—all six rounds chambered—to the outer pocket, where she could keep a tight grip on it.

If she had a fair bit of luck, she might have the box by suppertime.

The thought buoyed her spirits, and Irene strode towards the address, enjoying the calm and quiet of the neighborhood. The houses were cramped compared to the home she had grown up in, and the brick was worn, the fences in need of a few repairs. Even the streetlamps were scratched and scuffed. But it seemed a decent enough place. The street ahead ended in a cul-de-sac, and at the end of the cul-de-sac sat a brick apartment building with two wings and a flight of cement stairs running up the middle.

At the next intersection, Irene paused. Dark was settling in fast now, draping bulky shadows across the streets, but Irene was still able to see a red-haired man coming down the street to her left. She drew back and waited.

It was Cian Shea. What was he doing here?

He turned towards the apartment building and took the stairs two at a time. Irene moved after him. Patrick had insisted that Cian was honest, but if that were the case, why was he meeting with one of the men who wanted the box? A shriek from the next street startled her, and Irene whipped around. Two children ran down the block, chased by a larger boy, and all three were laughing.

Focus. She needed to focus.

Cian had already disappeared into the building. Irene took the stairs to the top. Her shoes clapped on one of the steps, and she stopped on the landing, praying Cian hadn't heard. After another minute, though, she proceeded up the final flight of stairs.

The thunderbolt crack of gunfire stopped her. Irene heard a shout, and then wood splintering, and several more shots. She darted up the stairs and around the corner. At the end of the hall, a ruined door stood open, with a shotgun hanging halfway through a hole in the wood. As Irene turned into the apartment, she found a man dead on the floor. A trail of blood showed

where he had dragged himself towards the door, and now he had one hand stretched out as he fumbled for the stock of the shotgun. The front of his shirt was soaked with blood, and when he looked at Irene, there was hatred in his eyes.

She kicked his hand away and grabbed the shotgun. The man made a last swipe at the gun, his breath gurgling, and then fell on his back. He was still. Irene didn't know if he was breathing.

Her eyes stung. Her breath came in quick, sharp gasps. The shotgun was unwieldy and heavy.

Irene stumbled down the hall, past another dead man, his face and head destroyed by a gunshot. Irene's breath came faster. The place smelled of blood and urine.

She tried not to look at the pink and gray spatters on the wall.

She was not going to run away.

Cian's voice pulled her deeper into the apartment. He stood in the rear bedroom with his back to her, talking to a sandy-haired young man who was holding a box. Irene recognized it instantly. The box Cian had brought to her house.

"Nice to meet you, Sam," Cian said. "Now, I think I'm going to take that box, and then we're going to have a long talk about the Dane."

The man called Sam met Irene's eyes over Cian's shoulder. Irene lifted the revolver, and Sam winced. "Listen, pal," he said to Cian. "I really appreciate the help, but I don't think you're going to be taking the box."

"And why's that?" Cian asked.

Irene jabbed him in the back with the tip of the revolver. Cian jerked away, but she kept the pressure up and said, "Because I am."

“Irene?” Cian asked.

“Hi, Cian. Why don’t you step on over into the corner? I’ll take that box, since it’s mine anyway, and then I’ll leave you alone.”

Cian had a pistol in his hand—the same big gun Irene recognized from the night before—but he nodded and stepped over to the corner. When he turned around, he said, “This is a mistake, Irene. You’re getting yourself deeper into this mess.”

“I could say the same to you.”

“You’d be right,” Cian said. “I don’t have much of a choice, though.”

Irene kept the revolver on Sam and gestured with her free hand. “I don’t either,” she said.

Sam held out the box. Irene took it, and Sam stepped away, hands in the air. He looked every inch a thief: wiry and scruffy, barely more than a boy and the wrong kind of charming. The kind that left a foolish girl without her pearls or her maidenhead and nothing but a string of empty promises. He tried a smile on her. Irene didn’t bother smiling back.

“I’ll leave you boys to figure things out,” Irene said. She stepped backwards, tucking the box under one arm. “No hard feelings.”

“No,” Cian said. “None at all.”

Sam was staring at the box the way a drowning man watches a passing ship.

Irene stepped back again, into the hallway, keeping her eye on the bedroom in case either man decided to reconsider. On her third step, though, she bumped into someone. A hand tapped her on the shoulder.

“Hello, Irene,” Harry Witte said, giving her a dazzling smile. He pulled the revolver from her hand, still smiling, and passed it back to Pearl. “I believe I said we wouldn’t meet again.”

Chapter 17

Cian shared a glum look with Sam after Irene left the room. It was the second time that the girl had gotten the drop on him. From the hall came her retreating footsteps, and then a muffled voice.

A man's voice.

"Give that back," Irene shouted.

Cian plunged into the hallway. Irene stood face to face with Harry Witte. He lifted the box in both hands, holding it out of Irene's reach, and over her head he gave Cian a wink.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Cian asked.

"Cian, please," Harry said. "There are ladies present."

Irene chose that moment to slap Harry. The blow turned his head a quarter of an inch.

"Irene—" Harry began.

She slapped him again. Both of the man's cheeks were red now.

"I think you're overreacting," Harry said.

"Give me the box," Irene said. "I found it. It belongs to my father."

"Technically," Cian said. "I found it." Harry and Irene gave Cian identical looks. Cian held up his hands. "Fine. Work it out between the two of you."

Pearl rolled her eyes.

"Irene, I believe I told you to let this drop."

She drew herself up, looking like a million bucks, with a gaze that would have stopped a runaway horse. "You told me to let it drop?"

Harry licked his lips once and glanced over at Pearl.

Not a hint of support.

“What I meant is that, for your own safety, you should leave these things to other people.”

“To men, you mean.”

“Now listen here,” Harry said. He lowered the box, tucked it under one arm, and took a step forward.

Irene didn’t as much as budge. Cian fought a smile. The woman had guts. He had to give her that.

“Why should I listen?” Irene asked. “Because you’re a man?”

“Where is all this coming from?” Harry said. “Pearl’s here. She’s a woman, just like you. Pearl. Tell her.”

Harry looked over. Pearl’s face might as well have been carved of stone.

“Rough day, Harry?” Cian asked.

Harry let out a sigh. “You have no idea.”

“The box,” Irene said, holding out her hands. “Now.”

“Let’s—” Harry began.

Before he could finish, something struck the building. The brick structure shivered as though it were made of mud. Fissures ran through plaster, throwing chips of wood across the room. The floor bucked and split. Cian latched onto the doorway with one hand. Irene tumbled backwards, and he caught her with his other arm.

For a moment, everything tilted and slid to the left as the building dropped and began to fall. Cian scrabbled for purchase with his feet. He caught the lip of a broken board and hung there, Irene’s arms wrapped around him.

And then the trembling stopped. The building had fallen at an angle, so that everything sloped to the left. Strips of lathe and plaster hung from the walls. The floor had broken into staggered sections. The gas lamps had gone out, leaving the apartment mostly in darkness. From somewhere nearby came a quiet hissing.

In the shadows, Cian stared down at Irene. She was pale, and her arms as tight as a vise around his waist, but she hadn't screamed.

"All right?" he asked.

"Like a dream," she answered, her voice breezy.

Cian grinned in spite of himself.

Further down the hall, Pearl and Harry had landed against the wall. The old Hun had vanished.

"Pearl?" Harry said.

"Fine."

"Freddy?"

The silver-headed German poked his head through the front door of the apartment. Dust clung to his cheeks and close-trimmed beard. He waved his cane at Harry and struggled to pull himself into the doorway.

"What was that?" Cian asked. "An earthquake?"

Harry and Freddy traded a glance. Harry shook his head.

"Then what?" Irene asked. "Don't tell me it was shoddy workmanship."

A long grinding noise came from the structure beneath them, and then, with a series of pops, the hallway split in half and the left side of the building began to fall. Through the dust and debris, Cian watched the wall drop away from behind Pearl and Harry. The two threw themselves

forward, gripping the floor, but as the building continued to fall the floorboards began to separate. Freddy reached down, clasped Pearl's hand, and pulled her up into the safety of the doorway.

Harry clung to his board, searching for handholds as the floor came apart beneath him.

"Stay put," Cian said to Irene, boosting her into the relative safety of the bedroom.

She looked like she was about to say something, but then she changed her mind and braced herself against the slanted wall.

Pulling himself hand over hand, Cian moved down the hallway, using the studs and frame of the ruined plaster wall to move closer to Harry. Harry hadn't seen him yet. The other man had managed to catch a splintered joist with the toe of his boot and had stopped his fall. The far side of the building was now open to the night, and the rush of air stirred the dust, exposing patches of night. From below came the crash of bricks hitting the ground.

Screams came from nearby. The residents of the building, Cian realized, as he dragged himself closer to Harry. How many had died when the building collapsed? Over the screams came the steady hiss of the ruptured gas lines. How many more would die when the gas caught? With a grunt, Cian leaned forward, across a jagged gap in the wall and floor, and reached for an anchor of broken brick and mortar.

The joist on which Harry was supporting himself creaked and bent. Harry scratched at a length of polished flooring with bloody fingers.

Offering a silent prayer, Cian grabbed the broken bricks and pulled himself across the gap. Mortar crumbled under his weight, but the brick held. Cian latched onto the next doorway, reached down, and gripped Harry's wrist.

The joist under Harry gave way.

The man's weight transferred to Cian's arm. Cian swore and struggled to keep his grip. Surprise and terror mingled in Harry's face, but the man didn't need any prompting. Using Cian's arm as a support, Harry dragged himself up an inch, and then another, and finally joined Cian in the doorway. Cian shook his aching arm when Harry let go.

There was no smile on Harry's face this time. No too-smooth, too-confident grin. The man was pale, dust clinging to his sweat face. When Harry met Cian's gaze, he gave a nod.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"Harry," Freddy called from the doorway. "They're coming up the stairs."

"How many?" Harry asked.

"Five," Pearl said. "No. Six."

"They've set a barrier," Freddy said.

Harry swore.

"Cian," Irene shouted.

Cian glanced back, then followed Irene's gesture. Sam, the sandy-haired thief, had crawled out along a piece of ruined flooring and was at the edge of the still-standing portion of the building. The thief lay down on his stomach, stretched out full length, reaching as far as he could.

And then Cian saw it.

The box.

It had fallen in a crook formed by a broken joist and a several splintered floorboards.

"He's going to get it," Irene cried.

Cian grabbed the crumbly knob of brick and swung himself back across the broken divide. Brick and mortal pulled free, and Cian began to fall, but the momentum from his swing carried him to the other side of the gap. He landed, slid a pair of inches, and caught hold of the wooden framing of the wall.

His feet dangled over empty air.

Shit and double shit.

Cian threw a glance over his shoulder. Harry and Freddy had disappeared through the doorway. From the outer hall of the building came the crack of gunfire, shouts, and then a sizzling white glare, brighter than any electric or gas light that Cian had ever seen. He waited for the gas lines to catch.

Nothing.

The shouts and gunfire continued, though, which meant that there would be no help from that direction. Irene let out a small cry, and when Cian turned his attention back her way, she had begun to lower herself from the doorway and onto the slanting flooring, towards Sam.

“Go back, Irene,” Cian shouted. “Get back up there.”

She shook her head, testing her footing, throwing quick looks at Sam. The thief had his fingers under the edge of the box and was dragging it towards him. His attention was fixed on his job.

Irene dropped onto the expanse of flooring that was still standing. The joists groaned, and the floor fell another inch. Cian swung himself forward, using the studs and the framing again.

Sam gave a hoot of triumph as he closed one hand over the box. He rolled onto his back and pulled the box up with him.

Irene trained her revolver on him.

The floor dropped another inch, and then there was a snap. The floor began to fall. Cian launched himself forward. He caught Irene by the arm. He felt the kick of her revolver as she fired. The sound of the shot hammered against his ears. Cian wrapped one hand around the door frame as the floor gave way. Sam dropped with it, letting out a shout as he fell.

Cian and Irene hung in the air for a moment. Then they heard the crash from below, as the boards and joists joined the rubble. Cian risked a glance.

A long, long way to fall.

Then he saw something that made his jaw drop. On a ledge of broken flooring in the ruined apartment below, Sam had managed to find a handhold. He pulled himself up onto the length of wood and dragged himself through a broken window.

In one hand, he still held the box.

From the fire escape, Sam turned, gave a wave, and then disappeared.

Irene swore.

Arms shaking and burning, Cian somehow managed to pull himself up into the bedroom, and then Irene after him. He dropped into the nook formed by the wall and the floor, feeling as though he'd worked a week in the clay mines. Irene slid down next to him on her knees. Curls of damp hair stuck to her cheeks. She stared at the ruined wall, eyes half-closed, taking shaky breaths.

Cian thought she might be crying.

After a moment, though, she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, blinked, and saw Cian looking at her. She tried for a smile. It dropped like a sack of bricks, but she tried again, and this time she managed to get it into place.

It was bright and breezy and it broke Cian's heart, and he thought he hadn't had much left to break.

"I suppose being big as an ox comes in helpful sometimes," she said, giving his arm a squeeze. Cian groaned and pulled his arm away.

"Is that your way of saying thank you?"

Irene stood, held out her hand, and Cian got up with a grumble. He did, however, take her hand.

"Thank you," Irene said, when they were both standing. Cian stared down at her, realizing how small she was, how frail and slender.

"Maybe next time, you'll think twice about sticking a gun in my back," Cian said.

"Maybe," Irene said. "Maybe."

The floor of the sagging room gave another groan. From the outer hall came more gunshots, and a cry that sounded like Pearl, and another distant flare of light.

"We can't go that way," Cian said.

Irene was already at the window. The shifting of the walls had fixed the window in place, so she broke the glass with the grip of the revolver and cleared the shards from the frame. She stuck her head out the window.

"He's gone."

"It doesn't matter," Cian said. "Let's go." He helped her through the window and said, "We'll find him. We'll find that damn box."

Irene looked at him for a minute, her face smudged with plaster and dirt, her eyes dark and full of life.

Like Corinne's.

Irene nodded and crawled out the window. As Cian pulled himself onto the fire escape, he heard her gasp, but it wasn't until he stood that he saw what had caused her reaction.

Free from the thick clouds of grit and plaster inside the building, the night was surprisingly clear. The clouds had parted. The winter sky was full of stars.

But stretched around the collapsing apartment building, like a wispy curtain, was a wall of shifting gray fog.

Chapter 18

Staring at the wall of haze that had drifted around the apartment building, Irene said, “What is that?”

Cian was about to respond when a tremor shook the collapsing building. “It doesn’t matter,” he said.

They hurried down the fire escape. Black paint flaked under their hands and feet, lacing their skin with the smell of rust. The last length of ladder was stuck—either rusted or frozen shut—so Cian dropped the six feet to the ground. When he landed, the jolt ran up through his heels.

“Now you,” he said to Irene.

From the fire escape, she eyed him, then turned a considering glance back up at the ruined apartments.

“Now,” Cian said.

Irene sighed, climbed over the edge of the fire escape. “You’re not going to drop me?”

“For God’s sake, Irene.”

She flashed him the same effortless smile, threw her arms wide, and fell.

Cian swore, stumbled a few feet in one direction, no, back, too slow—

She landed in his arms. Cian’s knees ached with the sudden weight. Irene looked up at him, still smiling, and patted his cheek.

“Very nicely done, Cian.”

“I’m not sure my back agrees.”

She laughed, let him help her to her feet, and adjusted her hat. Cian caught a glimpse of her neck between the heavy fur coat and the hat. A rather fine, slender white neck. He realized she was looking at him, her smug little smile tied in a bow, and flushed.

“What now?” she asked.

“We need to get out of here.”

“So wise,” she murmured, still fighting the smile.

Cian’s cheeks only got hotter. He gestured towards the mouth of the alley, and Irene nodded. She stifled another bout of laughter and slid her arm through his as they started walking.

“You’re not going to go bonkers on me again, are you?” Cian asked.

“Cian, you have the sweetest tongue. How do you keep the women away?”

“I’m serious.”

“No, I’m not going to go bonkers again, as you so charmingly put it.”

“Then why are you laughing?”

Irene looked him in the face. The corners of her mouth twitched. “Put it down to nerves. I’m just a silly woman, after all.”

Cian grunted. The soil of this particular conversation was getting sandy, and he was fairly sure there were sinkholes underfoot. A grunt seemed the safest response.

Irene burst into peals of laughter.

In spite of himself, Cian felt a smile stealing onto his face.

Mad. The woman was totally mad.

But pretty.

And why in the hell had he thought that?

They came around a bend in the alley. Dust hung in the air, mixing with the scent of garbage and diffusing the starlight into pale clouds. A breeze stirred the settling dust, bringing with it a carrion stench. Irene's laughter faded. She covered her mouth and nose with her sleeve. Cian pulled the Colt from the waistband of his trousers. The alley suddenly seemed very still and isolated. The only sound was the scrape of Cian's boots and the occasional swish of Irene's heavy fur coat. Ahead, the shifting wall of mist drifted along the middle of the next street, hiding whatever remained beyond.

A scraping noise came from behind Cian. He spun, brought up the Colt, and saw nothing.

Irene had her little revolver out. It probably wouldn't kill a man outright—not unless she hit him just right—but it was better than nothing. She pulled her arm free of his.

Nothing showed itself in the alley behind them. At Cian's nod, they moved forward again, this time trying to move silently. Again came the scraping sound, but this time from above. Cian looked up. The drifts of dust, suffused with starlight, hid anything that might have been moving.

Cian thought of the spiders as large as hound dogs.

To judge by Irene's pallor, so did she.

After another pace, the carrion stench struck Cian again, hard and close. Something moved overhead. He shoved Irene to the side, and they both tumbled into a pair of trash cans. Half-frozen garbage spilled across the ground. Cian hit the brick paving and rolled onto his side as something landed in the spot where he and Irene had been walking a moment before.

Irene lay on her stomach, but Cian noted that fact in the back of his mind. His attention was fixed on the thing that had dropped into the alley. It stood like a man—a very tall, very well-built man, bigger even than Cian. In the dusty half-light, the thing was all ropy muscles,

apparently shirtless in spite of the cold. It turned to face Cian, and vertical pupils widened in jade eyes.

A long tail swished across the ground, sending a tin can clattering across the bricks.

The thing darted forward. Irene spun onto her knees, firing her revolver. It turned towards her. Cian shoved Irene to the right. One of the thing's massive arms swept out, caught Irene's shoulder, and tossed her down the length of the alley. There was a rattle as her revolver hit the bricks, and then the thing had reached Cian.

He fired with the Colt. The shots caught the massive thing in the chest, and the force of the rounds knocked it back. One, two, three.

The Colt clicked. Empty.

One huge hand gripped Cian's side. He swallowed a scream as blades tore through his coat and shirt, ripping him open. The thing lifted Cian into the air, keeping him balanced on the blades. Black spots danced in Cian's vision as the pain cascaded over him. Somehow, he stayed conscious.

Vertical pupils contracted as they studied Cian.

He brought the Colt up, stabbing the barrel through the soft underside of the thing's throat. The back of Cian's hand brushed the thing's skin and felt something hard. Scaly. But the thing hissed, pulled back, and slammed Cian against the wall.

Blackness fell like snow.

Through the roaring in his ears, through the falling darkness, Cian stared at the huge thing that held him. Its jade eyes moved across Cian's face.

And then there was the crack of a gun, and the thing's head twitched to one side, and it dropped to the ground.

Five long talons, dripping with Cian's blood, were at the end of one hand.

Cian was on the ground. His legs were cold. Hell, all of him was cold. The stars weren't cold, though. They were bright and alive. They made him think of summer nights in France, and the sounds from the village, and Corinne's hand in his.

It felt small and warm. Just like the hand holding his right now.

He looked up and saw dark eyes in a slender face.

"Corinne," he said. Sleepy. It had been a long day.

Words were coming through, washed by a crashing roar in Cian's ears. The ocean, maybe.

The small, warm hand left his. Cian heard an angry shout.

And then a new face swam into view.

Cian tried to laugh because it was a dog's face.

Then a cold circle of metal around his wrist, and the dog's face again, and the stars were going to bed one by one. And Cian thought he might as well go to bed too.

Chapter 19

At some point during the night, something had crawled into Cian's mouth and died. This thing—a puffy, gauzy white animal, maybe a bit like a cross between a mouse and a sheep—left Cian's mouth packed with cotton and the taste of dirty laundry. He shifted, trying to get more comfortable, and heard a metallic jangle. Something held his wrist in place.

Concern drifted at the edge of thought. There was something else too. Something heavy and warm and itchy as a wool blanket. It pressed down on Cian's brain, suffocating the glimmer of concern.

Sleep seemed like a very good idea.

When he tried to turn on his other side, though, Cian heard another metallic ring, and then the same sense of frustration.

He wanted to sleep on his side.

Opening his eyes was an uphill battle. First, a glimpse of white. Then steel. Yellowed tile.

It was all very interesting, but sleep was calling.

The guttering spark of concern, though, refused to go out. Cian tried again.

A white and steel bed. A small room. Sunlight through a window, the lower third covered in frost. On the opposite wall, a framed cross-stitch of yellow flowers. Sunflowers. Maybe.

Cian thought that he might get up and check what kind of flowers they were, but the metallic jangle interrupted him again.

Handcuffs. On both wrists. Chaining him to the metal bed frame.

Outrage might have been an appropriate response. Or fear. But instead, Cian noticed the pain in his side, and the heaviness settling on his brain, white like snow. He decided that he might as well close his eyes again. And so he did.

When he woke next, the weight had lifted from his brain, although it felt like someone had packed his head with cottonwood puffs. Harsh cleaners filled the air, and the smell of someone who needed a bath—Cian himself, he guessed—and the scent of something like canned gravy.

Cian's eyes popped open.

The same white and yellow room. The same mysterious yellow flowers. The same handcuffs.

But now a man sat in a chair next to the bed. He wore a long, rumpled coat with a stain on the left breast, a dark suit with frayed trouser cuffs, and a tie that had been loosened and looked like it was keeping company with the first stain's twin. His eyes were small, dark, and hard. Ferret eyes, set into a face with heavy jowls and an even heavier shadow of a beard. He looked like the kind of man Cian wanted to punch on sight—the kind who liked badges and ranks and authority. The kind who wouldn't mind pushing you around, if he could get away with it.

"Cian Shea," he said. He had a voice like a rusted gutter.

"Who the hell are you? And where am I?"

"My name is Captain Irving Harper. I'm with the United States Army Criminal Investigation Division. I'm placing you under arrest for the murder of Lieutenant Harley Dunn. As soon as you are fit for travel, you will be transported to Jefferson Barracks for court-martial."

The man stood, pushed the chair against the wall, and started for the door. He looked back. “By all reports, Harley Dunn was your friend.”

“Go to hell,” Cian said.

No expression crossed the heavy jowls. Harper left the room, and Cian sank back onto the bed, staring at the cross-stitched yellow flowers, and trying to ignore the pain growing in his side.

Chapter 20

“You’re sure?” Irene said, looking at the starchy white bulk of First Baptist Hospital.

Patrick shrugged and pulled his hat down lower as another blast of freezing air struck them.

Irene didn’t feel the cold. “I suppose there’s only one way to know.”

“Irene,” Patrick said. He pointed with a gloved hand at a pair of men seated on a truck’s tailgate at the next street corner. They wore respectable clothes, but they were large men, and neither looked like the kind who had much trouble with his conscience.

“You know them? Are they from the Patch?”

“I know them. The Whelan brothers. I don’t know their first names. They’re mean. They worked for Seamus, and now they work for Byrne.”

“And they’re here for Cian.”

As though on cue, the two men stood and started walking towards the hospital.

“Damn,” Irene said.

“Go,” Patrick said. “I’ll see if I can’t slow them for a few minutes.”

She smiled her thanks, squeezed Patrick’s hand, and hurried towards the white building. Before the next block, she outpaced the Whelan brothers, and as she crossed the street Irene heard Patrick say, “Afternoon, boys. What are you doing in this part of town?”

If the Whelan brothers gave an answer, Irene didn’t hear it. A car lumbered behind her, the sound of its engine swallowing up everything else, and Irene entered the hospital without looking back. The hospital itself was nothing unremarkable. A mixture of scents hung in the air,

creating a miasma Irene had never experience before but identified on instinct: illness. One part emptied bowels, one part closed-up air, one part despair.

Against the far wall, a woman with her hair in iron curls sat at a desk, listening to an elderly man. The woman's eyes flicked to Irene. Those eyes reminded Irene of Miss Hannerley, one of Irene's most formidable teachers. When the woman turned her attention back to the man, Irene slipped through one of the side doors and started her search.

She owed Cian this much, at least.

The night before had become a long blur. Her entry into the apartment, searching for information about the box, holding Cian at gunpoint. Irene wasn't proud of that last part. Twice now Cian had saved her life, and both times she had treated him poorly. Last night, just when everything seemed to be going so well, the world had fallen to pieces again. Harry Witte showing up had been bad. But then—the apartment collapsing, Cian throwing her to safety, their flight from the building.

And the alley. That was where her memory became a smear of gray and green and the taste of rotting garbage. She couldn't recall what had happened. Bits and pieces—something dropping from above, Cian shoving her out of the way, the feel of the revolver kicking in her hands.

Then Cian, on the ground, bleeding. And a bulldog-faced man who had arrived, cuffed Cian, and loaded him into a truck.

The next hallway was full of doctors and nurses moving in coordinated steps. Somewhere in the building, someone was screaming. Irene changed her course, checking another hallway of patients, most sleeping or reading the afternoon away. At the next corridor, Irene saw a stairwell, and she took the steps up to the next floor.

If only she had stopped the man from taking Cian. That was where things had truly gone wrong. Cian had been injured trying to save Irene. She thought of the thing moving in the darkness. She had shot at it. It had kept coming. And Irene was fairly certain she would have died if not for Cian Shea.

All of which left her with a bitter taste in her mouth.

At the time, though, she had been caught in the same paralyzing fear that blurred her memories. As the man had loaded Cian into the truck, panic had finally settled into Irene's legs, and she ran.

That was twice, too, that she had proved herself a coward. She would not do so again.

The next floor was less crowded, with long stretches of patient rooms. The scent of urine was stronger here, and the plaster was chipped, the corners of the halls caked with grime. The men and women in the hospital beds watched her silently. They shared the look of men and women crushed by hard days that had lengthened into hard years.

Twice Irene saw nurses moving down the hall in their white uniforms, and twice she ducked into nearby rooms. The second time, she was certain the nurse had seen her, but the woman passed the room with slumped shoulders, not sparing the doorway a second glance. Irene traded gazes with the man in the bed—a wiry figure who seemed to be nothing more than skin and bone and scraggly white hair. He had soiled himself, staining the sheets and filling the air with the scent of his waste. Irene flushed and slipped out into the hallway. She paused in the next stairwell, wiped burning eyes, and hid her face in the sleeve of her fur coat. She still saw the old man's eyes, though.

After a minute, though, she went up again. Up, because she had to get out of this place. Seeing Kerry Patch, with its poor and its hungry and its homeless, had been one thing. Seeing this—

Irene walked faster.

On the third floor, she paused at the sound of footsteps outside the stairwell. When the sound passed, she slipped through the door. A man built like an oven trudged down the hall, his back to Irene. He wore a long gray coat and a suit, the cuffs of his trousers visibly frayed. Irene headed in the opposite direction.

The doors along the hall opened onto more of the same patient wards, and Irene moved as fast as she dared, not letting herself dwell on what she saw. The smell was thicker here, though, and she couldn't seem to draw a decent breath. She loosened the collar of her coat. She fanned herself with one hand. Something was burning inside her. Her stomach. Her heart.

Because there were just so many of them. How was it possible?

At the end of the hall, a heavier door was set into a reinforced frame. A narrow window broke the thick wood. Irene stretched up on tip toes and looked through the glass.

Cian lay in a hospital bed. The handcuffs on his wrists were visible.

His hair was messier than ever.

Irene tried the handle. Locked. She opened her clutch, pulled out a spare bobby pin, and fiddled with the lock. It took her a few solid minutes, but then the lock gave a pop, and the door opened. Irene stepped inside and shut the door.

Cian was sprawled out like a sleeping bear, making the hospital bed look far too small for him, and he was wearing only a thin cotton gown. Irene felt her cheeks heat. On a man of Cian's size—and build, for that matter—the gown left relatively little to the imagination.

Irene had a good imagination.

“Cian,” she said, crossing the room and taking his hand. “Cian, you have to wake up.”

He sat straight up, eyes flashing open, and said, “What in the hell?”

“You weren’t asleep.”

“No. What are you doing here?”

“Getting you out of here.”

“Getting me out of here? What do you think this is? A murder-mystery on the radio?”

“Do you want to get out of here?” Irene asked. “Or do you want to stay? Perhaps you enjoy the new wardrobe.”

Red climbed into Cian’s cheeks, almost dark enough to match his hair, but he managed to keep from looking down at the gown.

With a smirk, Irene started working on the handcuffs.

The first opened easily enough. Cian rubbed his wrist. Then, while Irene worked on the second set of cuffs, he reached down—obviously hoping that she wouldn’t notice—and tugged down the hem of the gown.

Irene’s smirk grew.

Footsteps came from the hallway.

“Irene.”

“I hear.”

The steps came closer.

Cian shifted on the bed. “Leave it, Irene. Get out of here fast.”

“They’re too close,” Irene said. “Besides, I don’t think you want a visit from the Whelan brothers when you’re all tied up.”

“Damn. The Whelan boys?”

Irene shushed him. “Let me focus.”

The second handcuff clicked free as the door opened. Irene straightened, her hand diving into her clutch for the revolver, but as she turned around she froze.

The man had a gun aimed at Irene. He shut the door without looking away from her, fixing her in place with hard, dark eyes that were set deep in his face. And it was a hard face. Stone, but the kind of stone Michelangelo never would have worked with. Roadside stone, pitted and scarred. He wore a dark suit and a hat, and the clothes had been fine once. A businessman on rough times. Or, perhaps, simply the slow settle into middle age that many men made, with the clothes following.

The gun seemed connected to an invisible hook in Irene’s stomach.

“You,” Cian said. “You were there. You killed Seamus—”

Before Cian could finish, the man swung the pistol towards Cian. Irene dragged her revolver free, knowing it was too late.

The door crashed into the man, knocking him forward a step. As he fell, the man flung his arm up and fired. The clap of the shot rang in Irene’s ears, and chips of plaster dropped from the ceiling, but Irene pulled the revolver and fired anyway. Only one shot, and it went awry, knocking a cross-stitch of yellow irises from the wall. Before she could fire again, Cian grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back.

The first Whelan brother pushed his way through the door, but the man had already turned and fired. The round caught the closest Whelan in the gut, knocking him back into his brother and sending them both into the hall. Shouts came from deeper in the hospital, and the man in the suit swore. He darted out of the room, firing twice more.

Irene's fingers were cold and numb as she held the revolver steady.

"Irene," Cian said.

"We need to go."

He nodded. "Can you—"

It took her a moment to realize he needed help. She slid the revolver into a coat pocket, put Cian's arm across her shoulder, and helped him to his feet. She might as well have tried to pick up the First Baptist Hospital itself. The man weighed a ton, and every inch of him was muscle. Irene knew that first hand. She could feel the lines of his body through the gown.

Somehow, Cian got to his feet, but he stumbled on the first step and stopped. When Irene looked up at him, he shook his head. He was white as a sheet.

"Sorry to ruin your plan," he said.

"No. You're coming with me."

"I can't," Cian said. She could feel his leg, pressed against hers, trembling.

A hand knocked on the still-open door, and a moment later, Harry Witte poked his head into the room.

"Going somewhere?" he asked.

"Harry?" Irene said. "What are you doing here?"

Cian, on the other hand, bristled. He almost growled.

If Harry noticed Cian, though, he didn't show it. He stepped through the door. One shoe left a bloody footprint as he crossed the room. He took Irene's place supporting Cian and said, "I brought transportation, but I'm afraid there's a bit of a jam." Then he urged Cian forward a step. Cian grunted, and dislike mingled with pain on his face, but he took one step. And then another.

"That's right," Harry said. "You're doing great."

This time, Cian really did growl, but Harry only laughed.

To Irene, it seemed to take an eternity for the two men to reach the doorway, but it must have been only a few minutes. At Harry's gesture, she passed through the door first, and then she saw the jam he had mentioned. Both of the Whelan brothers were slumped across the length of the hallway. Beyond them waited a wheelchair.

Irene grabbed the closest Whelan brother's leg. She dragged him clear of the path to the wheelchair. Red soaked the man's shirt and coat and left a smear across the yellowed tile.

Dead, her brain told her.

Not stopping to think about that word, Irene hauled the other Whelan brother out of Cian's way. Harry helped Cian into the wheelchair. Irene waited for a protest from Cian, some sort of disparaging comment, but he settled into the chair without a word. His face was the color of old linen. His eyes were closed.

"You'll have to carry that," Harry said, nodding to a pile of folded clothing next to the wheelchair. On top of the clothes sat a large pistol that Irene recognized. Cian's.

She scooped up the clothes.

Harry pushed the wheelchair. Cian's head bobbed with the uneven tiling. The clothes in Irene's arms barely weighed anything.

As they reached an intersection, a group of orderlies came into view. At the front was a man dressed in police blues, holding a nightstick. He came to a stop, pulled a revolver from its holster, and took aim.

"Show me your hands," he said.

Harry slowed the wheelchair and raised his hands. "Officer, the man you want—"

"Down on the floor," the policeman said. "You too, miss."

Irene left her revolver in her pocket. She got down to her knees.

“Buddy,” the policeman said to Harry, “I already told you to get down on the floor.”

Harry stood there, hands raised. Then he said something that sounded like a word but wasn't. Irene almost recognized the sound. Harry flipped his hands up.

The policeman and the orderlies flew backwards, bouncing across the tile like dust before a vigorous broom. Wind howled in Irene's ears, flapped her coat, twisted between her legs. The group of men struck the far wall in a jumble of bodies. For another moment, the wind continued to shriek, and then it vanished as quickly as it had come.

Harry gripped the wheelchair again, turned to look at Irene, who was still kneeling, and said, “To the left, I think. Don't you?”

Then he grinned, turned left, and started running down the next hallway.

Irene scrambled to her feet and ran after him, pushing wind-tangled hair out of her face.

What in God's name had just happened?

Chapter 21

Settled onto a sofa in Harry's apartment, Cian tried to get comfortable. He shifted, wincing at the pain in his side, and tried to free himself from the heavy blanket. Sweat popped out in hot, stinging sparks across his face. He was hot. Damned hot. Thirsty too. Irene had left a tray of tea on the nightstand, and the thought of drinking it sent a wave of nausea through Cian. With a last kick, he dislodged the blanket. Lukewarm air drifted over bare legs and toes.

Frost on the window mocked him.

For a minute, Cian stared at the window. The heat made his thoughts muddier than the Mississippi. He knew, from Irene's vocal—and voluble—remonstrations, that he was not supposed to get off the sofa. She would be furious if she found him walking about.

On the other hand, he was pretty sure that if he didn't open that window, he would burn to death.

It took two tries to leverage himself to his feet. The pain wasn't as bad this time. His whole left side felt like it'd been torn open, packed with coals, and stitched shut again. Cian was half-surprised that the skin wasn't red hot through the thin cotton undershirt he wore. He probed the bandages with one hand as he used the back of an armchair to make his way towards the window. Puffy flesh, scorching hot.

Bad. Infected.

He'd seen wounds like that in the war. Wounds that didn't get better.

God, he was so hot. Maybe Irene could set the kettle on his side and boil water for her tea. Then, at least, he'd be of some use.

One last, vertiginous step, and then he was at the window. He rested a cheek against the glass. His skin stuck to the frosted surface.

Wonderful. Bliss.

He flipped the latches, pulled his cheek away, and lifted the window. Icy air brushed his chest and neck, colder and better than any kiss.

He wondered what Irene's lips felt like.

He wondered why he wondered that.

"Gracious, Cian." Pearl stood in the doorway, a basin in her arms and a towel over her shoulder. In the cool air, steam poured off the water in the basin. "What are you doing?"

"I was hot."

"You need to rest." Pearl set the basin down and guided Cian back to the sofa. To be truthful, it was more than guidance. She had one arm around his waist, her hands careful of his wounds, and practically carried him. When she had him settled on the sofa, she retrieved the blanket from the floor, but Cian shook his head. The heat chased sparks through his brain, giving words plenty of shifting shadows in which to hide.

The worry on Pearl's face was obvious.

She retrieved the basin and set it by his side. For a long while, she sat there, until the water had cooled. Then she wet the corner of the towel and gently cleaned his face, his neck, his arms, his legs. The water helped with the heat. A little. Cian felt himself slipping into sleep.

Later, he heard Irene's voice, drifting at the edge of his dreams. Whatever she said, the words skipped off the surface of sleep. But Pearl's words came to him, clear and deep and true, like a rung bell.

"He's burning up."

Chapter 22

Irene paced the living room of Harry's apartment. She had thrown her coat across the back of a chair in order to pace better. The tasteful art, the gold and silver and crystal, the patterned sofa and the matching chairs—all of it was hateful. Harry lounged in one of the chairs—the one not occupied by her coat—looking like he wanted a cigarette, or a drink, or probably both.

“I don't know how you can just sit there,” Irene said as she whirled around to pace again.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

Irene flushed. It was the third time she'd said it.

She marched across the room again.

When she reached the end of her path and turned, a rap came at the front door. Harry rose with easy grace, crossed to the door, and opened it. He stepped back and let Freddy into the room. The old Hun shrugged out of his coat, which Harry took, but he kept his grip on his cane. The two men spoke in low voices for a moment.

“Well?” Irene said.

For the first time, a flicker of irritation lighted Harry's face. It vanished again, and he looked at Freddy.

“I need to see him,” was all the Hun said.

“Then go see him,” Irene said. “This is perfectly ridiculous. He's dying.”

“Enough, Irene,” Harry said. “We're doing what we can.”

Freddy looked as though he wanted to say something. Instead of waiting, though, Irene dug her cigarette case out of her coat and stormed to the back of the apartment—knocking a

small porcelain statuette to the ground on the way. She thought she might smile at the crash and the silence that followed. Instead, she almost cried.

On the balcony at the rear of the apartment, without her coat, Irene faced into the wind. The cold cut through the short, thin dress, raising goosebumps on her exposed arms and legs. She lit a cigarette, puffed once, and ground it out on the metal rail. Her fingers were trembling, and the cigarette slipped from her hand, vanishing into the darkness below.

Night had closed on the city. A few stars sailed between the clouds and smoke overhead. In the building behind Harry's apartment, windows showed yellow squares of light and warmth. Irene stared through the window that was at her level. A woman in a ratty house dress was bent over a gas stove, stirring something in a pot. A man came in, dressed in suit and coat, and kissed her on the cheek. She went back to stirring. He disappeared through the doorway. Was he just getting home? Or was he leaving?

A footstep on the balcony announced another person. Harry draped Irene's coat around her shoulders and leaned on the rail. Close to her, but not too close.

Through the window, Irene saw the man return to the kitchen, dressed only in his shirt sleeves now, his hair curling across his brow. He was young. They both were, Irene realized. She wanted another cigarette, but her fingers were too tight around the case.

"Do you think they love each other?" she said.

Harry laughed, but when he looked at Irene's face, he stopped.

"Do they fight?" she asked.

"I didn't think you were a romantic."

Irene felt a ghost of a smile reach her lips as she thought about Francis Derby. "I'm not."

In the tiny rectangle opposite, where another world seemed to float, the woman served something on a plate from the oven.

“Fish,” Harry said. “I hate fish.”

“Are you a romantic, Henry Witte?” Irene said.

Harry was silent for a long time. When Irene turned, she saw pain in his eyes. She thought she understood, for the first time, Pearl.

“It’s cold,” Harry said. His voice was rough and distant. “And we won’t do Cian any good standing out here.”

Irene let him lead her back to the living room. She settled herself on the sofa as Freddy returned. The old Hun stroked his trimmed beard as he took one of the chairs.

“Well?” Irene said.

“We have seen this before,” Freddy said, looking at Harry.

“Damn it,” Harry said. “You’re sure?”

Freddy nodded.

Harry cupped his hands over his mouth.

“What? What have you seen before?” Irene asked.

“This type of wound. Whatever attacked you that night, it was not one of the Children.”

“You mean it wasn’t a person. I already told you that.”

“It wasn’t a construct either.”

Harry still had his hands over his mouth.

“What does that mean?” Irene said. “What do we do now?”

Freddy shrugged.

Irene stared at him. Then she gathered her purse and her clutch and stood. “This is madness. He needs a doctor.”

“I am very sorry,” Freddy said, also rising, “but a doctor cannot help him. The illness is not natural, perhaps not even of this world, and—”

“Stop,” Irene cried. “Stop it. All of it. I’ve played along with this nonsense long enough. I’m going to get him help.”

“Miss Irene,” Freddy began.

Irene started for the door. Harry darted from his chair and grabbed her arm.

“You know what you saw,” he said. “You know these things are real. You know the danger out there, and Cian knew it too.”

Irene thought of the man in the suit and the hat, kissing the woman in the ratty house dress. She stared at Harry’s hand until he removed it. Then she pulled on her coat, buttoned it, and opened the door.

“He saved me,” Irene said. Her voice sounded strange, as though she were speaking into a tin can, but she didn’t care.

She shut the door behind her. Harry didn’t follow.

Chapter 23

Irene made her way to the river in the darkness. The cold was worse now, pinching her cheeks, forcing her breath through tiny white spirals. Life bled from the streets, until she found herself walking block after block alone, with only the hiss of the lamps for company. Snow began to fall in curtains, swells that rose in the wind, degenerating into frenzied whorls as they neared the lamps. The smoke and soot from the city tainted the edges of the snowflakes, so that they looked like the kind of snow that might have taken a tumble in a chimney or played in the lampblack. Disreputable snow.

It wasn't the snow Irene remembered from her childhood. Memories of childhood weren't all pleasant—her grandmother's fetid breath, her freezing feet, one hand clamped around Irene's arm—but for the most part, Irene's life had been happy until Francis Derby. Until the morning when, with grass clinging to her neck and shoulder, leaving red prints when it was pulled free, Irene had told her father what Francis had done to her. Until she had seen, for the first time, fear in her father's face.

Until he had betrayed her.

It had been that expression, and his cowardice, that had made him a person in her life. Before then, he had been a force—elemental, overwhelming, dark suits and smiles and steady, as mountains were steady, even before Irene had ever seen a mountain. But the fear in his face had made George Lovell into a man, with all the shallow places, all the cut corners.

Once, when Irene had been no more than six or seven, snows had buried the house up to the windows. In a rare fit of joviality, Papa had opened one of the windows, set Irene on the drifts of snow, and climbed out after her. They had spent an afternoon in a world draped in white.

At Papa's urging, they had dug out a small snow cave, where Irene had promptly set to work serving an invisible tea. She had fallen asleep in Papa's arms, in the depths of the snow cave. When she had woken, hours or minutes later, warm in her bed, she had known she had a Papa who loved her.

Irene blew out a streamer of white breath, tried to work warmth into her frozen fingers, and studied the building before her. The Old Cathedral was colder and more silent than any memory. Its verdigris steeple was nothing more than a finger held up to test the wind. Shadows hung from the pillared entrance like tattered curtains. From where she stood, Irene thought she felt the presence that waited inside the church. A part of her insisted that this was nothing more than her imagination—that she had been under too much strain these last days, that she was being too trusting of Harry's nonsense, and that, to be frank, she was teetering on the edge of madness.

Another part, though, was sure that she was not imagining the presence. It waited for her. It hungered.

Snowflakes dusted her collarbone, and Irene brushed them away.

Papa had held her warm and safe in the cave.

Cian was dying.

She crossed the street and only slipped once.

The shadows were soft as silk against her skin. Irene found her way to the door without any trouble. She raised her hand to knock, then smiled, realized it was unnecessary. Marie-Thérèse was waiting. She pushed the massive door and it swung open.

Within, the nave of the church was dark, and the air scented with something musky and resinous. It clung to Irene's nostrils and the back of her throat with a burn that reminded her of

cinnamon. The pews slumped like broken backs down the length of the nave, and the light from the street gleamed on gold and copper deeper in the building. Irene stepped into the nave.

The door shut behind her.

She thought of the snow cave, and of Papa's face the morning she had left home, and of returning home with the box in hand. Proof. And, perhaps, if she were honest with herself, a way to please him.

She thought of Cian too.

She didn't bother to look back at the door.

Instead, she stepped deeper into the nave.

"Marie-Thérèse," she said.

The word slipped between the white pillars, disappearing into the darkness and coming back with the sound of a voice that had brushed glass.

"Irene Lovell," Marie-Thérèse said.

Irene turned around. The pale, translucent form of Marie-Thérèse sat in the rearmost pew. As before, the dead woman glowed white, but without shedding any light on the room around her. With long dark hair parted above a round face, the woman was plump, almost fleshy in spite of her insubstantial appearance. A smile hovered over a small, European mouth.

"What have you called me for?" Marie-Thérèse asked.

"You know why I'm here," Irene said.

Marie-Thérèse shook her head, but her smile grew. "I knew you were coming." She paused, stood, her dress flowing in lines of shining white. "I do not know why."

"You know."

Marie-Thérèse's smile became harder. "A deal."

“You said that you could grant me anything my heart desired.”

Marie-Thérèse drifted closer.

Irene held her ground. “Is that true?”

“What does your heart desire?”

A snow cave. Francis Derby. The box.

Cian pushing her to the side when that monster had leaped at her.

“What is the price?” Irene asked.

Marie-Thérèse circled Irene like a woman eying a bad piece of muslin.

“I won’t deal with you without knowing the price.”

“You might as well ask a butcher the price without naming the cut you’d like,” Marie-Thérèse said.

For a moment, Irene was silent. She followed Marie-Thérèse with her eyes, her heart dropping by inches.

“What do you ask in return for healing someone? Can you even do such a thing?”

“Indeed I can. You can pay the first price. The one I named to you when we first met.”

A voice in the back of Irene’s mind screamed. It was a mad, terrified sound that threatened to overwhelm her. Irene pressed her lips shut and shook her head.

“Pity,” Marie-Thérèse said. She settled into the closest pew, draping ghostly hands over her knees, her back straight as she looked at Irene. “The box. More specifically, the mask.”

“The mask? What mask?”

Marie-Thérèse’s eyes widened, and she laughed. Her laughter was the only sound in the church, a high sound like wind trapped in a chime. “You didn’t know?” she finally asked.

Irene shook her head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. What mask?”

Marie-Thérèse laughed again, waving a hand as though trying to clear the air. “My dear girl, I’m not laughing at you. I’m simply surprised that you’ve let Harry pull you along by the nose for so long. What did you think was in the box?”

“I don’t know. I hadn’t given it much thought.”

“I see.” Marie-Thérèse surged to her feet and stalked towards Irene. This time, Irene retreated until she bumped into a pew. Marie-Thérèse pinned her there, one finger inches from Irene’s throat. “And tell me. What else haven’t you given much thought? When you came here, I thought you were one of Witte’s toy soldiers, like the Hun and that other woman. You were surprised to find me. I blamed myself for staking my claim on you so openly. Now, I find myself asking new questions. I find myself wondering if George Lovell has raised a fool on purpose or merely by accident.”

Irene steadied herself and forced her next words to come evenly. “You want this mask in return for healing Cian?”

“The Irishman? The one who was with you that night?”

Irene nodded.

A smile curled Marie-Thérèse’s lips. “Then, yes. The mask. And if you think that you can run to Harry for help, let me assure you that our deal is binding. Harry Witte is many things, but he is not foolish enough to challenge me on this.”

“I cannot give you the mask. It isn’t mine to give.”

Marie-Thérèse said nothing for a moment. She cocked her head. Her eyes were the eyes of something that hunted by night.

“Then I want you to find the mask. You do not have to give it to me. Only find it. With Harry, without him. As you wish.”

“How?”

“I’ll make sure you can find it.”

And nothing more than that.

Irene nodded. “I keep my word. But I want Cian healed first. Tonight. Then I will start looking for the mask.”

“Very well. The Irishman first.”

For the first time in what felt like ages, Irene felt herself smile. “Perfect.”

Marie-Thérèse glided towards Irene, pulling a ring from one finger. She dropped the ring into Irene’s hand. Rather than passing through Irene’s flesh, as Irene half-expected, the ring landed in her palm with reassuring weight. It was a heavy gold band without any stones, wrought in a pattern of flowering ivy.

“Give it to the Irishman,” Marie-Thérèse said.

Irene pocketed the ring. “A pleasure.”

She made her way to the door. When Irene grabbed the brass ring, Marie-Thérèse’s voice came to her as though from a great distance.

“You have a fortnight to find the mask, Irene Lovell.”

No threats, no promises. Only silence followed the words. Irene let herself out into the driving snow.

Her steps were slower on the way back. Her shoes packed the snow into smudged silhouettes. The wind swirled dirty snowflakes in her path.

She thought, once, of what she had bargained away. Once more, she remembered the snow cave, and Papa. She started to cry, but it was too cold, and crying hurt, and so she forced herself to stop. Her eyes stung for another block. She stopped at the next street corner. Beyond

the edge of the gas lamp, the snow flung itself into a void. The air tasted of horse droppings and cold.

She let the wind carry away one more childhood memory, like a soiled snowflake.

And then she focused on finding her way back to Harry Witte's apartment.

Chapter 24

The snow was falling thicker. Irene paused at the next street and looked back. Already the drifts were swallowing her steps. Scraps of rotted newspaper peered out from the slush. Irene could pick out a fragment of a headline. *A Debutante's Delight*—The rest of the phrase had vanished in the snow, but it didn't matter. She'd spent enough nights at debuts, enough nights with champagne tickling the back of her throat and hands tickling the backs of her knees, and one more didn't interest her.

Behind her came the muffled crunch of footsteps in the snow. The snow hid any sign of another person, and Irene's heart beat faster. She picked up her pace, crossing the ice that hatched the street. The snow fell heavier, rich ermine swells, thick enough that it was almost warm. On a night like this, everything looked the same. The stores, blanketed in white, were nothing more than polished dentures, waiting to snap open and shut. Frost lace spread across windows, hiding whatever lurked inside. The streets were untouched by any passage, even Irene's, as though the world had conspired to erase any evidence of her.

The snow came down hard. Irene blinked to clear the snow from her lashes and shaded her eyes with one hand. The storm was becoming ridiculous. Cian needed her. She didn't have time to waste wandering the city until her feet froze off. No sign of a cab. The streets were choked with snow, and Irene doubted that an automobile could go more than a few yards.

She stopped at the next street and looked back. Already the drifts were swallowing her steps.

Irene felt a moment of vertigo. She wiped snowflakes from her face, rubbed her eyes. She was tired, and the cold was only making it worse. What she needed was a fire, and a nice drink, and a good night's sleep.

As she stepped forward, ready to break the perfect crust of snow on the street, Irene hesitated.

At her feet, trapped in a pile of snow, was a scrap of newspaper.

A Debutante's D—

Irene reached down and plucked the paper free, but the wind stole it from her hand. The paper vanished into the night.

A chill settled into Irene. Behind her, the sound of footsteps came again. A quiet crunch of snow. Irene threw a quick glance over her shoulder, but again, nothing. She plunged off the curb, stumbled through snow that came up to her ankles, and turned left. This street was darker—the gas lamps had not been lit, or had gone out—and the snowy bulks of buildings waited like ancient cairns.

The footsteps had grown louder.

Irene picked up her pace, but her shoes slipped in the heavy snow, and her feet were numb from the cold. Twice she caught herself on the railings of the darkened houses. On the third time, she went down, landing on hands and knees and with snow brushing her chin. The footsteps were almost on her. To her left, Irene saw a staircase that led down to a recessed doorway. She lowered herself down the steps and crouched in the doorway. She shook from the cold and fright. The ring, clasped in one fist, felt warm in comparison.

The sound of footsteps slowed. Stopped. Irene waited. Her mouth was dry. Her eyes were fixed on the snow-crusting steps, on her tracks, which led to her hiding spot. From the street came

a grunt, and then a shriek that could not have been the wind. Irene pulled the revolver from her pocket. Her hand trembled. The shriek faded to a hiss, like a kettle set to boil, and then silence.

A single crunching footstep, and a dark shape took form at the top of the stairs.

Irene raised the revolver.

“Irene?”

She hesitated.

“Patrick?”

Chapter 25

Patrick helped her out of the stairwell. He brushed snow from her coat, looked her in the eyes, and did not let go of her hand. His grip was surprisingly warm. Surprisingly strong. He smelled like wood-smoke and, very slightly, of whiskey.

He was close enough to kiss.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Patrick, what is going on? Were you following me?”

He shook his head and turned to point at the street. Dirty brick stared up from a rough circle that had been melted in the snow. Irene could feel the heat pouring off the bricks even from a distance, and as snow dusted the exposed street, it melted and boiled away.

“What happened?”

“Let’s get you home,” Patrick said. He turned and started guiding her down the street, the way she had been going.

Irene pulled her hand free of his and came to a stop. “I won’t go another step until you tell me what’s going on.”

He paused, ran a hand through dark hair—wavy dark hair, Irene realized, hair that looked quite nice against his fair skin. “Walk with me,” he said. “Please. I’ll explain on the way.”

“Very well. But I’m not going home. I need to find someone.” She gave him the address.

“Fine. Fine. Let’s go.”

He took her hand again, and they started off into the night. The snow had begun to ease, so that the thick curtains dwindled to the occasional eddy. Stars poked their way through the darkness, eager to see what they had missed. For several minutes, Irene and Patrick walked in

silence, with Patrick throwing nervous glances over his shoulder. After a handful of blocks, though, Patrick let out a long breath, and some of the tension left his shoulders.

“Well?” Irene asked.

“I might ask you the same thing,” Patrick said. “What are you doing out tonight?”

“I had an errand to run,” Irene said. “And I had no idea there would be such a storm. Trust me, I might have thought twice if I’d known.”

Patrick snorted. “Storm.”

“What do you mean?”

“This wasn’t a storm, Irene.”

“Explain yourself.”

He gave her another quick look and whistled. “You didn’t know?”

“I’m getting very tired of people saying that.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just—when I saw you with the golems, and then the trouble with Seamus’s men, and then again tonight, I assumed . . .”

“You assumed what?”

“That you were part of all this madness.”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

Patrick paused at the next intersection. He was still standing close to her. Close enough that Irene could smell the whiskey and wood-smoke. Close enough that her mouth was dry again.

“Would you care for a drink? It’ll take time to explain, and this is no place to do it.”

Irene nodded, but the ring felt hot against her skin.

“A quick drink,” she said.

In a surprisingly short amount of time, Patrick took her to Kerry Patch. He let them into his bar, locked the door behind them, and stirred the furnace to life. The cold retreated by inches, ceding its hold on Irene's fingers and toes and nose, but she remained bundled in her coat. Patrick poured himself a whiskey and mixed a drink for her. Irene sipped at it. Strong. She blinked tears from her eyes, worked the fire out of her throat, and sipped again.

Strong. But rather lovely. She flexed her toes and studied Patrick again. The drink reminded her of him in that way.

"Tonight, that snow, it wasn't a storm," Patrick said. He took a drink, and then another. "It was a barrier, a kind of trap, designed to keep you moving in a circle. Something was following you. Hunting you, I believe, but possibly just waiting for the cold to claim you."

"How is that even possible? A trap that makes me go in circles? Something hunting me? I've lived in St. Louis most of my life, Patrick. I don't get lost easily."

"You've seen golems, Irene. You know that there are explanations that aren't easy."

Suddenly the drink no longer tasted so good. "You mean to tell me that it was something supernatural?"

Patrick nodded.

"There was something—the other night, when Cian was hurt, it was a clear night. But when we came out of the apartment building, I could see a wall of fog surrounding us for several blocks. It didn't look . . . natural, either."

Another nod. "That sounds like a barrier, albeit a bit less subtle than the one you faced tonight."

"Something attacked us that night. It wasn't human."

"Most likely not."

“What was it? It had scales, I think. And it was big. Bigger even than Cian.”

“I won’t know without seeing it, but it sounds like a sauria. They’re big and nasty and have scales.” He paused, swirled his drink, and took another sip. “Let me ask you a different question.”

“All right.”

“What is Cian to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the first time I saw you with him, you had a gun to his back, and then the two of you ran out of here like old friends, and then I helped you track him to that hospital.”

“Why does it matter?”

The barest hint of a blush rose in Patrick’s cheeks, but his gaze was steady. “It matters because I don’t want to poach on Cian’s grounds.”

“I am no man’s grounds, Patrick.” Irene tried to soften her voice. “I owe Cian my life, and I need his help, but nothing more.”

Patrick watched her for a moment longer, and Irene felt her cheeks heat, but she refused to say anything more. After another minute, Patrick nodded and drained his glass. “What else do you want to know?”

“What was hunting me tonight?”

“I don’t know. I could only see it at halves, as though I were catching a glimpse of something through a bad piece of glass, but when I put a knife through the back of its head, it came apart like a bad seam. It was hot, hot enough to melt that snow and bake those bricks, so I would guess it was something elemental.” He paused. “That fits with the barrier and the snow, too. Whoever was tracking you is skilled with the elements.”

“Was it the same one who trapped Cian and me the night before?”

“Perhaps. It seems unlikely though. What you described sounds fairly blunt, not like the more sophisticated show tonight. And a sauria is far less trustworthy than an elemental servant.”

Irene finished her drink, wiped her mouth, and laughed. “You make it sound so ordinary. As though all of this weren’t perfectly mad.”

“It isn’t ordinary. But I have to think about it this way. If I don’t—if I let myself dwell on it . . . Anyway, that doesn’t mean it’s not mad. If you see enough of these things . . .” Patrick shrugged. “It doesn’t end well

“How do you know all this?”

Patrick smiled, that boyish smile that crinkled the edges of his eyes and made Irene’s heart beat faster. “Let me have a few secrets at least.”

Irene laughed at that. The warmth of the drink settled into every nook and cranny. Outside, the wind had slowed and the snow had stopped.

“I need to go,” she said. Then, “Wait. Why were you out there tonight? Were you looking for me?”

“No. I was out for my own reasons, and I happened to see you. When I tried speaking to you, though, you walked right past me, and I realized something was wrong.”

Irene laughed again. “Not every woman is swayed by your charms, Patrick.”

When he spoke, he was smiling, but his voice was serious. “I don’t care about every woman.”

Irene laughed. It did nothing for the sudden coil of energy inside her.

They hardly spoke again that night. Patrick accompanied her to Harry's apartment. He left her at the door with a simple, "Good night." Irene stood there a moment longer, watching him disappear into the city.

Then she thought of Cian, and she knocked on the door, and waited.

Chapter 26

Harry stood there in his shirtsleeves. In spite of the late hour, he looked awake and alert, and he motioned Irene in without a word. He helped her out of her coat, held a finger up to his lips for silence, and led her deeper into the apartment. As they passed the living room, Irene saw Freddy asleep in a chair, his cane across his lap. Harry pulled Irene into the study. The air was heavy with the scent of leather and aged paper, and the gas lamps burned low, shedding quiet yellow petals across the upholstered furniture.

“I need to see Cian,” Irene said.

Harry studied her for a moment. “Pearl’s with him for now. Let’s talk.”

“He’s dying.”

“He’ll last another ten minutes.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say.”

Harry shrugged.

“What, then?” Irene asked. “What’s so terribly important that it can’t wait?”

“What did she want?”

“What did who want?”

His smile wasn’t like anything Irene had seen before. Hard and devoid of anything approaching kindness. Harry’s voice was iron scraping leather.

“Irene, you’re a smart woman. Please don’t make me ask again.”

Irene perched on the arm of one upholstered chair, crossed her legs, and put one hand over her bare shoulder. Harry’s smile closed by inches, like a spring being wound tighter, until his face was tight enough to burst. Irene studied the bookshelves. Many of the titles were in

French, a few were in Spanish. Some Latin and Hebrew and Greek. The top of the desk was clear, and the drawers had heavy locks on them. When she looked back at Harry, he wasn't one bit less frightening. Irene's hands were cold. Every inch of her was cold, and it had nothing to do with the weather outside.

"The box," Irene finally said. "She wants me to find it. Nothing else. Now tell me. How did you know?"

"What's in it?"

"I didn't say a word to you, Harry Witte. How did you know?"

"What is in the damn box, Irene?" He leaned over her, his hands on the chair, his face inches from hers.

Irene reached up, pushed him back an inch. Cold sweat had started along her back. She forced a smile, patted Harry's cheek, and said, "I think I'll see Cian now." Then she stood up. Harry stepped back, his hands flexing, and for a moment Irene was sure he was going to hit her. Then, with an ugly flush climbing his cheeks, Harry moved aside.

She made herself walk slowly out of the study. Harry followed her, and so Irene forced her legs to be steady, in spite of the shakes that were starting. She passed the living room and Freddy and let herself into the sitting room on the far side of the apartment. The gaslights gave only a dull sheen to the room. Pearl sat in one chair, an abandoned pile of knitting in her lap, staring into a corner. When Irene entered, Pearl glanced over, and a look of surprise crossed her face. She stood up, gripping the knitting needles as though they were daggers, and said, "What's wrong?"

Irene shook her head, but Pearl didn't move until Harry said, "Nothing."

Clutching the ring in one hand, Irene knelt next to Cian. He lay on the couch, blankets tangled around bare legs. Wisps of dark red hair covered his chest and arms. Irene felt a blush start somewhere in the pit of her stomach and climb all the way to her hair. She thought about Patrick's smile and felt guilty, and her face twice as hot as a coal, and she reached out and took one of Cian's hands. A big hand. So much bigger than her own. The skin hot and rough. Cian murmured something in his sleep and tried to roll away. Blood stained the bandages along his side.

Irene slid the ring onto his finger.

She waited for something miraculous. A flash of light, a golden glow, a shiver across her skin. But nothing. Cian mumbled again, his hand closed tightly over hers for a heartbeat, and then he let go. Huge drops of sweat covered his face and chest.

The room pounded, as though it were the skin of a drum, and a headache had started behind Irene's eyes. Pearl helped her up. Harry stood near the door, but Pearl gave him a shake of her head and led Irene past him. Irene's legs had turned to wet noodles. Pearl all but carried her into a darkened bedroom and got her into bed. As the older woman drew the sheets over Irene, Irene felt another wave of the pounding dizziness, and she said, "Is he going to be alright?"

"Rest now," Pearl said.

The other woman left without another word.

Beyond the curtained window, night waited, pressing itself against the glass with obscene eagerness. Irene shut her eyes, as she had as a child, but the dizziness refused to subside.

Sleep pulled her down with long, clawed hands, but before she slept, Irene felt her skin prickle, flushed with guilt, as she thought about Patrick's smile and the feel of Cian's hand closing over hers. A quick, hard squeeze.

And then sleep, and rising out of the darkness, round and pale as the moon, the face of Marie-Thérèse.

Chapter 27

It was the shouting that woke Cian.

He rolled over, head pounding, and searched blindly for a bottle of something. Anything that would take the edge off his headache. His headache worsened, and he squeezed his eyes shut, but a sliver of light still reached him.

God, it was going to be an awful day.

Instead of finding a bottle, though, or the rough floorboards of the room he rented from the Doyles, Cian felt his fingers brush a carpet with a thick weave. Then other details started to filter through the pounding in his head. The shouting first. A man and a woman. Or maybe two men and two women. It was hard to tell. Then there was the fact that Cian was warm, almost too warm, instead of damn near freezing in the drafty room above the sausage-maker's shop. His bed was more comfortable too.

Suspicious. Very suspicious.

He cracked an eye and immediately wished he hadn't.

The light stabbed a long silver needle into his brain. Cian blinked, his eyes tearing up, and tried again. And then again. After a minute, he could open his eyes all the way, in spite of ungodly brightness. He was in a small, well kept room. His bed was not a bed at all, but a leather sofa, and he was wearing nothing but his white cotton undershorts. There were other things in the room—a table with a silver vase and silk flowers, a liquor cabinet, a collection of ivory figurines on a sideboard—but all of those things slipped right out of Cian's mind.

He focused on the important details. He was, for all intents and purposes, naked in a strange place.

The shouting hadn't stopped.

Thick bandages wrapped his side and chest, and other memories began to filter in. Escaping that apartment building with Irene, and then being attacked in the alley. Looking down into golden, reptilian eyes, and the flash of pain.

The hospital.

Captain Irving Harper.

After that, things became a blur again. A few things, though, were obvious. First, Cian was no longer in the hospital. Second, he had moved up in the world. And third, whoever was shouting was clearly not going to stop any time soon.

He stood up. It took two tries, and his legs were about as strong as a sick cat, but he was on his feet. He wrapped the blanket around himself, rubbed sleep from his eyes, and helped himself to a bit of Scotch from the liquor cabinet.

Good Scotch.

He helped himself once more. To get his strength up.

Then he went to the door and threw it open. He recognized the next room, with its sofa and chairs and paintings.

Harry Witte stood in front of the door, his back to Cian, his mouth open as he cut off in mid-shout. Beyond Harry stood Irene, in a dress that showed plenty of legs and shoulders and made Cian's mouth drier than the Sahara. Pearl and Freddy stood a bit further back, watching the scene unfold.

Irene's eyes widened when she saw Cian, and she gave a delighted squeal and pushed past Harry. "You're awake," she said.

“Softly,” Cian murmured, rocking back as she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed. “My head’s about to split.”

She laughed, released him, and stepped back. Then, for no reason Cian could understand, she started sobbing. Huge sobs that were either relief or total despair.

Judging by the fact that he was wrapped only in a blanket, Cian assumed it was despair.

Pearl and Freddy both came forward and guided Irene to one of the armchairs. While Freddy fixed a drink, Pearl fixed Cian with a look.

He’d seen that look on women before. That look meant Trouble with a capital T.

“Well,” Harry said. “You’re alive.”

“Yeah. I owe you my thanks, I suppose?”

Harry nodded. “For a part. But you really owe your life to Irene.”

“Oh.” Cian stood there for a minute, flustered and wishing the blanket weren’t quite so itchy. Then, “Thanks, Irene.”

She burst into fresh sobs.

“God above,” Harry said. He grabbed Cian by the shoulder. “Let’s get you some clothes.”

In one of the bedrooms at the back of the apartment, Harry left Cian with clean—and new—clothes. Cian let the blanket drop and picked up the trousers, then glanced over.

Harry stood in the doorway, staring at Cian. The other man stood there a moment too long, stared a moment too long, before excusing himself and shutting the door.

The skin on the back of Cian’s neck crawled. There were a million reasons not to like Harry Witte. He’d just learned another one.

When he’d dressed—good wool trousers, a shirt white enough to hurt his eyes, and even a heavy, gray wool coat, new socks and shoes, and all of it fitting like a glove—Cian returned to

the front room. Irene's eyes were red, but when she saw him, she laughed and said, "I'm sorry, you must think I'm completely mad."

"I already thought that," Cian said, but he smiled as he did. Irene laughed again. "I meant it," Cian added. "Thank you."

"You don't even know what I did," Irene said. "You might feel differently when you do."

Pearl appeared then with a plate of potatoes and eggs, with a lonely strip of bacon in the middle, and she set it down before him. "Freddy ate all the bacon," she apologized.

"I'm older," Freddy said. "I need to keep my strength up."

Cian set to work eating. As he ate, Harry and Irene filled him in on what he had missed. Parts of the story he didn't like—being reminded of that wall of fog that had appeared outside the apartment, or Irene's story about being trapped in another barrier of snow, or the bit about the ghost. At this point, though, he had to admit that he had seen too many strange things to call Harry Witte a liar outright. As Cian ate, his headache cleared, and he found his mind racing to keep up.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said, when Irene had finished. "Thank you for what you did. I'm grateful, truly. But you shouldn't have made a deal. You don't owe me anything."

"You saved my life."

He shook his head. "You don't owe me anything."

"It doesn't matter at this point," Harry said. He took a breath, and when he spoke again, his voice was more even. "It doesn't matter. The deal is made. Now at least we have a chance to get it."

"You think this is a good thing?" Cian said. "She was out there, alone, in the middle of the night, mixed up in God knows what, and all you can talk about is how it's helped you out."

What the hell is wrong with you? Now she's got a spirit, or a ghost, or something after her, and it's all because you got her into this mess."

Harry surged out of his seat. "I got her into this mess? Listen here—"

"Stop it," Irene shouted. "Stop it, now. No one got me into this. God above, you're both the biggest fools I've ever met." A flush mantled her pale shoulders and her throat and her cheeks, and Cian found it hard to remember that she was angry with him. Irene looked at Harry, who still hadn't sat down, and added, "I make my own decisions. Both of you would do well to remember that."

"I'm sorry," Harry said after a moment. "Cian is right, to a point. We did bring you into this—"

"Did you not hear a word I just said?" Irene asked.

With a quiet smile, Pearl said, "He hardly hears anything these days. It's like talking to a man with his head in the sand."

Cian thought Harry might launch into another shouting match, but the red slowly drained from Harry's face. With a sheepish smile and a shrug, Harry said, "Very well. I see I'm outmatched by the women of our little group." He sat down. "Friends?" he asked, holding out one hand to Cian.

"You put her in danger. And you put me in danger. And I don't trust anything about you. No, Harry. We're not friends."

Harry held his hand out a moment longer before dropping it. An uncomfortable silence descended on the group. Then the old Hun leaned forward, one hand plucking at his short, silvery beard, and said, "If you're finished?"

Harry nodded but he didn't take his eyes from Cian.

“According to Miss Lovell,” Freddy said, “the box contains an ancient relic. If it is what I believe, then it is most commonly known as the Mask of Dagon. Henry, you will know more about this than I do, but I have read enough about the mask to know that it is a relic of unbelievable power. According to a cuneiform tablet, the mask’s first known location was in the great temple of Dagon, in Ur, and it was worn twice a year by the high priests in rituals of communion. The mask vanished after Ur was conquered by the Chaldeans, but it appears again depicted in a silver urn recovered from the temple in Jerusalem.” Freddy paused. “The record grows even more scarce after that. Louis XIV claimed to possess the mask, but he also claimed to have destroyed it. There are hints—manuscript entries—that the mask was entrusted to an illegitimate child and eventually found its way through a shipping magnate to La Nouvelle-Orléans, which Americans call New Orleans. It disappears again, although half the founding families of New Orleans claim to have held the mask at some point.”

Harry had a faint smile on his face. “Freddy, I think it’s safe to say that you know more about the mask than I.”

Freddy blinked. “Oh. Well.”

“How the hell did he know all that?” Cian asked.

“Mind yourself, sir,” the old Hun said. “There are ladies present. I know the history of mask because I specialize in ancient worship. Anyone in my field would have heard of the mask, the way any self-respecting artist would know about the Mona Lisa.”

“Right. The Mona Lisa.”

“We’re getting off track,” Harry said. “Freddy, you say the mask is powerful. How powerful?”

“Powerful enough to make the Winter Bride’s heart look like a street magician’s trick,” Freddy said. “The mask allows the wearer to commune with Dagon, even though he sleeps. Louis XIV claimed that the mask would raise Dagon from the depths and wake him, if used properly, but such a claim is uncertain. The French are creatures of fancy.”

Harry had gone pale. He gripped the arms of his chair with white-knuckled hands.

“Harry,” Pearl said. She turned to Freddy. “Why did you bring that up? The Winter Bride —”

With a start, like a clockwork toy springing to life, Harry leaned forward and waved one hand. “No, Pearl. It’s fine. I just—I was surprised.” Some of the strain in his face eased, but he didn’t let go of the chair. “If this thing is as powerful as Freddy believes, then we have to find it. No more mistakes.”

Pearl nodded, but unhappiness was written with a bold brush on her face.

“I don’t suppose there’s any way of convincing you to leave this alone?” Cian said to Irene.

The flush had faded from her neck and shoulders, leaving skin white as cream. Her thinness didn’t bother Cian quite as much as it had. The lines of her neck, the muscles in her shoulders—he realized, too late, that she was speaking and that he had missed the first part.

“—and if I don’t at least find the mask, I break my deal with Marie-Thérèse, and you’ll die.”

“I don’t want you to—”

“It was my choice,” Irene said. “And I’ve already made it.”

“Then wait here,” Cian said. “We’ll go find this damn mask without you, and you can tell her that you found it”

Irritation was bright in Irene's eyes. Cian didn't care.

Harry laughed, let go of the chair, and rubbed his hands together. "Sorry, friend. An impressive bit of chivalry, but I'm afraid Miss Lovell will be going with us."

"Why?" Cian said. "Because you say so? I know your type and I'm not scared of you."

The laughter left Harry's face. He stood up, but this time there was no threat in the movement. Instead, it was a gesture of dismissal. Harry headed down the hall towards the bedrooms, and over his shoulder he called back, "Irene is going with us because she's the only one who has an idea of where to look."

Cian looked at Irene and saw the confirmation in her eyes. His stomach dropped.

The woman was determined to get herself killed.

Chapter 28

“Stay close to me,” Cian said as they bounced along in the car. He kept his voice low and hoped that only Irene could hear him. They had crowded all five of them into Harry’s Model T, which skimmed along the road and rocked like a bad wagon at every bump and turn. Pearl sat next to Irene and kept her face forward and expressionless, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t hear them.

Irene smiled.

“I’m serious,” Cian said. “And keep clear of Harry. If anything goes wrong, I want to be able to get you out of there.”

“My knight in shining armor,” Irene said.

“You’re mocking me.”

She didn’t answer.

“At least I have some fucking manners, unlike him and every other fellow like him.”

With an arched eyebrow, Irene said, “I’ve never heard of fucking manners. They sound like a scream.”

“Forget it. Do what you want. You will anyway.”

Cian settled back against the seat, cursing her and feeling like a sardine stuffed in a can. On the one side, the window showed dark fields buried under snow like carded wool. On the other, Irene’s slender frame, her hip pressed against Cian in a way that tied his throat in a knot. Never mind that he had half a mind to pull her out of the car and drag her back to the city on foot. He sighed, his breath fogging the glass, and tried not to think about Irene, or Harry Witte, or where they were headed.

Irene laughed at something Pearl had said, and the sound sent a fresh wave of irritation through Cian.

In the front seat, Harry drove while holding a quiet conversation with the Hun. Freddy leaned forward, his face almost pressed to the windshield, body taut with excitement. The man had been wound tight as a fiddle since learning about the mask. He looked like a soldier who had just learned that his girl from home was waiting in the next town. The kind of look that made men do stupid things.

Harry, on the other hand, had the same easy manner as always. More than once, Cian had caught the man's eyes wandering towards him, and more than once Cian had felt his suspicions grow. Harry Witte was, to judge by Irene's reactions, handsome and charming. Pearl was in love with him—that much was obvious even to Cian. None of which explained the strange encounter with Harry in the bedroom, or the man's sidelong glances.

The Ford hit another rough patch, knocking Cian into the air. His head hit the roof. He bit his tongue. Landed hard on his ass.

Cian wished they had walked.

Outside, the fenced fields of farmers began to separate, like patches of a quilt tearing at the seams, broken by lengths of woodlands and fallow clearings. This far from the city, with the land buried in winter, made Cian think of France.

France made him think of Corinne, with her dark eyes, with her smile that he had thought was just for him.

France made him think of Harley Dunn, who was handsome and charming like Harry Witte.

Cian stared out the window. The sound of the bullet splitting bone and brain.

Irene was laughing again.

What could be so God-damned funny?

When he looked over, though, Irene and Pearl were both staring at him, and the women burst into fresh laughter. Cian turned his gaze back to the window.

Not a bit of sense to either of them.

Harry Witte was every inch the same as Harley Dunn. The kind of men that women loved. The kind of men that other men wanted to be. The kind of men that other men would follow into battle, would trust with their lives, with their fears, with the dark nights far from home in a foreign land.

And that was why Cian was going to save a bullet for Harry Witte. Because it was only a matter of time before Witte betrayed them, just like Harley Dunn.

In the middle of breathless laugh, Irene sat up straight and leaned over the front seat. She pointed with a finger. “Here,” she said. “Here.”

“Where?” Harry said. “I don’t see—well. There it is.”

The automobile slowed, and Harry turned onto a well-kept, unmarked road. Irene leaned back, her face intent now as she followed some sort of internal compass. Cian didn’t like it one bit. She’d made a deal with Marie-Thérèse to save Cian’s life, and that rankled in him like a barbed fishhook. What was worse was that the old ghost, or whatever she was, had done something to Irene. Put something in her head that would lead her to the mask. It sounded like witchcraft to Cian. It sounded dangerous. But most of all, it sounded like a trap for Irene.

And that was the part he liked least.

The road carried them through a dense stand of trees, their branches forming lattices against the night. A few lonely evergreens wore needled coats, still and silent observers of

winter's desolation. Something darted ahead of them, at the edge of the automobile's lights. A very small wolf, perhaps. Or a very large fox.

When they cleared the trees, the house was visible. House was a poor word for it—the kind of word that someone like Cian would use. Irene, on the other hand, probably had a dozen words for it. Manor. Country estate. Villa. Cian stared at up the monstrosity. Even in the darkness, its massive size was obvious, filled out by dozens of lighted windows. Against the vast dome of stars, the house looked built perfectly to scale, as though it could fill all that emptiness itself.

In the glimmer of the Ford's headlights, rows of parked cars were visible. There had to be at least a dozen of them. Most were expensive models—Cadillac and Packard, a pair of gleaming Rolls Royce, Duesenberg, more. Only a few came from the more humble lines of Henry Ford's factories. That meant rich people. And rich people, in Cian's experience, were trouble.

Harry pulled the Model T to the right, between a pair of overgrown, snow-dusted shrubs. Branches scraped the windows like fingers. When they reached a small clearing, Harry stopped, and the car settled like a dog shaking itself before it went to sleep.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Cian asked. "That place is practically a castle. What are we going to do? Knock and ask if we can look around?"

"It's not a joke," Irene said. "And if you had half a brain, you'd know that."

"Half a brain? Listen here, Irene, I—"

"God, enough," Harry said. "Both of you. Irene, you're sure it's there?"

She nodded.

"Fine. That's good enough for me. Pearl, Irene, wait here. Cian, you—"

"I don't take orders from you," Cian said.

Harry's face was expressionless. "I was going to say, you can do what you wish."

Cian snorted.

"If you think I'm going to sit out here and freeze my toes off," Irene said, "you are sadly mistaken, Harry Witte. Besides, you'll have no idea where to look once you get inside that house. I'm going with you."

Harry looked at Pearl.

She turned to look out the window at the house, then at Harry again. "We need everyone we have, Harry. You and Freddy haven't been enough on the last few jobs—the Children have always gotten to the artifacts first. I think we should go."

"Two women," Harry said, rubbing his chin. "Two women were a mistake."

"You're about to make an even bigger one," Irene said with a sweet smile.

Cian smothered a chuckle. The sound died when Irene and Pearl turned to stare at him.

He held up both hands. "Let's go before Harry has another brilliant idea."

They climbed out of the car. Pearl and Irene had their heads together, and Cian was certain he heard the words, "Men," and "children," and then Irene's muffled laughter.

"We'll go around back and look for a servant's entrance," Harry said. "A place this big is bound to have one or two. Once inside, we'll see if Irene can get us any closer to the mask."

Then he added, "Any questions?" Harry turned to look at Cian.

"Would you mind waiting in the car?" Cian asked.

Harry turned and started up the hill without a response.

"You needn't antagonize him," Irene said as they walked after him.

"One of us should keep both eyes open," Cian said. "That man could sneeze and you'd fall over out of pure delight. He can't be trusted. I know his type."

Irene glared at him and then quickened her pace, moving to walk with Pearl. The two women put their heads together again.

The rest of the way, Cian walked with Freddy. The old Hun was small and thin, and his hair and beard looked like they'd never been mussed in his entire life. His breath came in energetic puffs as he used the silver-handled cane to help himself up the hill. This close, Cian couldn't help but notice the odor of cabbage that clung to Freddy.

The Hun's eyes flicked over to Cian. "What?" he asked.

"You're a professor, right? What are you doing in all this?"

"I study these religions. It's only natural for me to participate in field work."

"Studying them is one thing. Searching for a mask as old as Babylon, though, because you're afraid it will wake a god—that seems like you're taking your work home."

Freddy bared his teeth. It didn't really look like a smile. It made Cian's skin crawl.

"And why are you here?" the old Hun asked.

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

At the top of the hill, the house seemed even larger. Gardens lay in icy winding cloths, sprinkled with empty fountains and snow-covered benches. The house itself was stone, the waterspouts and chimneys decorated with carvings of distorted faces that were only half-visible in the weak light. This close to the house, the sound of music was audible, as well as the aroma of roasting meat. Overhead something scrawny and black flapped across the sky, and Irene jumped. When no one else moved, she laughed into her sleeve, her eyes bright. She looked radiant. Cian wanted to kiss her.

They moved around the house like a forgotten embassy, trudging down gravel paths that wandered through the gardens. On the back of the house, the gardens opened to form a wide

lawn that, in summer, might have played host to morning teas and evening fetes, but now was lit only by canvases of light that came from wide French doors. Through the doors, Cian glimpsed a large room and men and women in evening dress.

“Here,” Harry whispered. He opened a narrow, recessed door and went inside. They followed him and entered a small room cluttered with coats and hats and scarves and muddy boots. A second door led further into the house, and a band of yellow light showed underneath it.

“Anything?” Harry asked.

Irene nodded. She pointed down and to the right.

“Underground,” Pearl murmured. “Why does it always have to be underground?”

Harry grinned.

After listening a moment at the door, Harry led them into an unadorned hall. The sound of music was louder here, now mixed with the clatter of metal on metal and the brash, familiar voices of servants who did not think they would be overheard. A large door to the left was open, pouring heat and the scent of onions and garlic and good roast beef into the hall.

Cian’s stomach rumbled.

For a moment, Harry stood still, as though considering.

Pearl tapped his arm. In a low voice, she said, “Perhaps the cellars? A house like this will probably have more than one. One attached to the kitchen, and then a wine cellar that might be accessed from somewhere else.”

“You’re brilliant, Pearl,” he said. “The wine cellar, then.”

“It won’t be far from here,” she said.

Harry cocked his head, and they moved out as a group, listening at other doors along the hallway and checking them. A pantry, a closet full of broken brooms and bedraggled mops,

another closet with linens, a pair of rooms that were empty. Harry led them away from the kitchen, where the voices had grown more enthusiastic, and now laughter mingled with the sounds of cooking. Most likely, Cian thought, one of the servants had brought along a bit of drink to share, and now that the party was underway, they would try to enjoy themselves as much as their employers.

As they followed the hall, the music grew louder, and twice Cian caught Irene humming. She flashed him a tight smile. One of her hands was buried in her pocket, and he guessed she had a death grip on her toy revolver. A moment too late, he realized he should have smiled back, but by then Irene had already moved on. Freddy bumped into Cian, and Cian hurried forward.

Ahead, a door had been propped open, giving a view of an expansive, wood-paneled room. The smell of wood-smoke rolled towards them, mixed with scents of beeswax and lemon. Harry stopped before they reached the next room, turned, and disappeared from sight. As Cian drew closer, he saw the narrow stairs that led down to a door. Harry knelt at the bottom, fiddling with the door, while the rest of them crowded the steps. The door popped open, and Harry motioned them to follow.

The stairs continued down. Here, stone stole the warmth from the air, and the odor of mildew filled Cian's nose. Harry paused at the bottom of the steps, and Cian heard a click and then a buzz. A row of electric lights came to life. The cellar was large, its full size hidden by the rows of wine racks that held dusty bottles.

"God, I could use a drink," Cian said, studying the racks.

"Later," Harry said. "Irene?"

"I think we're close. It's hard to tell. That way." She pointed towards the back of the cellar.

“Don’t you think it’s the slightest bit odd that you know where this thing is?” Cian said to Irene, grabbing her sleeve and holding her back as the others pressed forward. “Why wouldn’t Marie-Thérèse get it herself?”

Irene smiled up at him and patted his cheek. “Don’t you think it’s the slightest bit odd that you keep making a total ass of yourself?”

“Damn it, Irene.”

Her smile grew. “Don’t let Freddy hear you,” was all she said, and then she pulled her arm free and hurried after the others.

Cian watched her go. Then he grabbed the closest bottle and tucked it into his coat pocket.

He really needed a drink.

By the time he’d caught up with the rest, they stood in a semi-circle, facing a section of stone wall that stood open. A secret door, Cian realized, like the kind in every gothic novel and in half the pulps. Dry rot was on the air, and something worse. Corruption. Pearl had covered her mouth and nose.

“Someone should keep watch,” Cian said. “Just in case.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t like the feel of this. I’m going in alone. If I’m not back in ten minutes, leave.”

“Harry—” Pearl began.

“I don’t think—” Freddy said.

Harry shook his head. “I mean it. Ten minutes, and then you leave.”

He waited for disagreement and then turned to Cian and said, “You’re in charge from here.”

Cian didn't bother answering, but he saw Irene roll her eyes.

And then Harry slipped through the door. His footsteps came back for almost a minute, and then an abrupt silence.

Pearl watched the secret door. Irene dusted bottles with her sleeve. Freddy played with something in his pocket.

After five minutes, Cian said, "I'm going to check the stairs." He retraced his steps, went up the stairs, and opened the door.

Only it didn't open. He turned the handle again, pulled. Maybe it was jammed.

But the door didn't budge.

They were trapped.

Chapter 29

The locked door stared back at Cian. There were a few things he could still try. He might be able to break the door down. If he had a good bit of luck, the music might cover the noise. He could wait for Harry. Hell, he could ask Irene if she could get the lock open. He had a vague memory of her removing his handcuffs at the hospital.

Then, from the other side of the door, came footsteps.

Cian hurried down the stairs and flipped off the lights.

“Cian—” Irene called.

“Quiet,” he said. He felt his way by touch towards the back of the cellar. The bottle in his pocket clinked as it scraped the wall. Behind him, a sliver of light widened across the wall, and Cian darted behind the final row of wine racks. Pearl, Irene, and Freddy still stood near the secret door, but Freddy had put himself in front of the women. Cian jerked his head at the secret door.

They hesitated and then passed through the door. Cian followed them, pulling the door shut as the electric lights warmed to life. He leaned against the wall and studied the tunnel. The only illumination came from the light slipping through cracks in the false wall, but it was enough to make out a pitted stone floor that led further back. The steps from the cellar, even muffled by the secret door, were growing louder, and Cian urged the other three to move back along the hall.

Irene stumbled. Cian glanced back. The chagrin in Irene’s face changed to horror, and Cian started to turn around, to see what had frightened her. Freddy grabbed him by the coat and hauled him backwards.

An iron grille slammed down where Cian had been standing a moment before.

Metallic thunder crashed. Then the secret door swung open, spilling light into the hall. A short, round figure stepped through the frame. Cian blinked, trying to see against the backlighting. Then a gun barked, and the figure in the door vanished, and the door swung shut.

Leaving them in darkness.

“Irene,” Cian said.

“I just wanted to give them something to think about,” she said, but there was a tremor in her voice.

Cian stepped forward. He tested the grille. It ran on tracks set into the walls and it was too heavy to lift. As Cian dropped to his knees to give it another try, he heard Harry’s voice behind him.

“Ah. I see you found the tripwire.”

There was the whisper of a match, and then a bloom of light, and Pearl held a candle. Harry stood halfway down a circular flight of steps. He leaned forward over the edge of the stairs and held up something in one hand.

A length of wire attached to a metal pin.

“I thought I said to wait ten minutes and then leave,” Harry said.

“That’s not much of a welcome,” Irene said.

“Cian?” Harry said.

“The cellar door locked behind us. Someone was coming down the stairs. We were going to hide back here, but whoever it was came straight towards the secret door.”

“They knew we were here,” Pearl said.

In the weak light of the candle, Harry’s face revealed a moment of frustration. “I was afraid of that. You might as well come down here.”

Pearl went first, carrying the candle, and then Freddy. Irene gave Cian a look as she pocketed her revolver.

“All right?” Cian asked.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you’re white as a sheet.”

“I am not. Besides, you can’t see a thing.”

And then, before Cian could say anything else, she started down the stairs. He followed her, watching her pick her way down the steps in her heavy fur coat that did nothing to hide slender lines. She was starting to give him a headache.

Halfway down the steps, he popped the cork on the bottle of wine.

“What was that?” Irene said.

“Nothing,” Cian said. And then he took a drink.

He blinked, missed the next step, and caught himself.

Damn good wine.

Irene stared back at him, and he proffered her the bottle. She gave a disappointed sniff, but she took the bottle anyway and drank. Her eyes had stars in their depths when she handed the bottle back, and Cian was close enough to smell the wine on her breath. Her lips curved into a smile.

“Maybe you do have more than half a brain,” she said, her smile turning to a grin, and then she continued down the steps.

Cian took another drink. He figured he was going to need it.

By the time they’d reached the bottom, Cian realized that this portion of the building was substantially older. The stone was rough-worked, edges smoothed by time rather than by tools,

and a pair of massive columns supported the low ceiling. Four barred doors opened onto cramped cells. Rotting straw was strewn across the floor, slick from the moisture on the stone, filling the air with its stench. Cian offered Irene his arm. She shook her head.

She did, however, take the bottle again.

The others were gathered around one of the cells. When Cian and Irene joined them, Cian saw that the barred door was open. Standing in the cell, wearing nothing more than a filthy pair of trousers and with his arms wrapped around his chest, was the sandy-haired thief. He was covered in cuts and bruises, but the bright blue eyes and the tangled mess of sandy hair were the same. As was the smile, with its single missing tooth. The kind of smile Cian had seen plenty of times in Kerry Patch. Men with a smile like that always had a girl on one arm and another waiting at the next block.

Irene, at least, wasn't smiling back. Cian felt a surge of satisfaction.

"What was your name?" Cian said.

"Sam. You're Cian, right?"

Cian nodded.

"You know each other?" Harry asked.

"About as well as you do. He's the one who took the box. He was at that apartment."

Cian took a step forward, and Sam retreated. "I thought he worked for the Dane," Cian said. "But now I guess that's not the case, is it? You just happened to be there when I was."

Sam stood with his back to the wall but he tried another smile. "It was that window, you know? I was so close."

"Bad luck," Cian said.

"Would you like to tell us what's going on here?" Harry said.

“Don’t suppose you came to rescue me?” Sam said.

Cian laughed until Freddy prodded him.

“Damn,” Sam said. “Don’t suppose you have a smoke then?”

Freddy produced his silver cigarette case, offered Sam a cigarette. Sam inched around Cian, still unwilling to get too close, and lit the cigarette from Pearl’s candle. He drew deeply on the cigarette, closed his eyes, and breathed out a stream of smoke.

“God bless you.”

Cian grabbed his shoulder. The wiry man flinched—there wasn’t an inch of him that didn’t have a gash or bruise—but Cian didn’t let go.

“You were stealing the box from the Dane,” Cian said.

“God, yes. Get off of me. Can’t you see I’m a mess?”

“I can see just fine,” Cian said. He squeezed, and Sam tried to twist away, but Cian didn’t let go. “Start talking. I’m a pretty good listener.”

“Harry,” Pearl said.

Harry shook his head.

“Yeah, right,” Sam said. “All right, big fellow. I was there for the box. Let me go. I’ll tell you.”

Cian released the man’s shoulder. Sam took a step away and puffed on the cigarette for almost a minute. Cian took a step forward, and Sam darted back and threw his hands up. “All right,” he said, letting out another puff of smoke. “All right. God, you’re as friendly as they come, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea,” Harry said, and Irene let out a laugh.

“I went in the back. The Dane’s boys are a lot of muscle and not a lot of brains. I knew that window was junk. It was easy as pie to open. The box was just sitting there, I figured I’d help myself, and then I heard the gunshots, so I got out of there. Only that frame was bad, and the window came crashing down when I hit it with the box, and that nail caught my trousers.”

“You were caught on a nail?” Freddy asked. The old Hun had helped himself to a cigarette as well. “Not much of a thief.”

“Bad luck is all,” Sam said. “Happens to everyone. Besides, I ended up with the box, didn’t I?”

“Where is the box?” Harry asked.

Sam threw a glance up and flicked ash from his cigarette.

Harry groaned. “You didn’t.”

“I heard there was someone willing to pay good cash for the box. I talked to a few people, learned the details, came out here.” A nervous twitch ran through Sam’s jaw, and he wrapped one arm over his torn and bloodied chest. He tried for a smile and it didn’t come. “You might say the deal went south.”

“And you were fool enough to bring them the box?” Freddy asked. “You just assumed they would hand over the money.”

“Matters like this are delicate. It was a gentleman’s agreement. For ten thousand dollars in cash, I would have taken the box to Timbuktu.”

Freddy ground out his cigarette on the stone. The disgust in his face was evident.

“Irene?” Harry said.

“Yes?”

“Where is the box?”

“Harry, I don’t think—”

“Just tell me.”

“It should be right here.”

“Well it isn’t,” Sam said. “Any chance of another one of these?” he asked, holding up the cigarette. When no answer came, he rolled his shoulders. “The bastards took it.”

“Why keep you?” Cian asked. “Maybe they don’t pay you, but why not just kill you?”

“On account of my charm, I suppose.”

Cian took a step forward, but Harry waved him off. “The Children don’t kill for nothing. They would have kept him here until they needed someone for a ritual.”

“You mean a sacrifice,” Cian said.

Freddy spoke next. “We are now in the same position, I’m afraid.”

“What’s that mean?” Sam asked.

“We are trapped,” Freddy said.

Sam swore. He tossed his cigarette to the floor. It sizzled once as it drowned in the moldering straw. His eyes were wide and wet, and he rubbed his mouth once, and took a step towards the stairs. Suddenly he just looked like a kid who had gotten himself in far too deep. Cian had seen a lot of kids like that. Boys in France who had barely known which way was up.

Damn. Cian walked towards the blond man. Sam flinched and pulled back, but Cian held out the bottle. “I think you need this more than I do. Sit down on the steps. Let me see how bad those cuts are. Pearl, I need some light. Irene, give me that fancy handkerchief of yours.”

The women joined him at the steps while Freddy and Harry conversed near the cell. Irene handed him her handkerchief. She locked eyes with him for a moment. Her expression was unreadable to Cian, and it made him feel like someone had shoved him down a hill in a barrel.

He didn't like it, so he looked away and wet the handkerchief with some wine and started cleaning the cuts on Sam's face and body.

"Ow, God damn it," Sam protested, twisting away until Cian grabbed him by the hair. "Just leave it alone."

"Most of them aren't too bad," Cian said. "Though a few need stitching."

"I have needle and thread," Pearl said, patting her clutch.

Cian fought a smile at the sudden panic in Sam's face. "Hm," he said. "I suppose it can wait for now, although if we're here much longer, I'll go ahead and sew him up."

Sam finally managed to pull free and scoot up a pair of steps, cradling the bottle against his chest. He looked a damn sight better, but he just shook his head at Cian. "You? With those big hands? What kind of a seamstress would you be? You'll make me look like the raggedy man."

"It'll be good for you," Cian said.

Sam swore again and drank from the bottle.

Cian straightened and raised the bloody handkerchief. "I'd give this back to you, but I imagine you don't want it anymore."

Irene smiled, and it was like he was seeing her smile for the first time. A tremulous smile, like a spring morning that wasn't quite sure if winter was past. She shook her head. "Keep it," she said, and her smile slipped back into the playful look he was more familiar with. "As a token of my affections."

"A bloody handkerchief," Cian said. "I'm practically swooning."

Pearl covered a smile with one hand.

Sam took another drink and glowered at Cian.

All in all, as far as Cian was concerned, that seemed just about right.

Then, from the other side of the dungeon, Harry shouted, “What do you mean you have it?”

Cian, Pearl, and Irene moved towards the men. Freddy was pale but stood erect, his shoulders back, his lined face hard. The old Hun reached into his coat and withdrew an amber disc, its diameter the size of man’s hand. Carvings covered the amber, but in the weak light, Cian couldn’t make them out.

Harry reached out to grab the disc. Then he slammed his hand into the wall. “God damn it, Freddy. You told me it had been destroyed.”

“I—” Freddy began.

Harry spun, took a step in the other direction, and then swung around towards Freddy. Freddy didn’t move. For a moment, Cian was sure Harry would hit the old man. Then Harry dropped his arms and stalked off to the far side of the cellar.

The Hun’s face had lost its color.

“What was that all about?” Irene said.

Pearl, however, was staring at the disc. “Oh, Freddy,” she said.

That seemed to affect him more than anything Harry had said. He held the disc out towards Pearl like a suppliant. Pearl shook her head and joined Harry. Her voice was a murmur punctured by the occasional loud oath by Harry.

Irene cocked an eyebrow at Cian.

Cian shrugged. He reached out and took the disc. Freddy made a sound of protest, but it was halfhearted, and Cian ignored him. The disc was cool and dry to the touch. Its shape was uneven—thicker in some places and thinner in others. Up close, the carving seemed to represent

a sun, with rays of light streaming from the center of the disc. Cian flipped and caught it. Freddy gasped. The old Hun snatched it back and cradled it against his chest.

“Valuable, huh?” Cian said.

“You have no idea what you’re playing with,” Freddy said. “This comes from the Egypt’s early dynastic period. Its worth is incalculable.”

“I bet I could calculate it,” Cian said.

Irene smothered another laugh as Freddy’s cheeks reddened.

“So why were you supposed to destroy it?” Cian asked.

“Because it’s damn dangerous,” Harry said, Pearl at his side as he rejoined them.

“Because we took it from a two-bit sorcerer who probably couldn’t have lit a candle on his own, but who turned four square miles of forest to ash with this little thing. And most of all because Freddy told me that he was going to destroy it. How many others have you held onto, Freddy? How many have you kept hidden away that you promised you had destroyed?”

Harry’s hand was resting on a fat revolver at his side.

Freddy shook his head. Despair made his voice flat. “None, Harry. It was only this one. I brought it tonight because I thought we might need it. It looks like I was right.”

Harry snorted. “You brought it because you’re obsessed with it and you’ve been aching for a chance to use it. Hand it over, Freddy.” When the old Hun hesitated, Harry pulled the revolver from his holster. “Now.”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Freddy said. “Truly. It was a mistake.”

Harry took the disc and headed for the stairs. He holstered the revolver, motioned Sam out of his way, and said, “Stay down here.” Then he glanced back and added, “And this time, I mean stay.”

“Why is he looking at me?” Cian asked.

“Your reputation proceeds you,” Irene said. Then she looked at Freddy and asked, “What did he mean, you wanted to use it?”

Freddy shook his head.

When Irene glanced at Pearl, Pearl sighed. “I’m sorry, Freddy. They need to know all of it.”

With a stiff nod, Freddy moved to the corner of the cellar, his face to the wall. The little Hun looked ready to fold in on himself and disappear. Pearl watched him for a moment. Then she said, “Freddy has a history.”

“Everyone’s done things he’s not proud of,” Cian said. Irene threw him a quick glance that he ignored. “No need to go dredging it up.”

“In most cases, that might be true. Here, it’s not. Freddy is a professor and a scholar, as we told you. He knows a great deal about cultic ritual. What most people call magic. That’s how Harry met him. Harry was hunting a magician, or a sorcerer, or whatever you want to call him. When Harry tracked the man down, though, he was dead.”

“Saved Harry a few minutes work,” Cian said.

“Freddy was standing over the dead man,” Pearl said. “He’d been struck by a lightning bolt. On a clear day. Inside a room on the third floor of a hotel.”

Cian paused. “Damn,” he said.

Pearl nodded. “Freddy insisted it was self-defense, and Harry believed him. But Harry also warned Freddy about cultic magic. See, we can’t track down everyone who uses magic. There are too many folk rituals, too many things passed down family to family, too many covens

and secret societies. We take care of the ones who are hurting people. Usually, they're also the ones who have gone mad.

"That's what cultic worship does, in the end. Exposing yourself to the chaos of the universe, to the old gods, to the Devil—whatever you want to call it, whatever you believe—it's like a photographic plate. Even if the light only touches it for a fraction of a second, it changes it. The more magic you use, the more you change, until you're mad. Or worse."

"What's worse?" Cian said.

Irene slapped his arm. "I don't want to hear about that. Not now. Not here." She shivered, and her eyes went to the dungeon's corner. "And Freddy?"

"Freddy was more than a professor, it turned out. He was a sorcerer too. Harry . . . Harry had to stop him. I don't know all the details. I don't know, to be honest, why Harry left Freddy alive. But I know the one condition that Harry made absolutely clear: Freddy had to stop using magic. We all believed he had. Freddy still knows a great deal about magic and about the artifacts, and so Harry entrusted Freddy with destroying them. But now—"

Freddy walked past them. His eyes were rimmed in red, but his head was up, and his back was straight. "I have not betrayed my promise, Pearl. It was one mistake."

Pearl nodded. She looked miserable.

"Mad as a hatter," Cian said. "That explains a lot."

Freddy glared at him.

A wash of red light tumbled down the steps, outlining Sam and Freddy and growing brighter until Cian had to close his eyes. Heat poured into the dungeon. The smell of hot metal filled the air.

The light and heat vanished as quickly as they had come.

“Come on up,” Harry called.

At the top of the stairs, the iron grille had melted into a pool across the narrow hall. It was already cooling as the cellar floor and air sapped its heat. Cracks spread over the dull surface of the metal. Here, the air was dry and dusty, scratching Cian’s throat. Harry skirted the pool and Cian helped Pearl and Irene to the far side of the hallway. When he glanced back, Freddy was staring at the molten metal like a man who had just seen his wife in another man’s bed.

Harry led them through the wine racks, up the stairs, to the wooden door. He tested the handle.

“Give me half a minute,” he said.

“Half a minute,” Sam said. He had taken another bottle of wine from a rack and was trying to open it. He pushed the bottle into Cian’s chest and nudged Harry out of the way. The lock clicked open a moment later. Sam pushed the door open, turned, and said, “That’s how—”

A bullet cracked against the door frame. Harry pushed Sam down the stairs. Cian caught him, returned the bottle of wine, and then drew the Colt. Cian took the stairs two at a time until he reached Harry.

“On three,” Harry whispered.

“Fuck three,” Cian said and kicked the door open.

A massive man stood at the top of the stairs, half of his body hidden by the wall. He started at the sound of the door. Cian aimed and fired. The blast of the shot was deafening in the cellar, but the bullet caught the man in the face and he hit the ground screaming.

Cian sprinted up the stairs. Another big fellow was coming around the corner. Cian squeeze off two more shots. One caught the big fellow in the shoulder. The other struck his arm. The man was built like a moose, and somehow he kept coming.

The bullets bought Cian enough time. He slammed into the big man, driving his shoulder into his gut and carrying both of them to the ground. Cian drove his fist into the man's side. He felt a punch land under his ribs, felt the sickening wave of pain, but Cian landed a blow on the side of the man's head. The man's head snapped to the side and he went still.

Cian got to his feet. The hall spun for a moment. He clenched his teeth. Cian Shea didn't empty his stomach over one lousy punch. He did, however, shake the ache from his hand.

Over the ringing in his ears from the gunshot, Cian heard screams.

Harry had reached the top of the stairs and was watching the paneled room. He fired once, and the screams escalated.

"Hurry," Harry shouted.

The rest of their group sprinted past Cian and Harry, heading back to the servants' door. A bullet chipped plaster from the wall, and Harry shoved Cian back a step.

"You can walk?" Harry shouted.

"I'm standing, aren't I?" Cian said.

He started after the others, taking up a position at the next intersection while Harry made a slow retreat. Once a man darted into view, firing wildly, and the bullets ate a line across the floor. Cian offered a return shot. The screams had stopped by that time. They continued their retreat in stages, until they reached the servants' door and plunged into the cold. Wind had risen, shattering the frozen cap of the snow and stirring long clouds into the air. The spume of snow glistened in the weak moonlight. It felt like a caress on the back of Cian's neck and cleared his head from the throbbing in his side.

As they skidded down the icy slope, lights bloomed in the house, and more gunshots came from behind them. Cian twisted around to see, felt the pain in his side latch onto him like a hound, and started to fall.

Harry caught him, grunted, and said, “Damn you’re big.”

Then Cian recovered his footing, and he shoved Harry off, and they reached the bottom of the hill.

A moment later, the Model T spun out from a cluster of shrubs, its lights like mourning yellow eyes. Harry and Cian climbed in. Pearl, in the driver’s seat, set off again, the tires churning the snow until they reached the relative clear of the drive.

The gunshots, the screams, the lights from the houses disappeared as soon as they had passed the stretch of woods. It was like dropping a blanket over a lamp. Cian fell back to rest against the seat. His side hurt like hell, as did his hand, and his ears were ringing like Christmas. When he looked over, Irene was flushed, her eyes bright, and she was staring at him.

“That was the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen,” she snapped.

Her face told Cian otherwise.

Sam reached across Irene and handed Cian the wine.

Cian took the bottle, tilted it in thanks, and took a long drink. And then another.

Irene was still looking at him.

Not a bad night.

Not a bad night at all.

Chapter 30

The next morning, Irene woke in Harry's bed. It smelled like him: a slight masculine musk that wasn't unpleasant but was distinctly Harry. She lay there for a moment. She wanted a bath and a coffee and to slap Cian Shea's face, and perhaps not in that order. The night before, the men had insisted that they all stay at Harry's apartment, and Harry had ceded his bed to Irene and Pearl. The other woman must have already woken, for Irene was alone.

Alone in Harry Witte's bed, the smell of him clinging to her skin. Harry Witte, who was brave and charming and heart-stoppingly handsome.

So why in God's name was she thinking about slapping Cian Shea?

Irene got out of bed, pulled on her dress—in need of a good cleaning after the last two days—and tried to do something with her hair. She checked her stockings for holes, found several, and put them on because she had nothing else. Then she sat for a minute and tried to figure out why she was such a fool.

In the end, she decided that she wasn't a fool at all. Cian Shea meant nothing to her, even after last night. Not his bravery—or idiocy—when he charged out of the cellar. Not the way he had helped Sam. Certainly not his smile.

She marched out of the bedroom. Pearl was in the kitchen. A pot of coffee sat on the table. Irene helped herself to a cup and glanced out into the living room. Freddy's hands and legs were visible, jutting out from behind a screen of newspaper, and Cian—all shoulders and arms—sprawled across the sofa, snoring. He looked like an overgrown child. Irene fought a smile, and when she saw Pearl watching her, Irene took a sip of coffee to hide the expression.

"How did you sleep?" Pearl asked.

“Not well.” Irene sipped at the coffee again.

“Nightmares?”

Irene nodded.

“I had them too. For weeks and months. I still do, I suppose, only not as often.”

“It’s so much to take in. Monsters and magic and crazed cultists. Sitting here, with coffee and sunshine, it’s hard to believe. But when I think about last night.” Irene shivered. “How did you meet Harry?”

Pearl didn’t answer. She toyed with the rim of her cup. She looked up at Irene. The saucer slid a half-inch across the table.

“I’m sorry,” Irene said. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Please don’t apologize. Another time, perhaps?”

“Of course.” Then Irene grinned. “Unless Harry decides to separate us for plotting against him. He’s rather touchy about that sort of thing, isn’t he?”

Pearl laughed, a rich, full sound that Irene hadn’t heard before. “Sometimes I don’t think Harry Witte would know what to do with a woman on his best day.”

“Well, I see you two are awake,” Harry said from the doorway. “And getting along it sounds like. What are you talking about?”

Pearl looked at Irene. They both burst into fresh laughs.

Harry flushed, but his smile never faltered. “I’ll leave you to it, then.” He disappeared into the vacated bedroom.

“God in heaven,” Cian groaned. The sound of tortured springs came from the living room and then footsteps, and Cian appeared in the kitchen. His shaggy red hair stood on end and his

clothing was rumpled, exposing a line of skin along his chest that made Irene's eyes wander. In general, he looked like a bear hauled from his den.

"Sleep well?" Irene asked.

He took a chair, poured himself coffee, and glared at her. "If you think it's funny, it's not. I might as well have been sleeping on Procrustes' bed. And yes, before you say something smart, I know who Procrustes is."

Irene had to fight back another giggle. "Something smart? I wouldn't dream of it. Not around you."

"Give him a break," Pearl said. "Do you want toast, Cian? I'm afraid Harry's cupboard is bare."

Cian watched Irene suspiciously, but he nodded. "Yes, thank you." And then, still watching Irene, "Heavens, Irene, what is it?"

And then Irene couldn't hold it back any longer. "Procrustes," she burst out, her laughter threatening to topple her from her chair.

Shaking his head, Cian poured himself more coffee. "Any whiskey for this coffee, Pearl?"

An hour later, they had all breakfasted—toast and coffee, all that Harry had on hand—and so Irene grabbed her coat and moved to the door.

"And where do you think you're going?" Cian asked.

"What does it matter to you?" She pulled the coat on.

“It’s dangerous right now. After last night, you shouldn’t be out there, wandering around alone.”

“I’m a grown woman, Cian.”

“Not grown enough to have a lick of sense. You—”

“Don’t you dare tell me—”

“Children, enough,” Harry said. “Where are you going, Irene?”

“To my rooms at the Louisiana Grand for a change of clothes and a bath.”

“You can bathe here,” Cian said.

She smiled. “Is that an invitation?”

Cian turned so red that she thought he might burst a vein. He stared at her, mumbled something incoherent, and stomped to the back of the apartment.

Harry shook his head.

Pearl was focused on her knitting, a shadow of a smile on her mouth.

“Do you want someone to go with you?” Harry asked.

“Now you want to take a bath with me?” Irene said. “What’s a girl to do?”

“Fine,” Harry said. “Go.” Then he added, “Wait. Irene, do you have any sense of where the mask might be?”

She paused at the door. Shook her head. “Not since we reached that cellar. What does that mean?”

“It means Marie-Thérèse set us up. Or perhaps someone else did. We’re going to have a talk with her. Go have your bath.” He smiled wickedly. “Alone. We’ll meet you at your rooms.”

“Noon?”

He nodded. “She’ll be weaker then.”

Irene caught a cab and was back at the Louisiana Grand faster than she had imagined. Walking through the high-ceilinged rooms of gilt and marble and Turkish rugs, watching men and women in elegant clothes trailed by bellboys and stacks of luggage, Irene felt as though she were in a world apart. A blond woman with an elaborate coif harangued a servant. A trio of men in expensive suits smoked cigars, laughing and passing around sections of the newspaper. At the desk, an elderly couple held out a map to the concierge. Men and women of substance and means, living the kind of life Irene had lived until so recently. Men and women who knew how the world worked, who had climbed to the top, who were powerful.

And all of them ignorant of the real world. Not just the monsters and the magic and the madness that Irene had seen over the last week. Not the terror, the violence, the kick of the revolver. The other things—the poverty, the hunger, the cold.

It was like stepping through the looking glass. It turned Irene's stomach.

Was this how Cian saw her? Pretty and delicate and useless?

Her cheeks were hot as she took the elevator to her floor.

She bathed and put on a navy blue dress. It had a coral sash at her waist and more coral lining the folds that fell just at the knee. She removed the rest of her jewelry and hid it in her suitcase. She felt strange wearing it. As though it belonged to someone else now.

And then she was thinking about Cian again. She glanced at the clock. Not even eleven. That gave her plenty of time. She pulled on her coat and hurried back downstairs.

She had errands to run.

By the time she made it back, it was almost noon. Irene checked her hair one last time, made a quick study of the revolver, which needed cleaning, and then there was a knock at the door. When she opened it, Harry stood there, freshly washed and wearing another expensive suit. Cian had bathed too, it seemed, for his hair looked better—a haystack instead of a haystack after a windstorm—but he wore the same clothes. Irene felt a glimmer of satisfaction.

“Well,” she said, hurrying out before they had a chance to enter her room. “What are we waiting for? Do we have time for lunch? I’m starved.”

“Maybe after,” Harry said. “Business first.”

As they took the elevator down, Cian studied the stylized lines of the elevator, done in brass and mahogany with a maroon carpet.

“Ritzy place,” he said.

An overweight woman, sweating in the confines of the elevator, gave a sniff and stared at Cian. It took a moment before Cian noticed, and then his cheeks reddened, and he stared at the floor.

Irene worked moisture into her mouth. Then she said, “Oh, not that ritzy, I don’t think. After all, they let all kinds stay here.” Cian looked up, and Irene threw a long, cold glance at the woman.

The woman gave an incredulous sniff and fanned herself with one hand.

Cian grinned at Irene.

It was like setting a spark to tinder. She was warm all the way to the Old Cathedral.

In the early afternoon light, the verdigris steeple showed glimmers of copper, and the letters above the door of the church caught fire. To Irene’s surprise, a sizable crowd waited outside the doors. She wasn’t Catholic herself, but it seemed strange for so many people to be

standing around outside on a weekday, especially in the winter. Perhaps a Mass had just let out. Harry guided them through the thicket of people. Towards the doors, the crowd grew dense. Cian tapped Harry's shoulder, cocked his head, and took Harry's spot. With slow, implacable steps, Cian forced a path open, using his size—and its effect on the men and women who might otherwise have protested—to clear the way.

When they reached the front of the church, Irene saw what had drawn the crowd. The massive double doors of the cathedral were splintered. One had fallen inside the building, while the other hung from a single hinge, stirring as a breeze moved it. Through the doors, police were visible, studying the wreckage of pews, examining overturned stands of votary candles, searching through the rubble of broken statues.

“Looks like someone else got here first,” Cian said.

Chapter 31

“Who would do this?” Irene asked, staring through the ruined doors of the Old Cathedral. The police continued their examination of the damage to the nave and the chapels. Farther back, near the altar, Irene thought she saw a foot. Before she could be certain, though, a police officer stepped into her line of sight, frowning at her and waving for her to move along.

Harry motioned for them to follow, and they left the Old Cathedral and its crowd. As they walked, Harry led them south, following the snow-choked sidewalks away from the river. “The question isn’t who would do it,” he said after a pair of blocks. “The question is who could do it.”

“Maybe Seamus’s boys,” Cian said. “Or I guess I should say Byrne’s. Maybe they heard we’d been to the Old Cathedral.”

“Or those things that were following us,” Irene said. “The Children and their golems. Maybe they knew Marie-Thérèse sent us and they were angry with her.”

Harry shook his head. “Impossible.”

“It’s not impossible,” Cian said. “Byrne’s men have been looking for us, and Irene’s right about—”

“I’m telling you, it’s impossible. You don’t understand. Marie-Thérèse isn’t just some ghost clinging to the world like a bad echo. As much as I hate to admit it, she was right about that much. Marie-Thérèse is a power in this city. She’s strong and clever and dangerous.”

“How strong?” Cian said.

“Strong enough that I haven’t gotten rid of her,” Harry said drily. “And certainly strong enough to get rid of any two-bit thugs from Kerry Patch. Strong enough that the Children are careful not to antagonize her. Those people at the party last night would give their right hand to

have the mask, and I don't doubt that a fair number of them are lost in cultic madness. But most of them couldn't do enough magic to give you a boil. Whatever hit the Old Cathedral was powerful enough to take out Marie-Thérèse where she's strongest, and that's after it crossed over onto consecrated ground." He drew a line around his mouth with his fingers. "What I'm saying is that someone new has entered the game. Someone very, very powerful."

"What do we do now?" Irene said.

"We get out of town," Cian said. "As fast as we can. All of us. The Children already have the mask. Let them deal with this new person. And Marie-Thérèse too. They can slit each other's throats for all I care."

"You want to run away?" Irene said.

"Running away is the only smart choice sometimes. This is one of those times."

"I'm not going to let them have the mask. I need it. And I need you." Irene flushed when she heard the words out loud. "To prove my father wrong, I mean."

"The first train out of here," Cian said. "That's the only smart choice."

"Let's talk to Sam first," Harry said. "There's more going on than we realized, and maybe he knows something."

Cian gave a grim nod.

"Fine," Irene said with a sigh. "But can we please eat first?"

It took longer than Irene had hoped to find somewhere to eat. They passed a half-dozen places—a pair of respectable restaurants that even her parents would have enjoyed, then a pharmacy lunch counter, and a few smaller restaurants—and every time Irene suggested one,

Harry would nod approval, but Cian would put on a face like a sick horse and shake his head. Finally Irene threw up her hands and said, “Fine, then. You choose.”

Cian did choose. Irene regretted her words.

It was a dump of a place. Dust and dirt clung to sticky spots on the tables. The floor was a battlefield of spills and crumbs. Instead of menus, their waitress—a middle-aged woman whose stomach was taking a running dive over the strings of her apron—read them a list of three options. Cian had a hot sandwich. Irene had the soup. Not a specific soup. Just the soup. Harry hesitated and ended up with eggs and potatoes.

Irene watched the hem of her coat to make sure it didn’t touch the floor. She wished she could say the same for her shoes.

“Charming,” Irene said.

“You could have eaten somewhere else,” Cian said. “There’s no rule we all have to eat together.”

“Really? I thought I had to report my every move to you. I was certain that when I tried to leave this morning, you all but jumped down my throat, telling me where I could and couldn’t go.”

Harry sighed and sat up, as though looking for someone—anyone—he might recognize.

The handful of other patrons were old men, their beards trailing in cups of soup.

The soup. No other identifier.

“You think I care what you do?” Cian said. “Let me set you straight. You can do whatever you please, Irene. You can spend your time with the Man in the Moon for all I care. I say one thing this morning—a solid piece of advice—and you can’t even hear that without putting your back up. God be good, I’ve never met someone as headstrong.”

“No,” Irene said, giving him her sweetest smile. “I imagine the women you meet are normally much . . . easier. To get along with, I mean.”

“Enough,” Harry said. “You two can go after each other with daggers when we get back to the apartment. Until then, I’d like to have a civil meal.” He stared at their waitress, who was coming back with their food. “Or whatever might pass for one.”

The woman served their food. Up close, she looked like she was starting a beard of her own, and it was an impressive start. After the plates were settled, the woman stood rooted to the floor. Irene was confused until she saw Cian dig money out of his pockets.

“Here,” Harry said, pulling out a leather billfold. “I’ve got it—”

“I can pay for my own damn food,” Cian said. He counted out a paltry amount of change, dithering so long that Irene began to tap her spoon against the bowl in impatience, until she realized what was wrong.

He really didn’t have any money.

Face as red as his hair, Cian dumped the coins into the woman’s hand. She started to count them, but Harry passed her a bill. “For myself and the lady,” he said. “You can keep the rest.”

There was no expression on the woman’s face. She pocketed coins and bills alike and disappeared into the kitchen. Cian set to work on the sandwich. Harry picked at his potatoes and eggs, his expression mistrusting. Irene disturbed the thin layer of grease that had settled across the top of her soup.

She felt an inch tall and had no appetite. She made herself eat the soup anyway.

Afterward, she still didn’t know what the soup had been—vegetable? Beef? But it was only in part due to the bland dishwater they had served. Mostly, it was due to the sudden,

suffocating realization of how she had acted. That morning, she had prided herself on being so much worldlier than the other patrons of the Louisiana Grand. She had thought how she had known fear and danger and cold and hunger.

For a grand total of what? One day? Two?

Opposite her sat Cian Shea, devouring his hot sandwich, a goopy string of cheese brushing his chin, his eyes on his plate. Cian Shea, who was wearing the clothes that Harry had given him for the second day in a row. Cian Shea, who barely had enough change in his pocket for a place like this, let alone new clothes, or a room at the Louisiana Grand.

And he had saved her life more than once. And he shouted and was rude and ignored reasonable suggestions. And he looked like a bear in winter, with that mass of fiery hair that refused to stay settled. And when he laughed, it made Irene forget about everything out else.

Her spoon scraped the bottom of the bowl.

The sound set the world in motion again.

She realized Harry was devouring his food. Somehow, the slender man made eating a plate of eggs and potatoes look more appealing than a tray of caviar. Harry glanced up at Cian.

“These are excellent. Good choice.”

Cian grunted.

Irene fought the urge to pick the string of cheese from his chin.

“Military?” Harry said.

Cian wiped his face. “What?”

“You. I don’t know a thing about you.”

“And why the hell would you care to know a thing about me?” Cian said. The words were as rude as ever, but there was an extra layer of suspicion behind them, something Irene hadn’t heard before. The way Cian looked at Harry—

“Because I like to know something about a man if he’s watching my back. Or if I’m watching his.”

“I can watch my own back.”

“For God’s sake, Cian,” Irene said. “Can you act decently for once? It’s just a question. You’d think Harry was trying to get state secrets out of you.”

To her surprise, Cian flushed. “Sorry. Yes. I was in the war. You?”

Harry shook his head. Irene waited for an explanation, but Harry remained silent.

The silence seemed to confirm something, and Cian gave a half-nod.

“What is going on?” Irene asked. “The two of you are impossible.”

“Now, you know how I feel when you and Pearl get going,” Harry said with a smile. He polished off the last few bites of his meal and stood. “Shall we?”

As they headed back to the apartment, Cian stirred from his usual silence. “What kind of work are you in?”

“And why the hell would you care to know a thing about me?” Harry said, his tone light, and with a smile to cut the tension.

Cian laughed. Not the full laugh, not the one Irene liked. This one still had plenty of tension behind it. But it was laugh. “Fair enough,” he said. “I deserve that. Square?” He held out his hand.

Harry shook it.

“To answer your question,” Harry said, “I’m a private investigator. Pearl works with me. We do all sorts of work. Infidelity, of course, because that’s where the steady money is, but all kinds of things. And people know that we handle the weird ones. The ones they can’t take to the police or anyone else.”

“And you make money?”

“Sometimes,” Harry said with a smile. “Never enough, though. Ask Pearl. She’ll tell you all about it.”

“She keeps your books, then?”

“She does, but don’t say it to her like that. She does her own bit of investigating too. Pearl sees a lot that most folks miss.”

“Is it dangerous?” Irene asked.

Harry laughed. “Not unless the cheating spouse is working magic and trying to steal an ancient cultic relic. Nothing like the last few days.” He paused and looked at Cian. “What do you do?”

“Try to stay out of trouble,” Cian said. He glanced at Irene. “I’m not doing so well at that, though.”

Harry laughed. “Lucky for us. I’d be happy to have a man like you, Cian. If you want a job, say the word.”

The desire in Cian’s face, the hope, was so painful it hit Irene like a hammer. But he tried to sound casual when he said, “That might work. Let me think about it.”

Harry nodded, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. That was when Irene realized that Harry had seen it all too.

She suddenly liked Harry Witte quite a bit more.

“And what about me?” Irene said. “I haven’t heard a word about where I fit into this picture.”

“My apologies,” Harry said with a grin. “I simply assumed that a woman with your means, staying at the Louisiana Grand, would have no interest in mucking about with the likes of us.”

“Mr. Witte,” Irene said, “that simply shows that you know nothing about me, or about women, or, more generally, about hotels.”

Harry’s grin fell into the snow.

This time, Cian’s laugh followed them all the way back to the apartment.

Chapter 32

By the time they got back to Harry's apartment, Cian had to admit to himself—if no one else—that he might have misjudged Harry Witte. Just a bit. The thought flew out his head, though, when they walked inside. Freddy sat glowering in the living room. The newspaper was folded at his side. His hat was on his knee, his cane at his side, and an empty tumbler on the table. When Cian and the others walked into the apartment, he surged out of his seat, grabbed his cane, and stalked towards the door.

"About time," he said. "You said an hour, Harry. I do not have time to spend all day watching this cut-purse."

An outraged, "Hey," came from the next room.

"Everything alright, Freddy?" Harry asked.

"He tried to escape twice. Once through the door. Once out the window. He's secure for now." Freddy jammed on his hat, brushed past Irene, and was out the door.

"Warm as a summer day," Cian said.

"That's just Freddy. You get used to him."

"Like a bad rash," Cian said.

Irene swatted his arm.

"Is that old Hun gone?" Sam's voice came from the next room. "A little help?"

"Shall we?" Harry said.

In the next room, they found Sam handcuffed and tied to a chair. A fresh bruise colored his cheek, standing out against the cuts and bruises from his imprisonment. He wore a borrowed shirt from Harry. He squirmed in his bonds when he saw them.

“Thank God,” he said. “He’s had me like this for a pair of hours.”

“You shouldn’t have tried to leave.”

“Let me out, would you? I have to—” Sam cut off and looked at Irene. “You know.”

Harry undid the cuffs and ropes. As Sam stood up, Cian laid one hand on the thief’s shoulder.

Sam froze.

“Sam, I kind of like you,” Cian said. “So I hope you’re not going to do anything stupid. Just a quick trip to the bathroom, right?”

“I got rights,” Sam said. “You can’t just hold me like this. I’m a free man.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Cian said. He gave Sam’s shoulder a light squeeze, and Sam’s face whitened. “See how smart you are?”

Sam mumbled something.

“Bathroom’s down the hall,” Harry said.

Cian marched Sam towards the room, glanced back at Harry and Irene, and grinned.

Harry rolled his eyes.

Irene grinned right back.

Perhaps because the bathroom window was too small, or perhaps because Sam had gotten smarter over the last few minutes, he didn’t try anything. When he’d finished, Cian led Sam back to the impromptu prison, which had formerly been the sitting room.

“Got anything to eat? I’m starving,” Sam said.

“I’ll check,” Irene said. “Toast alright?”

Before Sam could answer, she had left.

“Have a seat, Sam,” Cian said.

Sam looked like he didn't particularly want to sit, but when he saw Cian's face, he took a chair. Cian felt a flicker of sympathy. The boy—and he was a boy, barely old enough to be out of the house—was in far over his head. That much was obvious. But sympathy wasn't going to keep Cian from breaking the boy's legs if he tried to escape.

"I got rights," Sam muttered.

"Anything you want to tell us?" Harry asked.

"Like what?"

"Don't start that," Cian said. "You won't like how it ends up."

"Know what I think?" Sam said. "I think you're a lot of talk."

Cian took a step. Sam flattened himself against the chair.

Right then, Irene walked in with a plate of toast and a glass of milk. She looked at Sam. She looked at Cian.

She sighed.

Cian tried to meet her gaze. He couldn't. He looked away.

"Ha," Sam said. "Knew it."

Cian slapped him across the back of the head. Sam howled.

Irene shushed him, handed him the toast and milk, and gave Cian a hidden smile.

"Children," Harry said. "I'm surrounded by children."

Like a whipped dog, Sam hunched over his meal, eating in the ravenous bursts that only truly young men can manage. Harry's face revealed pure dismay as he watched crumbs spray across the leather upholstery of the chair. Cian fought a grin.

"I'm sorry we have so little," Irene said. "I'll do a bit of shopping today and make us a proper dinner."

Sam looked up. “Dinner?”

“Get used to it,” Cian said. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Until we’re sure you’re safe,” Harry added. He was staring at a particularly large crumb—practically its own island of toast on the upholstery—but his voice was friendly. “This is for your benefit, Sam. Those people you got involved with, they’re dangerous. They’ll find you and they’ll make sure you can’t tell anyone about what they did to you.”

“Staying here isn’t any safer,” Sam said. He set glass and plate on the coffee table. Milk made a ring around the base of the glass.

Harry’s hands twitched, as though desperate for a towel.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, still staring at the glass.

“What do you think I mean?” Sam asked. He pointed to the cuts to his face, peeled back the collar of his shirt, and stabbed a finger at the burns and bruises to his chest. “This wasn’t just for my benefit, you know. They wanted to know all about you folks.”

“What?” Cian said.

“Yeah. Cian Shea, Irene Lovell, Henry Witte, Pearl Morecott, and some Hun name. Friedrich. Something.”

“Did you—” Harry asked Cian.

Cian shook his head.

“Neither did I,” Irene said.

“And you didn’t say anything until now?” Harry asked.

“Why should I? All I cared about was getting out of there. I didn’t know you from Adam. But then, on the ride back, I started putting things together. A big, dumb-looking mick with a

face like a bad bag of rocks. A fine-looking bird with her nose in the air. A Hun. Starts making sense.”

“Anything else?” Harry asked.

“Did I mention they said the mick was as dumb as he was ugly?”

Irene was covering her mouth, her body rocked by tiny waves.

Cian fixed Sam with a glare.

Sam shrugged and sank back into the chair again. “It was them that said it. Not me.”

“Sam,” Harry said, reaching forward to pluck the crumb from the chair and deposit it on the plate, “until now, I feel like I’ve been very patient with you. But that patience has a limit, and we are quickly approaching it. No more jokes. No more games. What did they want from you? What did they know about us?”

Sam watched Harry for a minute. “They said your name a lot. Like they were scared of you. The others not so much, but you—you, they were almost shitting their pants. Why’s that? You don’t look like much to me.”

Harry didn’t answer.

After a moment, Sam swallowed. “Anyway, I already told you. They wanted to know how I knew the lot of you. If we were friends, if I worked for you, if it was a set up. All that stuff. And they wanted to know why you’d give up the mask. I think they figured it was bait.”

“What did they look like?”

“I don’t know.”

Cian put a hand on Sam’s shoulder. Nothing more, just rested it there.

“God’s truth, I don’t. They had a light in my eyes the whole time, I couldn’t see nothing.”

“Couldn’t see anything,” Irene said.

Sam blinked at her.

“We need to move him,” Harry said. “Before they come looking. Pearl’s place would be best for now. Freddy’s a bit high strung.”

Cian agreed and he didn’t like that he agreed. He tried to keep it quiet, but both Irene and Harry looked at him.

“Did you say something?” Irene asked.

“What was that sound you just made?” Harry asked.

Before Cian had to answer, Sam tried to stand up. Cian pressed him back into the seat, and pain washed over the boy’s face.

“You don’t understand,” Sam said. “I’m trying to tell you. They know everything about you. Where you live, where you work, what you ate for lunch last Sunday. Send me to Pearl, send me to the Hun, it doesn’t matter. They’ll find me as soon as they want to find me. You got to let me go. I’ll clear out of here.”

“First smart thing you’ve said,” Cian said.

Harry shook his head. “Something doesn’t add up. I can’t put my finger on it yet, but I’m not letting him out of my hands until it makes sense.”

Sam glanced up at Cian. “They said he was mad,” Sam said, nodding at Harry. “A total loon. Listen to him, he’s not making any sense. You know I’m right. Let me go.”

Cian gave Sam’s shoulder a squeeze, careful not to hurt the boy, and said, “It’ll be alright, Sam. Have a little faith. In a few days, you’ll be out picking pockets again with no one the wiser.”

Despair stamped itself in Sam’s features. He gave a halfhearted nod.

When Cian looked up, he saw Irene staring at him. There was something in her face. Something completely unreadable to him, something he had seen the night before, in the squalid hole where Sam had been held prisoner.

As though she had seen him naked.

He shrugged and looked away.

Then Irene said, "Wait, Sam. You said they knew everything about us."

Sam nodded.

"Harry, my parents. I have to check on them."

"Go. I'll stay and watch Sam. What about you, Cian?"

His laugh was short and hard. "No, no parents. No family."

Harry frowned. "Nobody connected to you?"

"Maybe the Doyles. I rented a room from them. I'll stop by and take a look."

Harry nodded. "Freddy will be back soon enough."

"Don't leave me with him," Sam said. He grabbed Cian's arm. "Please."

Cian glanced at Irene, who wore shock like the best silk, and Harry, whose face was expressionless. Cian felt sick to his stomach. He peeled Sam's fingers off his arm.

"You'll be fine. Harry's decent enough."

One of Harry's eyebrows shot up."

"And he's not going to hurt you," Cian said. He leveled a firm look at Harry.

Harry shrugged. He looked like a choirboy.

The sick feeling worsened.

"We'll be back tonight," Irene said. She tried for a smile, but it kept slipping.

Cian took her by the arm and led her to the door.

“You boys have fun,” Irene called back.

No answer.

As they started down the stairs, winter rubbed color into Irene’s throat and cheeks and ears. Cian watched her sideways.

He thought about what her lips would taste like.

“What are you looking at?” Irene asked. “Do I have something?” She brushed at her cheeks.

“Nothing.”

“Come by my rooms at the Louisiana after, won’t you?” Irene asked as she hailed a cab. “We’ll come back together?”

“That doesn’t make sense. Let’s just meet here.”

“Oh for God’s sake don’t be so stubborn. Say five? At the Louisiana?”

“It’s completely out of my—”

Irene threw him a kiss and climbed into the cab. “Perfect. Five, then.”

Cian watched the cab carry her away, still trying to figure out what had just happened.

Without an answer, he trudged towards Kerry Patch.

Chapter 33

The sausage shop was closed. Cian knocked three times, huddled in the doorway as a winter wind whipped down the unnamed street. Kerry Patch hadn't changed in the few days he'd been gone. It still looked like the kind of place that wanted to hit you across the back of the head and rifle your pockets. A thin woman with even thinner hair came up the street, leading two children by the hand, and she smiled at Cian. He smiled back. She looked familiar, which meant that he had probably seen her a dozen times on the street. The old Cian, though—the one who had rented this room from the Doyles—hadn't paid much attention to anyone who wasn't bringing him a glass of booze.

He wasn't sure what had happened to that Cian. Maybe that old bastard was dead. Today, with the sun shining, with a wind as cold as Satan's balls cutting his face, Cian felt awake. Awake the way he hadn't felt in a long time. Years, maybe.

How long since he'd used liquor to smash in the back of his brain? A few days? He didn't count the wine; it had only been a few drinks.

He hadn't thought about Corinne. Not once.

Cian turned and knocked again, rather than letting himself think about Corinne. Still no response, which made no sense. Mr. Doyle hardly ever left the shop, and Mrs. Doyle maintained a vocal presence. Perhaps a family emergency. Did they have family?

Cian scrubbed a hand through his hair. The reek from the shop was strong—a rotting meat smell, instead of the cleaners that usually masked it. Maybe the Doyles really were gone.

He went around back, climbed the stairs to his room. The door was still busted from when Bobby Flynn had come looking for Cian. The rail to the steps was still broken too, where

he had shoved Bobby through the wood. Cian didn't let himself look down. He didn't want to see that spot of ground.

The room had been tidied, the bed stripped, the dresser emptied—not that there had been much to begin with. Anything he had left was gone.

Good. Better that way.

He went back down the stairs, into the back of the lot. Nothing on the ground showed where Bobby Flynn had died. The grass had a uniformly trampled look, as though winter had rolled on its back. The garden plot was nothing more than frost-rimed stakes. It might as well have been a graveyard.

He should leave. Right then. The Doyles had gone to visit a relative. Or been called away by a neighbor.

The sun was shining.

The ice on the stakes gleamed.

Cian didn't leave.

He checked the back door. The frame was split, the bolt torn free, the door hanging ajar. A line of snow had drifted in against the new angle of the door, like a refugee fleeing the cold. Cian pushed the door open.

The rotting meat smell was stronger. The kitchen was dark. With the windows shuttered and the fireplace empty, the place felt new, as though Cian had never been there before. A ceramic bowl, covered with a cloth, sat on a floured table.

Cian twitched the cloth aside. Frozen dough lay waiting for his attention.

Bread. She had been making bread.

She made bread almost every day.

Cian shut the door. The darkness was complete, aside from the lines of light that battered the shutters. He fumbled the matches from his pocket. Struck one.

Light and warmth grumbled between his fingers. He lit a taper on the hearth above the mantel.

Leave. Run. That was the smart part of his brain. The part that had been to France and back. The part that had told him, years ago, to run, to leave. The part that had watched and seen what happened when he stayed.

Candlelight rippled on the walls. Cian tried to steady his hand.

He pushed open the door to the shop. The candlelight showed three dark forms. One, slumped over the meat grinder. One in a chair. A sock lay on the floor next to her. One standing upright, face to the door, as though he had forgotten how to open it and had frozen to death trying to figure it out.

In the candlelight, their skin was black.

Cian's breath was like his escaping ghost. Even in the winter, they stank. Not the bloated, summer rot he had known in France. This was more contained. The percolating decay set just out of sight, like potpourri on the stove. He tried to breath through his mouth. The steam of heat and life blurred his vision.

Molly Doyle had wanted to comb his hair.

That was the only thing he could think of.

Cian's hand had become steady. As though he were holding a gun instead of a candle. He moved forward because now he had to know for certain. The candle light wrapped long fingers across Mr. Doyle's face. The sagging cheeks were frozen and stiff, the eyes wide and glassy as they stared into the meat grinder, as though searching for a piece of gristle. There was something

vast and existential about it. As though they were all only gristle caught in some heavenly meat grinder.

Cian swallowed something bitter. Metaphors. He couldn't seem to think straight. His brain had taken a train.

Molly Doyle's face was fixed like a mask from *Oedipus*, Jocasta's face as she realized the truth. Cian wanted to reach out and shut her eyes. No one should have to stare into eternity like that. But he couldn't. Her expression was too terrible.

He knew that look. It was what he felt crawling under his skin when he first realized what the golems were. When he saw the giant spiders, when he met a ghost, when he fought a lizard-man. It was madness. The madness of seeing something impossible.

That was what Jocasta had learned. And Molly Doyle. And Cian himself, if only a little bit. The truth was cosmic and mocking. Better to be mad than stare truth in the muzzle.

Something scraped the boards. Cian jumped. Hot wax splashed his hand. He cursed.

Rats. God damned rats. He needed to get the police here. They wouldn't care about a couple of dead micks in the Patch, but at least they'd take care of the bodies.

Cian took a step toward the front door, trying to identify the dead man from behind. Who had the third one been? An unlucky customer who had been present when the Children arrived? A friend stopping by for a drink? Someone inquiring about the empty room upstairs? The clothes were muddy, as though the man had dragged himself through the dirt before reaching the sausage shop. Maybe a miner, then.

Cian took a step to the side to see the man's face.

The dead man's head turned. Shriveled, lifeless eyes studied Cian.

Bobby Flynn.

Cian darted back. Bobby Flynn moved like a puppet on strings—fast and jerky. The dead man's mouth hung open, revealing a blackened tongue. Rotting fissures split his lips and cheeks. One of the dead man's hands came up and swiped at Cian's face. Cian dodged. He fumbled for the Colt. His fingers were stiff and frozen from the cold. The gun felt like a block of ice.

The light from the candle rocked with Cian's steps. It pooled across Bobby's forehead, his chin, his throat. It left dark wells around his eyes.

It was the eyes that made Cian want to scream.

He choked the sound back.

Bobby lunged again. His fingers caught Cian's coat. With surprising strength, the dead man jerked Cian forward, throwing Cian off balance. The candle tumbled to the ground. Light tilted across Bobby's face.

Dead, withered eyes bore the fullness of the light.

Bobby caught Cian with a punch to the side of the head. The blow knocked holes in Cian's sight. His knees went out, and the only thing holding him up was the dead man's strength. A second punch landed. It sounded like the sea: a crashing, pounding white punctuated by pain.

Cian fired.

He kept firing until he realized he was on his knees. Until he realized he was breathing, and the roar in his head was quieting. Until he realized something heavy was on top of him.

Cian pushed the now twice-dead Bobby Flynn to the ground. This time he watched.

Bobby Flynn didn't get up.

The dead man's face was shattered from three lucky shots. Nobody would recognize Bobby Flynn now. Nobody would mistake this mess of bone and cartilage for the man at Seamus's.

Cian knelt there until the Colt had cooled. He got up and staggered out of the sausage shop. The sun was at the edge of the sky, and the sky had the pallid bruising of a corpse. Cian patted snow on his cheeks, his lips, his neck.

He thought of Molly Doyle's face, and Jocasta's, and the universe.

The snow only helped a little.

Chapter 34

When Irene arrived home, she followed the long drive around to the back of the house. Smoke chugged from one chimney, which meant that her father had decided to indulge a fire, and the scent of wood-smoke made Irene think of childhood winters. Candied apples, her father adding an extra splash of rum to the eggnog when Mother wasn't looking, and the nights of sharing a bed with her grandmother's cold feet. The memories were good ones, but they sat in her stomach like curdled milk.

They know everything, Sam had said.

Irene went around back because she was thinking about Sally, who had died because of the mask. At least Sally had died quickly. What would the Children do if they came back looking for Irene? Or her parents?

It wouldn't be quick. Irene knew that much.

When Irene reached the back of the house, she paused. One of the cellar doors was ajar. Irene's skin pimpled. Nothing to worry about, she told herself. The coal was delivered to the cellar. The house had an old furnace and it went through coal like an old woman through a bag of peanuts.

Perhaps the man who brought the coal had forgotten to shut the cellar.

Perhaps he was still down there.

Irene waited another minute in the freezing afternoon. The sky had darkened steadily to steel.

The man—if there was a man—didn't emerge.

Irene shut the cellar door.

The kitchen door was unlocked, and Irene let herself into the house. Warmth, the smell of nutmeg and dried rosemary, and shadow. The pots winked in the afternoon light that slipped through the windows. Irene wondered if her parents had already found another housekeeper. They probably had—Mother would be helpless, and Father would want dinner on the table when he got home. The thought felt sacrilegious. This was Sally's place.

Irene found a bar of chocolate in the pantry, in Sally's usual hiding spot, behind a jug of vinegar. She broke off a piece and chewed it slowly.

The house was quiet.

Irene set off deeper into the house. The chocolate was waxy and clung to her teeth and throat. She regretted eating it. The lamps were off, and the afternoon light pale and gray, giving everything the sterilized, ethereal air of a museum. Mirrors caught the image of a slender woman buried in a fur coat, her cheeks bright, her eyes shadowed, her hair a wreck. Irene gave the woman a smile and got a smile in return.

From under the door to Father's study came the warm glow of the gaslights. Irene tapped and opened the door.

Father sat in an armchair near the fireplace. A stack of documents sat on the hearth in front of him, and he was feeding the paper to the blaze. On the table next to him lay an overturned pipe, an empty glass, and a bottle of Scotch. The smell of wood-smoke and pipe-smoke was warm as a wool coat.

"Irene," Father said. He stood, dislodging a sheaf of papers to the floor, and stumbled towards her. "God be good, Irene."

"Father," Irene said.

Everything forgotten. Everything forgiven.

She ran towards him.

He stopped her, though, grabbing her arms before she could embrace him. His fingers pinched her, even through the heavy fur coat. When he spoke, the Scotch on his breath was thick and peaty.

“Where is it, Irene? Tell me you’ve brought it with you.”

“What?”

He shook her. “No games, Irene. I was wrong. I admit it. There was a box. Tell me you’ve found it. Tell me, and I’ll take it all back.”

“Father, I don’t—”

“I know you have it. I know you and your new friends have it, Irene. I’m not blind. I’m not deaf. I’m not stupid. Where is it?”

“Father, you’re hurting me.” Irene twisted, trying to pull free. “Mother. Where’s Mother?”

For a moment, she wasn’t sure her father had heard her. His eyes were wide and bloodshot, his breathing like frayed velvet. “Your mother is gone, girl. I sent her away. Somewhere safe.” He squeezed his eyes shut. His hands tightened. “Fucking Jesus, Mary, and Martha, Irene. Where is the fucking box?”

Irene went still.

Father’s eyes flashed open. “You won’t tell me.”

“I don’t know, Father. So much has happened, I was worried, I came back to—”

“Worried. You stupid bitch. You stupid, pathetic cunt.” He shook her. Irene’s teeth clacked together. “The thief then. Where is he? We know you took him from the house. Tell me, right now, and maybe I can pull this wreckage from the fire.”

“You were at the house,” Irene said. Her eyes felt hot and huge. She said each word slowly, as though saying them would delay the truth. “You and Mother. You knew. All this time. And you lied to me. You made me think I—”

“Where is he, Irene?”

She shook her head.

His slap knocked her to the ground. Irene lay there a moment. The study had turned on its side. The fire hung above her, ready to race down and lick the heat from her face.

She stared up. Her father stood over her, his belt in one hand.

And just like that, Irene was a child again. She got onto hands and knees and tried to scramble away.

The first blow caught her at a diagonal, across one shoulder and running down her back. In spite of the padding of the coat, the blow raised a line of fire, and Irene cried out. The next blow was wild, crossing her hips, and then another that caught the back of her head. She pitched forward onto the carpet as the blows continued to rain down, a storm of pain. Her father shrieked and swore.

It lasted a long time. It lasted forever.

But eventually it was over. Irene sobbed into the rug. The crackle of the fire, her father’s heavy breathing, and then the dull clank of the belt buckle striking the floor. Her father’s steps rustled the papers, then quieted against the carpet, and then he was gone.

Chapter 35

Cian sat in the lobby of the Louisiana Grand. He was certain people were looking at him. The bellboys, for example, studied him as they rolled the carts of luggage. They knew a man without a dime in his pockets when they saw one. The officious little man at the front desk, in a neat black suit, stared over at Cian from time to time. How long before they asked him to move on? They couldn't have vagrants filling up the lobby of the Louisiana Grand.

And unfortunately, vagrant was painfully close to the truth.

It was easier to think about empty pockets and bellboys, easier to look at the arrow-straight lines of brass and dark wood and gold-filigree, than think about what he had seen in the Patch. So Cian rubbed his thumb across the embroidered upholstery of the sofa, studied the wrought-iron curves of the heating registers, and thought about money.

And about Irene.

His head ached. It was only half from the dead man's punch.

Four o'clock dragged itself around the lobby and finally disappeared into the street. Five o'clock came in like a man with a pocketful of cash. Cian sat up straight, wishing he'd had a chance to wash up, running fingers through his hair, and generally feeling like a total fool.

Five-fifteen and still no sign of Irene.

At five-thirty, he was picking the embroidery from the sofa with his thumbnail and ignoring the nasty look of the concierge.

The man, though, wasn't dissuaded. He crossed the hall towards Cian, his heels ringing on the marble floor, and planted himself in front of the sofa. He had a speck of lint on one lapel and looked as strong as an old tire.

“Excuse me,” he said.

Cian glanced up and gave the loose embroidery a vicious yank.

The man’s mouth puckered. “May I help you? Are you waiting for someone?”

“Yeah.”

“A guest? May I have his name? I will be sure to tell him you came.”

Cian gave him a smile and stood up. He had at least a foot on the man, and the concierge blinked up at him. His sundial-nose didn’t drop.

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell her myself,” Cian said. He pushed past the man, sending him stumbling. Petty. Satisfying.

Instead of leaving the hotel, though, Cian headed for the elevators. He took it to Irene’s floor and marched to her door.

Maybe she was napping.

If she weren’t here, he’d go to her house.

Cian stopped. Blinked.

Now where in the hell had that idea come from?

He knocked on her door.

No response. He knocked again, rattling the door in its frame.

Cian waited. A minute, then two. As he was about to leave, he heard the rustle of cloth from inside the room. Then silence. The silence dragged out.

“Irene, open the damn door. I know you’re in there.”

The silence was a held breath. That was when he was certain she was in there.

He pounded again.

“Irene. You can sleep later. We need to get back to Harry’s.”

Still silence.

Cian let out an explosive breath and started hammering on the door. “If I break this thing, I’m going to have them put it on your tab, Irene Lovell. Now open this door before I—”

The door opened a crack.

“Well. That’s better.”

“Cian, I’m not feeling well,” Irene said. He couldn’t see her through the crack in the door, but her voice was dead, like smoke from a cold fire. “Just go by yourself. I’ll see you in a day or two. When I’m better.”

“What’s wrong?” Cian pushed the door open, ignoring Irene’s protests.

The room was dark, with the gaslights turned down and the drapes drawn. Cian raised the lights and started swearing.

Irene stood in front of him, wearing nothing more than a camisole, bloomers, and stockings rolled to her knees. Part of his brain swallowed every detail and stored it for later: her shoulders, her breasts, her legs. The other part noticed the important details.

A red mark in the shape of a hand darkening on her cheek. Bruises marking her arms and collarbone. Red eyes and nose.

And the way she stood. Arms loose around herself, as though she hurt too much even to touch herself.

“Who did this to you?”

“Cian, I’m not dressed. You need to—”

He stepped towards her, and she stepped back, until he pinned her against one of the walls. She flinched as she bumped into it. Then she stood there, staring up at Cian, her breath like a windstorm.

“Who did this to you? I’m going to tear him apart.”

She shook her head. It took him a minute to realize she was crying.

This close, he could smell the faint perfume she still wore, and her sweat, and the lingering scent of her coat. Through the thin camisole, the fresh bruises across her back showed. Cian swallowed. His hands ached, and he realized they were clenched. He uncurled his fingers and took Irene’s arms the way he might have handled a sparrow with a broken wing.

The bruises covered the inside of her arms. She had tried to defend herself.

He had to take slow breathes to keep his grip light.

“You need a warm bath,” he said. His voice was coming from somewhere far away, from someone calm, someone who wasn’t boiling over with rage. “And aspirin. And something to sleep.”

“Cian, I want you to go.”

“Sit down, Irene,” he said, guiding her to a chair. “I’ll start the water.”

She slapped his hands away. For a moment, her breath was furious. And then she slapped him. Twice, both times hard enough to spark stars in his vision. When she brought her hand up again, he caught her wrist.

Like catching a falling leaf.

“Please go,” she said. “I don’t want you to see me like this.”

And then she started sobbing.

He didn’t dare embrace her. Not with all those marks to her body. But he wanted to. Every inch of him wanted to fold her in his arms, to wipe away her tears, to protect her.

Instead, her rubbed the sting from his cheeks. In a voice that was practically a growl he said, “Damn it, Irene. I know you’re strong. And I know you’re smart, and independent, and all that. But just let me take care of you once. Tonight.”

He didn’t know if she heard him, but she didn’t resist as he helped her to the chair. He got the bath as hot as it went. Then he helped her to the bathroom.

His fingers were shaking as he took the hem of the camisole.

With a trace of her old spirit, Irene said, “I can undress myself, thank you very much, Cian Shea.”

He laughed. It came out raw and wrong, but at least it was a laugh. “I’ll run to the pharmacy.”

“There’s money in my clutch.”

And that was a kick to a man’s balls. So much for taking care of her.

He left her in the bathroom. He took money from her clutch. There was plenty of it. More than he’d ever seen in one place in his life. He ran to the pharmacy and got what he needed, and then he ran back to the hotel. In spite of the cold, he was hot and sweating by the time he reached Irene’s room. He let himself back in and locked the door.

The gaslights had been lowered again, and the room was almost pitch black. It took him a minute for his eyes to adjust, and then he went into the set of rooms, moving carefully through the sitting room and into the bedroom. Irene lay on her stomach on the bed, wrapped in a fluffy white robe. Her camisole lay on the floor like a flag of surrender.

He found a glass, mixed up the sleeping powder, and carried it to the bed with the aspirin.

Irene looked up at him. Her eyes were wet and shining in the ambient light. Damp hair clung to her neck and cheek. She didn’t move, didn’t speak.

Cian brushed a curl of hair behind her ear and proffered the glass.

With Cian's help, Irene managed to sit up long enough to drink the mixture and swallowed the aspirin. Then she lay down again, still on her stomach, her head turned away from Cian.

"Thank you," she said. The words were so quiet they might have come from the moon.

"I'll be in the other room," Cian said. "If you need anything."

She nodded.

There should have been something else he could do. Something to take the pain away, something to pour life and light back into her face, something that would make everything right again.

Helplessness sat in Cian's stomach like a knife.

When her breathing evened out into sleep, Cian moved back towards the sitting room. On his way, in the dark, he caught the corner of a tower of boxes. He fumbled with them, trying to catch them before they fell. They were all flat, rectangular boxes—the kind he'd seen in the windows of stores like Famous-Barr and Stix.

She'd been shopping.

He managed to quench a smile before he made it out of the room.

In the sitting room, Cian kicked off his boots, took off his coat, and stretched out on the sofa in his shirtsleeves and trousers. One big toe stared back at him from a hole in his sock.

The sofa was too small. That was starting to become a pattern in Cian's life.

It took a long time before Cian could sleep. When his eyes finally shut, though, he had decided—in perfect detail—what he was going to do to whoever had hurt Irene.

Chapter 36

The next morning, Cian woke to the smell of coffee. And bacon. And something warm and buttery. He heard muffled voices at the door, and his eyes popped open. It took him a moment to orient himself: the gold leaf decorations, the dark wood, the elaborate ironwork.

The Louisiana Grand. Irene.

Cramped and aching from sleeping on the too-small couch, Cian tried to stand up, only to have pins and needles sweep out his legs. He ended up lying on the floor next to the sofa, groaning and trying to work feeling back into his lower quarters.

With a rattle of china, Irene pushed a cart into the room. She still wore the bathrobe, but there was color in her face again, and she had taken time to comb her hair. The cart itself was almost as interesting as Irene. It held several covered trays which were giving off the most wonderful smells.

When she saw Cian on the floor, Irene smiled, and Cian almost forgot the bruises.

“I would have sworn you were on the sofa a moment ago,” she said.

“I’m built a bit big for your furniture. I thought I’d try something else.”

Irene raised an eyebrow. “It didn’t keep you from sleeping, if the snoring last night was any evidence.”

Cian flushed and got to his feet. He fought the urge to cover the bare toe and the hole in his sock. In any event, it was too late—Irene would have already noticed.

Her eyebrow quirked again, and Cian thought he saw her struggling with a smile, but all she said was, “Hungry?”

They ate sitting on the sofa. Irene had outdone herself—pancakes and bacon and eggs with runny yolks and crisp toast with butter. Real butter. The last time Cian had had that was in France. There was even a carafe of milk, beaded with moisture.

When they'd finished—which was to say, when there was nothing left but crumbs and a smear of yolk on the plates—Cian settled back into the sofa and let out a contented breath.

“Full?” Irene said.

“What?”

“What do you mean what? I just asked if you were full.”

“Yes, but the way you said it—” He cut off when he saw her smile. “Thank you for breakfast,” he said.

“Thank you. For last night.”

“Irene—”

“No, Cian. I’m not going to say another word about it.”

She stood up, and the robe slipped, revealing an expanse of her back that was already starting to purple. Cian sucked in a breath, but by the time he had stood up, Irene had pulled the robe back into place. She eyed him with a cool, challenging look.

He held up his hands.

“Just let me dress and then you can have a bath and we’ll—”

“No,” Cian said.

“Fine, you don’t have to bathe.” She wrinkled her nose. “But—”

“I meant no, you aren’t going to get dressed. You’re spending the day here. Resting.”

“Excuse me?”

“Irene, I might be big and dumb, but I’m not that dumb. You can barely walk, even with that cart holding you up.”

“I don’t need you or any man telling me what I can or can’t do, Cian Shea.”

He rolled his eyes. “Go ahead. If you can walk to your room without falling down or clutching at the walls for support, I’ll shut my mouth.”

“If you were wise, you’d shut it anyway.”

He grinned. “No one ever said I was wise.”

Irene muttered something under her breath. If Cian caught it correctly, there were some shockingly vulgar expressions in the mix.

She took two steps, shaking like an old woman in a high wind.

Cian took her arm, one hand cupping her side, and helped her the rest of the way.

“Bed,” he said.

“Perhaps for an hour or two. And if you’re wearing one of those big, dumb smiles, Cian, I’ll—”

“No smiles. Promise.”

When he’d settled her in bed with more aspirin, Irene gestured at the pile of boxes.

“You were busy,” Cian said, stacking the boxes on the bed. “Did you leave anything for anyone else?”

“Very funny.” She peeked in one box, set it aside, and then checked another. When she’d found the ones she wanted, she passed two of them to Cian. “Open them.”

“Why?”

Irene drummed her nails on one of the remaining boxes.

Cian lifted the lid on the top box. He swore when he saw what was inside.

“Before you say anything—” Irene began.

“No.” He set the box back on the bed. “Thank you. Very much. But no.”

“And why not?”

“Because,” Cian fumbled for an explanation. “It’s not—you shouldn’t—”

“Cian Shea. Open that box right now. Unless you’re going to say no to a woman who was beaten within an inch of her life last night.”

When Cian looked at her, he saw that her eyes were wide, her lower lip trembling. His knees crumbled.

“Irene—” It was a weak, ineffectual protest, and it died almost as soon as it began.

Her face transformed into a smile. “Go take a bath and shave. And take these.” She handed him the rest of the boxes. A mountain of boxes.

Cian stood there a moment, juggling the last of his pride with the mountain of boxes.

“Go,” Irene said. “Now.”

So he went and bathed and shaved, and Cian had to admit that he felt a hundred times better afterward. The boxes held clothes. Fine silk shirts as white and soft as a cloud. Crisp collars. Wool trousers thick enough to stop a bullet but that didn’t itch or chafe. Seven shirts. Three suits. Two hats.

Socks.

New shoes.

Twice Cian started taking the new clothes off. It was ridiculous, letting a woman buy clothes for him, as though he were some sort of kept man. It was even more ridiculous letting Irene push him around like that, making him dance just because she had a pretty mouth and those deep, dark eyes.

The clothes Harry had given him were fine. A bit stiff and fragrant from three days' wear, but perfectly suitable, and they hadn't come from Irene.

Each time, though, Cian's resolve crumbled, and when he finally left the bathroom, he was wearing the new clothes.

Irene's smile could have started a fire.

"Well, well," she said.

Cian's cheeks were hot. He cleared his throat. "They fit very well."

"I can see that."

"Um, yes. Well. Thank you, again. This was very kind of you. As soon as I—"

"Don't you dare say you'll pay me back."

"Don't be foolish, Irene. These clothes must have cost a fortune."

"It's my money. I'll spend it however I please. Consider it a thank you for saving my life."

"If you think I saved your life because I thought you'd give me a few suits—"

"Cian."

He paused, trying to recover the strand of his tirade. "If you think—"

Irene yawned, and he noticed the empty glass on the nightstand. "I'm a bit sleepy, Cian." She closed her eyes and snuggled deeper into the mound of blankets. "Say you'll stay."

Cian stared at her for a minute, trying to figure out what had just happened. Her breathing was soft and even. He mentally ran through his argument one last time, telling Irene exactly what she could do with these fancy new clothes and her money.

Then he hung up his new jacket, sat on the bed, and leaned back against the headboard.

Irene shifted and slid her hand under his arm.

They spent the day in the hotel room. Irene slept most of the time. Cian read the newspaper and found time to send a message to Harry, letting him know—without too many details—what had happened. A message came later that day from Harry telling them to stay safe and return when they could.

When Irene wasn't asleep, though, she was impossible, as always—making ridiculous demands for chocolates and sweets that had Cian running to the pharmacy or the concierge twice an hour. He tried to refuse. Once. It had ended with Cian coming back with a cheap silk rose that he had found in a shop two streets over as an apology.

In the late afternoon, Irene woke, bathed again, and dressed. A lavender dress accented with white flowers and ruff, it was more conservative than some of the dresses Cian had seen Irene wear, but it covered her shoulders and arms and hid the bruises. She didn't wear any jewelry—that surprised Cian a bit, but he liked it—but at some point she'd put on a spray of perfume, and the scent was enough to make Cian's blood pound.

“Well?” Irene asked.

He tried to smooth out his voice. “I thought we agreed you were going to rest.”

“Really. That's all you have to say?”

“What?” Cian said.

“Nothing.”

“No. What's wrong?”

“Nothing. Let's go downstairs and have dinner. I assume that's not too far. You won't mind helping me?”

“Are you sure? Maybe we should order up. Or I could bring something back.”

“Cian, I’m starving. And I’m not going to eat like a barbarian hunched over the coffee table. Now I’m going down to dinner. You can sit up here all night for all I care.”

She tried to march to the door, but it was barely more than a pained hobble. Cian stood up and held out his arm, doing his best to assist her as they made their way to the elevator. Even with his help, Irene’s progress was slow, and Cian’s thoughts turned to whoever had done this to her.

“You’re squeezing my hand particularly hard, Cian,” Irene whispered as they rode the elevator down. “Are you trying to break every bone I have? Or just reminding me that you’re there?”

Cian flushed and made himself loosen his grip. “Sorry. I was thinking about something else.”

The dining room was a sea of brass and crystal, with white tablecloths floating like blessed islands. Everywhere men in suits and women with perfect hair and perfect dresses, their voices forming rolling waves, laughter like storms on the horizon. Rich folk. People who had money and were comfortable in it. People like Irene.

“You’re doing it again,” Irene said as a waiter guided them to a booth. Cian helped her sit, noticing her wince as she slid onto the red leather. Cian sat opposite her.

“What?” he asked.

“Making that face. The one like you just saw the man who killed your father.” She paused. “You don’t have that gun with you, do you?”

Cian studied the room and didn’t look at her.

“Oh, Cian,” she said.

“Well someone has to think about keeping us safe. We can’t all spend our lives in places like this, with waiters tripping over themselves to bring us whatever we want, laughing as we talk about the stock market or the railroads or whatever the hell people talk about.”

“Keep your voice down.”

“Why? So I don’t embarrass you?”

“You’re embarrassing yourself,” Irene hissed as the waiter returned.

Cian set the menu down on the table and tried to study it. He didn’t trust his hands. The words swam in front of him.

He ordered something. He had no idea what. Most of the dishes were unrecognizable.

Irene went on at length with the waiter, asking about wines by names, laughing. When the waiter left, Irene looked over at Cian and sighed.

Cian stared out at the dining room and ignored her.

There was just so much damn money here. The huge chandeliers with electric lighting. How many families in Kerry Patch could live off what it cost to light this place? Hell, for that matter, how many families could live off the damn suit Cian was wearing? The collar felt like a noose and he worked his finger under it. Everything here was expensive. The silverware was real silver. The plates were china. And there was so much of it—more forks and spoons than any man needed, big plates, small plates, big glasses, small glasses.

When the wine came, Cian took the bottle from the waiter and poured himself and Irene a large glass each. Cian missed the waiter’s shocked look until Irene waved the man away.

“Great,” Cian said. “I did that wrong too.”

“Not wrong,” Irene said. “Just different.”

“Everything’s different here. What am I supposed to do with this tiny little knife? You can’t cut anything with that.”

“It’s for the butter.”

Cian took a drink. And then a second.

Irene barely touched hers.

The wine was good—damn good, in fact, which meant it was expensive too. Cian swallowed it like a man trying to drink the sea. The wine started hitting back, hammering at the knot in Cian’s shoulders. Irene watched him, tracing the stem of her glass with one finger.

Her eyes narrowed as she focused on something behind Cian.

“What?” Cian asked.

“I thought—”

Cian turned to look, and Irene said, “No. Don’t look.”

“Well, how am I supposed to see who it is?”

“Never mind. I don’t know who it was, he just looked familiar. He’s gone now anyway.”

Ignoring Irene’s sounds of exasperation, Cian craned his neck, trying to see anyone that might be familiar. Aside from the woman in the next booth, who had a sagging chin and stared at Cian like a bird inspecting a worm, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. He glared at the woman. She shoved a frantic spoonful of soup into her mouth, and Cian dropped back into his seat.

The salad came next. Cian seized the closest fork, but Irene shook her head.

The waiter eyed Cian, as though studying some new specimen that had crawled up through the sewers.

Irene held up a smaller fork. “This one.”

The waiter hadn’t left. He was still watching Cian.

“Need something, buddy?” Cian asked.

Color rushed into Irene’s cheeks. “Thank you, we’re fine now.”

The waiter nodded at her and left.

“There’s no need to be rude, Cian.”

“He was staring at me.”

“He was probably wondering if you wanted any help.”

“It’s a damn salad. I don’t need any help eating a salad.”

Irene mumbled something.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“No, go on. What?”

“I said clearly you do. This is the salad fork. Not the one you had.”

Cian set the fork down. He wiped his hands on the napkin. Good, solid cloth. He twisted it and threw it onto the seat next to him.

“What?” Irene asked. “Now you’re angry?”

“I’m not angry.”

“You’re red as a beet.”

“I’m not angry.”

“You sound angry.”

“I’m not fucking angry,” Cian shouted.

Silence descended, smothering the clatter of forks and knives, the voices, the laughter.

Irene stared at him, pale and composed and distant as a painting.

“I’m just clearly not cut out for such a fancy place,” Cian said in a lower voice.

He stalked towards the door. Voices began to pick up, here and there, all of them alive with curiosity. People stared. Cian didn't care.

Irene didn't come after him.

The lobby of the hotel, with its vaulted ceiling and brass designs and gold leaf, was cool and quiet in comparison to the dining room. A man in a long coat had just come in from the cold and was shaking snow from his shoes, and a bored clerk straightened up at the front desk, but otherwise Cian was alone.

He shoved his hands into his pockets because he was still shaking.

Outside. He needed fresh air. A walk. And to be somewhere else.

As he pushed through the hotel doors, a blast of cold hit him, cutting through the suit jacket and making Cian wish for the heavy coat he'd left upstairs. He took another pair of steps before regretting his decision.

It didn't matter though. He couldn't go back. Not now.

"Cold night to be out," a familiar voice said as Cian turned to head up the sidewalk.

Cian looked up from the pavement.

Irving Harper smiled. He had a revolver aimed at Cian's chest and a pair of cuffs in his free hand.

Chapter 37

The red leather upholstery of the booth cupped Irene's form like a kid glove. She had always loved the dining room here. Her father had brought her several times, along with Mother. Once, there had been a ball. The chandeliers, the scent of the women's perfume, the sweat and heat from the dance, it had seemed like something from a children's book.

She had always loved the dining room here.

Now, though, men and women at the other tables stared at her. She knew many of them by name. The Davies, two tables to the right, studying their tablecloth when she looked at them. Mrs. Wolhampton, her eyes magnified behind an immense pair of spectacles, studying Irene without any hint of shame. Judy and Ruby Williams, sisters and the city's biggest gossips, sitting like cats who had come across—through no effort of their own—a bowl of cream.

By tomorrow, everyone would know.

Father would know.

The red leather upholstery only accentuated the bruises.

Irene downed the glass of wine. It landed like a boxer, throwing quick jabs at the back of her head, cracking the lights and her too-tight nerves. She poured herself another and drank more slowly.

She wondered if Cian had noticed. It was the same wine he had taken from that cellar. She had thought—

But then, she had thought so many things.

After the second glass, when the wine had settled into her ears with a burgundy whisper, she picked at the salad. When the waiter passed her table—his eyes sweeping over her, the

salads, the empty seat—Irene waved for him to remove the salads. The man hesitated, studying the second place setting, obviously trying to decide whether to bring two meals or one. He looked like a mortician in his cheap black suit.

The one she'd bought Cian had been much nicer.

Irene met the waiter's gaze and said nothing. She wasn't going to help him make his decision.

After the waiter left, she sat there, tracing a purpling ring on the tablecloth left by a drop of wine. The crackling energy of the room had lowered, but not enough. Cian had thrown chum into shark-infested waters. St. Louis's social scene had just gotten its dose of winter gossip.

Irene couldn't tell why she cared so much.

"Irene?" a voice said.

She glanced up. The world had taken on a shimmer from the wine, and she blinked against the brilliance of the chandeliers. Dark hair. A flash of a boyish smile.

"Patrick? What are you doing here?"

He laughed. "I admit, the Louisiana Grand is not one of my normal haunts. I'm afraid I'm a bit under-dressed." He wore trousers with ragged cuffs and a heavy winter coat. The kind of clothes that marked him as a man from Kerry Patch. The kind of clothes Cian had been wearing when she met him. "I was looking for you." He glanced over at the waiter, who was coming towards them with a disapproving look on his face. "I don't think I'm welcome."

"I'm tired of this place anyway," Irene said. She stood and grabbed the bottle of wine and both glasses. The waiter stopped, staring at her and then at Patrick. "Have the food sent up to my room," Irene said, not bothering to lower her voice.

The waiter nodded. She knew what he was thinking. She knew what they were all thinking.

Even with the wine fuzzing the pain, though, it was hard for Irene to walk. She made it out of the dining room before she felt her knees wobble. Patrick slid an arm around her. Up close, he smelled good. Masculine, with a trace of soap. He took the bottle and glasses in one hand and laughed.

“A bit too much to drink?” he asked as they made their way to the elevator.

“Not enough,” Irene said.

“I’ve helped some drunks in my time,” Patrick said as they rode up. “But none quite so pretty.”

“I’ve seen the men in Kerry Patch,” Irene said. “I think you’re not being fair.”

Patrick laughed again. The tension in Irene unraveled like cheap yarn, and suddenly she was smiling. A drunken smile, yes, but a smile nonetheless. It was easy with Patrick. He was handsome and young. He had nice shoulders and nice hands, and she liked how it felt to have him stand close, one arm around her.

He helped her to her room. Irene took more aspirin, but she ignored the sleeping powder for now. Instead, she lay on the chaise longue, watching Patrick through half-closed eyes. He studied the room, shrugging out of his coat and turning in a circle.

Yes. Very nice shoulders.

“Do you mind?” he asked, gesturing to a chair.

Irene shook her head.

The way he watched her opened a pit in Irene’s stomach. There was no mistaking what she saw in Patrick’s eyes.

Not like that idiot Cian.

A knock at the door interrupted them. A different waiter had brought a cart with two covered trays, which Irene directed into the sitting room. The waiter laid out place settings on the coffee table and left without a word.

“I don’t suppose you’d mind eating with me?” Irene asked. “I’m afraid I’ve ordered too much.”

Questions were all over Patrick’s face, but all he said was, “Who says no to a meal with a beautiful woman?”

Cian had ordered the filet mignon and potatoes au gratin, which Irene set in front of Patrick. She had a cutlet of veal in white wine and winter squash.

As they ate, Patrick told stories and jokes, pouring wine for both of them, until the heat from being near Patrick had become a white-hot roar under Irene’s skin. His boyish smile never faltered, his easy manners never slipped, and Irene found herself leaning over the small table to be closer to him, to laugh at his witty comments, to bask in the attention he showered on her.

When they’d finished eating, Irene moved to the sofa next to Patrick. He moved to make space for her, but only a few inches, and their legs pressed together. Irene put a hand on his knee.

Patrick’s smile faded like the sunset. He took her hand and stood up.

Irene raised an eyebrow. “You did come looking for me, Patrick. Didn’t you?”

He cleared his throat. “I did. Believe me, I did.”

“My hand is the least interesting part of me.”

Patrick risked another smile. He didn’t let go of her hand. “Irene, I certainly didn’t come here to get you drunk.”

“I was halfway there on my own.”

“Do you want to tell me why you had two meals, but you were sitting alone at that table?”

“No.”

“All right.” He squeezed her hand. “Well, to be honest with you, tonight has been lovely. More than I could have hoped for with a woman like you. But I didn’t come here for this. I came here because I need your help.”

“My help? Are you sure you aren’t thinking of someone else?”

“Yes, your help, Irene.” Patrick paused, and suddenly there was something incredibly vulnerable in his expression. He dropped her hand and paced to the other side of the room. “You remember—that night, when I found, you remember that I told you I wasn’t looking for you. I was out for my own reasons.”

Irene shivered. The fire under her skin had gone out, as though she had jumped in the Mississippi. “You told me about the binding. You saved me from whatever it was that had been following me.”

“Yes, but only by chance. You see, Irene, I’m in trouble.” He swallowed. The color had left his cheeks. He dropped onto the chaise, and he might as well have been on a train, growing more and more distant by the moment. “I’ve made mistakes. A lot of them.”

Through the wine, Irene’s brain began to click like an engine trying to start.

The revolver. Where had she put her revolver?

Patrick looked up and shock crossed his face. “God, Irene. You look frightened half to death. I—my God, I’m so sorry. I’ll leave you.”

“No, Patrick. Wait. I was surprised. What’s wrong?”

“It’s a long story, and the central message is that I’m a stupid, shortsighted fool. I run my bar, you know? It’s not legal, and it wasn’t the best business even before the Volstead Act. I know that, I know the kind of trouble it brings. But once the city went dry, it was a good way to make money. My parents are dead, and I’m the oldest of eight children. I needed to put food on the table for those kids.” He paused, tried for a smile, but it slid off like hot grease. “I’m making myself sound like a saint, and that’s not the truth at all. Anyway, I got into business with some men who could bring in the booze. At first, things were smooth. I paid, they provided the drink, and everyone was happy.

“Then things started to change. Someone else took over their operations. Prices went higher. Seamus and his boys got upset and tried to do something about it, but they came back like whipped dogs, and Seamus wasn’t ever right again. Then, they started demanding more. Not just money. Help. These men that were bringing in the liquor, they wanted to bring in other things too. They wanted to use Seamus’s rig.”

“Guns?”

“Sometimes. Other stuff too. I don’t know. Sometimes it would be crates and crates that would disappear. Sometimes it would be one or two small boxes that they handled as though they were made of glass. They never told me what was in them. But I handled most of them because they would hide the stuff inside the casks of booze, or in the crates of whiskey, always mixed in with something else. They used me to bring things into the city without telling Seamus about it. Maybe they thought Seamus would want more money. Maybe they just wanted fewer people to know about it.”

“And then what happened?”

“I got greedy. I knew they needed me. I knew they didn’t want Seamus to know. Hell, I knew they didn’t want anybody to know. When I took the next delivery, I only paid half, and I told them they wouldn’t be getting any more from me. I was paying for the booze with my silence. That’s what I told them. They didn’t argue. They didn’t threaten me.” His voice cracked. He stood up and turned to the window. It was a pair of minutes before he spoke again. “I came home three nights later. My sister Anna was gone. The other kids didn’t know where she was. She’s only sixteen years old.”

Irene kept silent.

Patrick turned around and wiped his cheeks. “They showed up a week later. They didn’t ask for anything. They didn’t say anything. They just sat at a table at the bar, drinking and laughing. I paid them the rest of the money right then. They took it. They still never said a word about Anna.”

“Patrick.”

“She’s not dead. I kept looking. I found her. I don’t know why they didn’t kill her. Maybe to use against me if I screwed up again. Maybe they just didn’t think it was worth the trouble.”

“Where is she?”

“A brothel. A damn whorehouse on the south side of the city. It belongs to the Dane. I tried to get in there once, after I found out. The Dane’s got men there. They knew who I was and knocked the shit out of me. They told me if I tried to go back, they’d kill her.”

“I am so sorry, Patrick.”

“Be sorry for Anna. I deserve this—I got myself into it. Anna, though. Anna didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Truly? Irene, I can’t thank you enough. You have no idea—I’ve tried and tried.”

Irene felt a flush of warmth. He wanted her. He needed her. She could help him when nobody else could. “What can I do?”

“The Dane has contacts up and down the city, and he’s bought off enough people in the mayor’s office that the police aren’t going to make a stink about that brothel. But if someone with enough clout were to say something, if someone started putting pressure on the police in public, talking to the papers about the corruption in the south city, that sort of thing—they’d have to do something. They’d close that place down, take Anna away from there. She might be in jail for a while, but that’s better than where she is now.”

“Patrick, I’m flattered that you think I have that kind of influence, but I’ve been gone from St. Louis for years. A few people will remember me, but not many. I could speak to the Women’s League—”

He was shaking his head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t speak clearly. It’s your father, Irene. I need you to speak to him on my behalf.”

Chapter 38

As they climbed into the back of the police van, Cian stumbled. Harper caught him.

“These aren’t necessary, you know,” Cian said, glancing at the handcuffs.

“Just a precaution.”

Harper urged him up into the van and climbed onto the opposite bench. A policeman shut the doors, and a moment later the van grumbled forward. Harper didn’t look any different. Same stained suit and coat. Same bulldog jowls with heavy stubble. Same hard eyes. Sleepless eyes. He stared at Cian like a man watching paint dry.

Cian shivered as the cold settled into him. He regretted leaving his good, heavy coat at the hotel. He regretted the fight with Irene. He regretted, in particular, having walked right into Irving Harper’s waiting arms.

In general, he regretted a lot of things.

Harper hadn’t moved. He slouched on the far bench like a disreputable statue.

“Don’t suppose you have a blanket?” Cian asked. “I forgot my coat.”

Harper didn’t even blink.

Cian sighed. “I didn’t think so.”

After that, the only sound was the tires scraping slush off the pavement, and Cian’s teeth clicking together, and the occasional metallic thud when the van found a bump. Cian settled back as best he could, but the bench was hard, the wall of the van freezing, and his hands starting to lose feeling. Harper had put the cuffs on tight. Much tighter than necessary.

“You knew him,” Cian said. “Dunn. What did you say? Were you friends?”

“Keep talking and I’ll break your jaw.”

“No, not friends. No offense, Captain Harper, but you’ve got all the charm and grace of trench-foot. Harley wasn’t like that. He was all smiles and laughter and sunshine. Besides, you’re too old.”

Harper’s eyes were dark beads.

“Not family,” Cian said. “I doubt they would have sent someone from his family. What then? One of his officers who took a shine to him? Or maybe you just knew him from a distance, maybe you liked to think about crawling into his bunk at night, finding out what all those French girls were so happy about.” Cian gave a hard, tight grin. “Is that it, Captain? You should have seen the last girl. The one he was with when I shot his fucking head off. Her name was Corinne. If you knew how happy he made her—”

The blocky form of Captain Irving Harper moved much faster than Cian expected. One moment, the captain was slumped on the bench. The next, he stood over Cian, twisting Cian’s head back with one hand, bringing his other hand down in a fist.

Right before the captain’s blow landed, something struck the van. The vehicle tilted to the side, one set of wheels leaving the ground. The captain’s blow grazed Cian’s chin, snapping his head to the side. Bells rang behind Cian’s eyes. Through the tumult, he had the sudden sensation of weightlessness, as though he’d been thrown from a horse.

Then a crash. The screech of metal. A shower of sparks, the only light in the darkness. Harper’s weight on top of Cian. The smell of pipe smoke and old wool. The van slid for a few moments more and came to a jarring halt.

The van lay on its side. Cian was on his back, pinned to the ground by Harper. The man’s weight and the heavy, stinking wool suffocated Cian. He grunted, gasped for breath, and kicked and twisted until he freed himself from beneath Harper.

The captain dropped to the ground. Still.

Then silence. Only the rasp of Cian's harsh breathing. He clamped his teeth shut, blinked his eyes clear. Tried to listen.

From the front of the van, the sound of a door opening. Then a gunshot and a scream.

Shit. Holy shit.

Harper still wasn't moving.

Cian turned to face the doors. With his hands still cuffed behind his back, he fumbled through Harper's pockets, searching for the key. He found a pipe that spilled crumbling tobacco into his hands, and a stick of gum, a ball of lint big enough to make a sweater. Cian inched backwards, reaching for the other pocket.

Something scraped through the ice outside the van.

Fingers numb, prickling with trapped blood, Cian searched through Harper's other pocket. A handful of change, a box of matches, and then—the tiny key. Cian pulled it from Harper's pocket.

The dragging, scraping steps came closer. Something dragged along the bottom of the van with a screech.

Cian searched for the keyhole. He slid the key inside. Turned.

The key slipped from his fingers and dropped from the keyhole.

God and Mary and Michael and St. fucking Patrick.

The screech of metal on metal ended. The silence was worse.

Cian dragged his hands along the side of the van, searching for the key. One of the doors bent, as though gripped by a massive hand, crumpling inwards. Moonlight and gaslight filtered into the back of the van.

Metal glittered.

Cian swept up the key and jammed it into the keyhole. This time, the right cuff popped open. He reached back, trying to find Harper's gun.

The van door ripped free with a whine.

Against the relative darkness of the street, Cian could make out few details. A gas streetlight two blocks away, a few single-story buildings, the stink of hot metal. Framed in the ruined doorway of the van stood a massive figure, and the distant gaslight left iridescent ripples across scales.

Cian's throat closed. He'd seen this kind of thing before.

It was the same as the monster that had almost gutted him in the alley.

The monster slid into the van, crawling over the benches. Cian scooted backwards. The monster pinned him against the wall of the van. Harper's body was right next to Cian.

Light caught and kindled in the monster's amber eyes. Vertical slits widened and narrowed. The creature sniffed. One clawed hand pressed Cian against the wall.

"Where is he?" the creature asked.

The words were distorted, barely intelligible, and drawn out with a hiss.

Harper's jacket had fallen open. In the holster under his arm, the butt of a revolver showed.

The creature pressed harder against Cian's chest. Pain exploded through Cian.

"Where is he? We know you have him."

"Who?" Cian gasped.

The pressure eased. Stars danced in front of Cian's eyes.

He wondered how many ribs were broken.

“The thief.”

Cian grabbed the revolver, swept it up, and pressed the barrel against the side of the creature’s head. He pulled the trigger.

At the last moment, the creature tried to pull away. The shell still took off the top half of its scaly head.

Slime and bit of brain and scales spattered Cian’s face. He shoved the dying abomination off of him. For a moment, the creature writhed on the floor of the van. Then it was still.

Cian slumped against the wall of the van. Just a minute. Just long enough to wipe his face, catch his breath, and feel his heart settle somewhere back into his chest. Then he pulled the matches from Harper’s pocket and struck one.

Harper had a gash across his forehead and blood across his face, but his pulse was strong and his breathing even. Tucked into the back of the man’s trousers was the Colt, which Cian took. He returned Harper’s revolver.

Then he climbed out of the ruined van. They sat on a quiet street that Cian didn’t recognize. Businesses that were shut for the night, an abandoned lot. The perfect place to knock over a police van and do some killing.

In the middle of the street lay the shredded remains of the policeman who had been driving. Cian thought he would vomit. His stomach flipped and heaved.

But after a minute, nothing came out, so Cian wiped his lips and his forehead.

The creature had scented him. It had known to ask about Sam.

Cian started for the Louisiana Grand.

Chapter 39

Nothing had changed at the hotel. That was the thing about rich people, Cian figured. The world might be burning to ash around them, but as long as the wine and the veal and the music kept coming, they wouldn't bat an eye. Nero. He'd heard something like that, about Nero. A Roman something. Emperor.

In the lobby of the hotel, the green slime from the dead monster was more obvious. It dried to a crusty green-brown, staining the new suit. Irene would be furious. It would be another fight he would lose.

If she were alive, if she were all right, he'd lose that fight gladly.

The elevator crawled up the building. When the doors opened on Irene's floor, Cian sprinted for her room, dodging a dark-haired maid with an armful of towels and a tuxedoed waiter rolling an empty cart.

Maid and waiter both stared at him. Cian realized he already had the Colt out.

He didn't care. When he reached Irene's door, he pounded on it.

"Irene, open up. You're in danger." Another staccato of pounding. "Irene!"

The door swung open, and Cian pushed into the room.

And then he realized Patrick Hannafy was standing in the doorway. In his shirtsleeves.

Irene appeared in the sitting room. She was flushed, a smile on her face, looking alive and beautiful and happy. When she saw Cian, the smile went out like a cheap light.

"What the hell is this?" Cian asked, looking from her to Patrick.

"What are you doing here?" Irene said.

A sound came from the hallway. Cian glanced back the way he had come.

Two men in trench coats marched down the hall. They were huge men. With their collars turned up and their hats pulled low, their features were hidden from sight. One saw Cian, and the two broke into a run. The floor trembled under their weight.

“Golems,” Cian said, shoving Patrick into the room.

He shut and locked the door. Patrick was already trying to lift the sideboard, and together the two of them hauled it into place in front of the door. A moment later there was a crash, and cracks rippled through the door. Cian motioned Patrick and Irene back into the bedroom. Another blow shook the door. Shards of wood fell into the room, exposing the bulk of one of the golems. Its hat had slipped back, exposing the lumpy, misshapen face.

Irene swore.

“That’s about right,” Cian said.

They shut the bedroom door and hauled the dresser into place. From the sitting room came a series of loud crashes.

“This won’t hold them,” Patrick said.

“I know that,” Cian said. He moved to the window. Threw it open. Winter air rushed into the room. Below, the amber light of the city lay like a bed of broken glass. The street was a long way down. Long enough for a good scream and a quick death.

A blow shook the bedroom door.

“Irene, grab your coat,” Cian said. “And mine too. Patrick, get over here.” When Patrick joined him at the window, Cian gestured outside and said, “There.”

“You’re insane.”

“Do you want to try killing those things?”

“It can be done.”

“Do you know how?” Cian asked.

After a moment, Patrick shook his head.

“Then out we go.”

“Out there?” Irene asked, joining them at the window. She was already bundled in her heavy fur coat and she handed Cian his coat. He slipped it on.

Behind them, broken wood sprayed the carpet.

“Out there,” Cian asked. He glanced out again. The Louisiana Grand was a relatively new building, with the clean, straight lines that everyone favored. Rather than a single, straight column though, the building had three distinct tiers that dropped away as the building rose. Perhaps twenty feet below Irene’s window was the upper-most tier. It was nothing but a patch of cement and darkness.

“It’s wider than it looks,” Irene said, her voice bright. “Perspective, you know. It’s all about perspective.”

“Perspective,” Patrick breathed. It sounded like a prayer.

To Cian, the slat of cement didn’t look much wider than a game of hopscotch, but he kept his opinion to himself.

“I’ll need help up onto the window, of course,” Irene said.

“Don’t be stupid,” Cian said. “Patrick, go.”

With a nod and a last look at the splintered door, Patrick crawled out the window and began lowering himself down the face of the building.

The sudden silence between Cian and Irene made every hair on Cian’s body stand straight up. He tried to tell himself it was just the cold.

He didn’t believe it one bit.

She wouldn't look at him.

He helped her onto the window sill and stood next to her. The wind whipped between their legs. Her perfume filled Cian's nose. He held her hand a moment longer than he needed to and hoped she didn't notice.

A massive blow split the bedroom door. The dresser began to slide across the floor.

"Hold onto me tight," Cian said, wrapping her arms around his neck. "It's not far. We'll be down quick as lightning."

"What a terrible image," Irene murmured.

She was right, so Cian didn't respond.

With Irene clinging to him, Cian lowered himself, gripping the sill and then wedging his fingers between the stone face of the building. When he lowered himself again, Irene gave a gasp, and he felt her arms slip. Cian dug his fingers into the freezing stone. The cold sank sharp teeth into his hands, gnawing at his grip, threatening to send them tumbling.

"All right?" he managed to choke out.

Irene tightened her grip. He felt her nod into his shoulder.

She was shaking.

Damn, he was shaking himself.

There was another window, perhaps ten feet down, and those were the longest ten feet of Cian's life. When Cian got his footing on the sill, he heard Patrick say, "I've got you, Irene. You can let go."

Cian looked over his shoulder and watched as Patrick caught Irene. He cradled her in his arms. She was staring up at Patrick, relief flooding her features.

So. That was how it was.

Cian lowered himself down the last length of stone and dropped onto the empty terrace. He didn't even feel the cold anymore.

Overhead, the open window was a square of bright light.

"They haven't even come near the window," Patrick said. "I guess strong doesn't mean smart."

"Good. Let's go." Cian started down the length of the terrace. Away from Irene. Away from Patrick.

Ahead, a narrow service door opened into the building. Cian jiggled the handle.

"Cian," Patrick said. He still had Irene in his arms.

Cian kept his gaze fixed on the door. "What?"

"I think—"

A thud shook the terrace. Cian looked back the way they had come.

One of the golems had landed on the terrace, standing stiff as a board. If the fall bothered it, though, there was no sign. The second golem landed a moment later, dropping with all the grace of a stone. The two golems marched towards Cian.

Cian threw his weight into the service door. The frame snapped, the bolt popped loose, and the door flew open.

"Go," Cian said, gesturing down the darkened hall.

Patrick broke into a staggered run, holding Irene to his chest, disappearing into the hotel. Cian pulled the Colt and fired a shot. It caught one of the golems in the shoulder. A man would have been knocked on his ass. The golem didn't even flinch. It kept coming. A landslide wrapped in a cheap coat.

After a second shot, Cian pulled back into the hotel. He didn't bother with the door. A glance down the hall showed no sign of Patrick or Irene, and Cian hoped that meant they were a safe distance away. To Cian's right, a narrow flight of service stairs ran through the hotel.

He waited until the golems made it to the service door. He fired again.

The bullet cracked against one golem's head.

"Come on," Cian said. "Come on!"

Moving at their unchanging, lumbering pace, the golems came.

Cian took the stairs down. The golems followed, shaking the cement steps with their weight. They moved faster now, propelled by gravity, and Cian sprinted to stay ahead. Behind him, the golems began to close the distance, crashing into the stairwell with unbelievable force and ricocheting after him. At the third landing, a massive hand brushed the back of Cian's coat, and he threw himself forward by instinct.

Plaster exploded behind Cian as the golems slammed into the wall. They kept moving, though, unhindered by their reckless passage. Cian gave up running; they were too fast now. Cian's chest felt like he'd swallowed swords. Part was the running. Part was the damage down by the monster in the police van.

He crawled over the railing and dropped to the next floor. The jolt shook him to the teeth. He dropped again, keeping to the outside of the rails.

The golems were fast, but not this fast.

Sweat prickled on Cian's face and chest as though he'd rolled in nettles. Someone had been sharpening his ribs, and they stabbed him with every movement. But after what felt like an eternity, his heels hit cement, and Cian realized he was on the ground floor.

A bent, old woman with a broom stared at Cian. The broom was motionless.

Overhead, the golems came down like rain in a barrel.

“Get out of here,” Cian shouted, hustling the woman to the door. “Now.”

She dragged the broom with her.

They emerged into the lobby of the Louisiana Grand. Marble and gold leaf and rich people. Cian gave the old woman a push away from the door and sprinted for the front of the building.

A moment later, the door to the service stairs exploded like a case of firecrackers. Screams rang through the lobby as well-coiffed women and well-dressed men scattered. The golems, still moving like twin landslides, came after Cian.

Cian didn’t give them a second look. He charged through the doors and skidded out onto the frosty sidewalk. As he turned to run south, a voice stopped him.

“Cian!”

Patrick waved from a cab and popped open the door.

Cian threw himself into the back seat.

“Drive,” Patrick shouted.

The cabbie put the car into gear.

Everything else seemed to happen at once. The doors of hotel burst outward in hail of glass and metal and wood. The golems hit the snow-slick sidewalk. One of the golems went down with a crash like a mountain falling. The second, however, kept coming.

The taxi inched forward.

With the groan and screech of metal, the golem hit the back of the cab. Rough fingers scrabbled at the back of the car. The cab slid sideways. Its tires caught a clean patch of pavement.

The golem slipped.

And the taxi pulled out into the street and into the night.

Chapter 40

Irene's shoe broke the ice. Water slipped over her foot.

"Damn it all," she muttered.

"What?" Cian asked, glancing back as he led them down the sidewalk.

"Nothing."

"Are you—"

"I said nothing."

He turned forward and kept walking.

Irene stomped after him, her stocking squishing between frozen toes.

The cab had dropped them after three blocks. Dropped them was not quite the best way to say it. The cabbie had thrown them out, screaming about damage to his automobile, demanding payment. Cian had shouted back, until Irene reminded him that they needed to keep moving.

He'd looked just as sullen then as he did now.

Patrick walked at her side, helping her along, half-carrying her at times. Irene refused to let him heave her over his shoulder like a sack of meal. Better this slow, sodden crawl.

It was the principle of the thing, after all. Women didn't need men to save them. They didn't need men to carry them out of burning buildings. Irene was quite capable of escaping a burning building herself.

The barb under her skin, of course, was tonight.

Tonight had proved that wasn't always the case.

By the time Harry's apartment came into view, Irene's feet had turned to ice.

"One more night in Harry Witte's bed and I might as well marry the man," Irene said.

“I don’t imagine that would bother you much,” Cian said.

“Your imagination is not your strongest quality,” Irene said.

Patrick stared at both of them and tried not to make it obvious.

At the stairs that led up to Harry’s apartment, Irene relented. Patrick was gentle when he picked her up. He still smelled of sweat and smoke. The feel of his arms and chest was nice. Very nice.

But even nicer was the flicker of rage on Cian’s face.

Her satisfaction vanished when they reached Harry’s apartment. The door stood open. The living room was in disarray—one chair turned over, a book on the ground with its pages torn free, a broken glass and the smell of spilled scotch. Cian waved Irene and Patrick back and moved into the apartment with his gun drawn. After a pair of minutes he returned, ushered them inside, and locked the door.

“Golems?” Patrick asked.

Cian shook his head and started towards the sitting room. “Freddy’s here. Out cold and with an Easter egg growing on the back of his head, but alive. The door and the locks are fine, which mean that either Freddy opened the door or—”

“Or what?” Irene asked, shuffling along as fast as she could.

“Sam’s gone.”

“You don’t think—”

Cian’s face said that he did think. Very much. And his expression made Irene hope Sam was running very hard and very fast.

Freddy lay on the floor of the sitting room. His hair and beard were mussed, and he looked frail, instead of his normal vigorous self. The chair in which Sam had been bound was on

its side, the ropes in a tangled coil at its base. The rest of the room seemed undisturbed. Irene turned her attention back to the wounded man. Freddy's face had good color, and his breathing was strong, and Irene felt the tightness in her chest ease. Cian knelt next to the old man, probing his skull and checking for any other wounds. Then he went through Freddy's pockets.

"This isn't Kerry Patch," she said.

Cian ignored her. He placed Freddy's silver cigarette case and lighter on the floor, a billfold, a crumpled handkerchief, a set of keys. Then he paused, studying something in his hands before holding it out towards Irene.

It was a small carving done in turquoise. Irene took it from Cian and brought it closer. The piece was no larger than her thumb, but the detail was exquisite: it was a man's face, his eyes closed in sleep, cheeks hollow with sickness or hunger. It felt heavier than it should have been. Cold too. She set it on the rug and wiped her hands.

"That's everything?" she asked.

"I thought this wasn't Kerry Patch."

"Don't be a child."

"Patrick," Cian said, "I appreciate your help tonight, but you'd be smart to leave now. Before you get dragged into this any further."

Irene stiffened. "Don't listen to him, Patrick. You saved my life tonight. You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

Cian's jaw tightened, but he didn't say anything.

"Are you all right here?" Patrick asked. "I could help you get somewhere else. Somewhere safer."

"I'm staying here," Cian said. "I don't know about Irene."

“I’m going to stay as well,” Irene said. “For a bit longer, at least.”

“I should go then. I need to get back to the bar. You won’t forget, Irene? What we talked about?”

“No, of course not.”

He gave her his best smile, and Irene tried to smile back. If Patrick noticed the effort, though, he didn’t show it. He said goodnight, and Cian let him out the front door.

While they were gone, Irene lowered herself into one of the chairs. She looked at Freddy, who was so peaceful he might have only been sleeping, and she tried to ignore the sick wobble in her stomach.

Her father.

“What was that about?” Cian asked when he returned.

“What?”

Cian got to his knees, lifted Freddy, and moved him to the sofa. Then he dragged a blanket over the old man. When he turned to Irene, Cian’s eyes were sea-green glass.

“Why do you look like you’ve just bitten into a lemon?”

“I do not—”

Cian sighed. His shoulders slumped, and Irene suddenly realized that he held himself strangely, as though his chest hurt him. “Forget it,” he said. “Do you want help getting to Harry’s bed? I’m going to stay up with Freddy in case he takes a turn for the worse.”

There were a hundred things she should have said. She should have asked if he was hurt. She should have said thank you, or sorry, or something clever that would have made him laugh and forget her awful behavior from that night. Instead, she said, “I can walk on my own, thank you.”

She got out of the chair, trying to mask her winces, and managed to stay straight on her feet until she left the sitting room. Then she slumped against the wall as she made her way to Harry's room. She crawled into bed, too tired and hurting even to pull off her coat.

She lay awake a long time, crying into the pillow.

Chapter 41

In the silence of the apartment, Cian thought, for a moment, that he heard Irene crying from the other room. It was just a moment, though, and then silence. He stood up, ribs aching, to go check on her. At the door to the living room, he stopped.

She'd only bite his head off again.

Not that he didn't deserve some of it.

So he took one of the chairs and watched the old Hun. Freddy seemed like he would be all right, although it was hard to tell with head wounds. If he hadn't woken by morning, they'd have to take him to the hospital.

But his mind wouldn't stay focused on Freddy. It drifted down the hall, through the doors, towards Irene. Irene laughing with him over breakfast. Irene curled up next to him on her bed. Irene, brave and beautiful and stronger than anyone Cian had met, even after that vicious beating.

And then the other memories: the look in Irene's eyes at dinner; the way Patrick had held her; the fact that, every time Cian took a step forward, she found some reason to snap at him.

Some of it, of course, was his fault. He'd be the first to admit that.

Cian made his way to the sideboard and poured himself a whiskey. For his ribs. He carried the glass back to the chair and sipped at the drink. Some of it was his fault. At dinner, for example. He shouldn't have let the waiter bother him. He shouldn't have gotten so worked up about a damn fork. And, at the bottom of it, he shouldn't have been so afraid.

That's what it was, in the end. Fear. Fear of those dark, beautiful eyes. Fear that Irene would be Corinne all over again.

He poured himself another whiskey. And then another.

By midnight, he was drunk.

It helped, a little. Like digging a hole in the back of his head, a place to throw all those memories. Corinne, lithe and laughing. Lying with him in one of those impossibly green French fields, with nothing to cover her but starlight. And then—

And then Harley Dunn.

Irene in Patrick's arms, staring up at him with a smile.

There wasn't enough drink in the world to bury all those memories, but at least the booze helped.

Some time past two, Cian heard a key in the lock. He got up from the chair—it took two tries—and pulled out the Colt. He made his way to the hall just as the door opened.

Harry came into the house stomping mud from a pair of heavy boots. He wore work clothes and he was covered in clay. He shut the door, locked it, and when he turned around, he saw Cian.

Cian still had the Colt out. His hand shook.

"Are you going to shoot me?" Harry asked with a smile. He pulled off his hat and coat.

Cian blinked. "Sam's gone," he said.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Put that away," he said and pushed past Cian.

Cian fumbled with the Colt, trying to slide it back behind his trousers, and settled for putting the gun on the coffee table. Then he joined Harry in the sitting room. Harry stood over Freddy, examining the old man, and in his hand Harry held the turquoise carving.

"Is he all right?" Harry asked.

"I think so."

“Where did this come from?” Harry asked, holding up the carving.

“Freddy had it on him.”

“What do you mean—” Harry stopped himself. His face was white. “Stay here.”

He disappeared into the back rooms. After a few minutes, he came back. Some of his color had returned. “Did you find anything else?”

Cian gestured to Freddy’s possessions spread out on the rug.

Harry shook his head. “I mean did you search the apartment. We know Sam’s a thief. Did you notice anything missing?”

“No. Did you?”

“A pair of shoes, plus the clothes I’d loaned him.”

“What is that thing?” Cian asked. “That carving.”

“Something cultic, obviously,” Harry said. “And something Freddy should not have.” He looked tired, and he rubbed his face. Flakes of drying clay fell to the floor. “God, things don’t get any better, do they?”

“What do you mean?”

Harry hesitated. He poured himself a whiskey and then motioned for Cian to follow him out to the front room. Then he shut the door, and they sat down. Harry downed the whiskey in one movement. He wiped his mouth. His eyes were dark and hollow.

Cian had seen eyes like that before. A French soldier who had come back from the front lines without his legs. The man had screamed about the gas, about the dead, about the rats. His eyes had looked like Harry’s did now. Eyes that had seen too much.

“That’s twice now that Freddy’s had something cultic. Something that he shouldn’t have. Sam told us that the Children know everything about us. Add the two together and . . .”

“Is he a traitor?” Cian asked. “You know him better than I do.”

“I’m afraid that might be blinding my judgment.”

“If it looks like a rat and smells like a rat.”

Harry let out a breath. Then he looked at Cian. “You’re drunk.”

“A little.”

“A lot.”

Cian shrugged.

“Why?”

Cian grinned. It felt wobbly, like a plate on its edge, ready to fall and crack.

“Women?” Harry asked with a soft laugh.

“You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” Cian said. The words popped out before he could stop them.

For a moment, Harry said nothing. Then, “Good night, Cian.”

He stood up and walked towards the back of the apartment.

“Where were you tonight?” Cian asked. “Rolling around Cheltenham?”

Harry didn’t stop walking and didn’t look back. “An old cultic shrine in one of the abandoned clay mines.”

And then he was gone.

Cian loosened his tie, shrugged out of his coat and jacket, and rolled them up to improvise a pillow. He gave the sofa a dirty look and then stretched out.

As usual, the sofa was too short.

Chapter 42

Irene found bacon in the icebox the next morning. And milk. And eggs. And a thick wedge of good cheddar. And bread. And cream.

In other words, she found breakfast.

She felt like a million bucks. She still ached and was stiff as a board, but she felt better. So much better. She hung up her coat, cleaned her face and hair, and wondered if she would spend the rest of her life with no more than one dress at a time in her possession.

Then she started frying bacon. She scrambled eggs. She made toast.

She cut herself a piece of cheese as she cooked. To keep her strength up.

All the aches and twinges stuck with her, but they felt good. A reminder that she was alive. Her head was clear, and her heart was dry as a piece of slate. She'd cried everything out last night. She was ready to make things right.

When she had a plate of food made up, she carried it into the living room with a mug of black coffee. Cian lay on his side on the sofa. His shirt had inched up during the night, revealing the muscles in his lower back. He shifted and looked over his shoulder at Irene through one eye. Then he groaned and dropped his head onto the sofa.

"Can't I just die in peace?" he said.

The shape of his shoulders under his shirt sent butterflies up Irene's throat.

She made her voice firm, though, as she said, "I see you found a way to stay busy last night. You were, as I believe you told me, watching Freddy. To make sure he was all right."

Cian's answer was a long groan.

"Coffee?"

He groaned again, but it was a bit less theatrical this time.

“Bacon?”

This time, there was a definite note of interest.

“And eggs.”

“Damn you, woman,” Cian growled as he sat up and swung his feet to the ground. He held his head in his hands for a moment, then motioned for the coffee. Irene passed it to him. He took a sip, and then another, and then massaged his forehead. “God, this is not a bad way to start the day.”

Irene laughed. “Well don’t get used to it. I’m afraid I’m not that kind of woman.”

“What kind?” he said around a mouthful of toast and eggs.

“You’ll have to wait and see,” she said with a smile.

Then she returned to the kitchen, fixed herself a plate, and rejoined Cian. They ate in silence—out of compassion for the obvious effects of a hangover—but it was a comfortable silence. For the most part. There was still a bit of an edge to Cian. A defensiveness to the silence. A man standing on a castle wall, uncertain if he was seeing friend or foe.

“Are you all right?” Irene asked.

Cian laughed. “I’ve experienced this particular ailment plenty of times, Irene. I’ll be fine.”

“No,” she said with a laugh. “I meant everything else. I thought, last night, you might have—”

He probed his chest and ribs. Pain flickered on his face. Then he shrugged. “Hale as an ox.”

“What?” Irene asked.

“Hale as an ox,” Cian repeated. A trace of doubt entered his voice.

“I’ve never heard that expression.”

Cian shoved a piece of toast in his mouth.

“I’ve heard hale and whole,” Irene said.

Watching her, Cian chewed in silence.

“And I’ve heard healthy as an ox,” Irene continued.

Cian speared a piece of bacon.

“But I’ve never heard hale as an—”

“Good God, Irene,” Cian said. “What are you talking about?”

“I was just saying—”

“Are you angry at me or not? I am having a damned hard time figuring out what is going on.”

Irene picked at a piece of toast, scattering crumbs across the coffee table.

“Never mind,” Cian said. “Forget I asked.”

“I’m not angry with you,” Irene said. “I’m—I’m sorry, for what happened yesterday. At dinner. I should have . . .”

She trailed off, and after a moment, Cian sighed. “No. I’m sorry. I let myself get all fired up over nothing.”

“Forgiven?” Irene asked.

“Nothing to forgive,” Cian said. “Are we square?”

Irene fought a small grin and gave him a mock salute. “Yes, sir.” And then a giggle slipped out. “Square as an ox.”

Cian buried his head in his hands.

To his good fortune, that was when Harry emerged from the sitting room, helping Freddy to a chair. Freddy's face was red, but his eyes were clear, and he looked more embarrassed than injured.

"All right?" Cian asked.

Freddy nodded. "Well enough, I suppose. I deserve worse than a bump on the head for letting a pup get the better of me."

"Breakfast?" Irene asked the two men.

"Sounds wonderful," Harry said as he sat on the sofa next to Cian.

Cian jumped to his feet. Harry raised an eyebrow.

"I'll grab the food," Cian said and hurried from the room.

"Thank you," Harry said, but he was still eying the space Cian had left on the couch.

"Anything you can tell us about Sam?" Irene asked Freddy. "Where he might have gone?"

Freddy shook his head. "I turned around to get a drink, and the boy struck me. He must have slipped his cuffs when I wasn't looking. Good riddance to him."

Cian returned with the plates of food, and the four of them sat in silence for a few minutes as Harry and Freddy ate. Irene found herself studying Harry. There were new shadows under his eyes, and although he was as handsome as ever, there was an edge to him now.

"What's wrong?" Irene asked.

"What?" Harry said.

"You. Something's different. What's wrong?"

"Just a bad night."

Irene crossed her legs and leaned forward. Cian's eyes moved to her legs. Harry's didn't, and she tucked that away.

"Harry Witte, don't try that on me for a second," she said.

Harry ate a bite of eggs and looked at Freddy.

"It will ruin this wonderful breakfast," Freddy said.

"Better breakfast than the rest of the day," Irene said. "Let's hear it."

"The mask," Freddy said. "I came last night to tell Harry what I had learned. If it is the mask that I described earlier, then it poses a great threat."

"Magic," Cian said.

"Yes, if one were skilled enough, it might be used to power cultic rituals." Freddy paused and nibbled on a piece of bacon. "But I believe there is more in play here. Over the last few months, Harry and I have attempted to intercept or retrieve a number of cultic artifacts. Every time, we were frustrated in our efforts."

"So you had a few rough jobs," Cian said. "Big deal."

"That's what we thought at first," Harry said. "No big deal. I mean, it would have been nice to keep these artifacts out of the Children's hands, but none of them were major pieces. Not like the mask. At least, that's what I believed."

"Last night," Freddy picked up the story, "I was working through Tilton's *The Sacred Breast: Fertility Rituals in the Levant*, hoping—"

Cian coughed, covered his mouth, and said, "I'm sorry. The sacred what?"

"Breast," Freddy said. "And I was—"

After a muffled noise that sounded like a giggle, Cian managed to say, "No, I'm sorry. The full title."

With a flicker of irritation, Freddy said, “Tilton’s *The Sacred Breast: Fertility Rituals in the Levant*. Now. If I may proceed?”

Cian made a gesture to proceed, but he was obviously dying of laughter inside.

Harry met Irene’s gaze and rolled his eyes.

She smiled in spite of herself.

“Tilton,” Freddy was saying, “describes an ancient ritual to wake Dagon and call him back to his servants. He lists a number of implements needed to rouse the sleeping god. The names he uses are not any that I recognize, but the descriptions match several of the artifacts that have been stolen over the last few months. The most important item, though, without which the ritual cannot proceed, is the mask.”

“I thought the mask allowed a priest to communicate with Dagon,” Irene said. “Or perhaps to perform more powerful magic.”

“As I said,” Harry said with a tired smile, “it was a bad night. After Freddy told me this, I went out and did a bit of digging on my own. In this case, the digging was a bit more literal than I liked. I knew there had been a shrine to Dagon in the clay mines, but it had been closed for a long time. Before I even came to the city. I went to check it out.”

“And?” Cian asked.

“And there were signs of fresh offerings. Only grain and wine, so far, but you can bet that they’ll start with the victims soon enough. Once a cultic god gets his hooks into you, you’ll only want more. The Children make opium-addicts look like models of restraint.” He paused. “At this point, we have to believe that the Children are intent on raising Dagon. To do so, they will have a powerful magician or sorcerer aiding them. I’m afraid things have gotten much, much more serious.”

Cian had a dark look on his face and he was staring at Freddy.

“Harry,” Cian said.

“Yes?”

“What about the piece that we found last night?”

Harry set his fork down and wiped his mouth with the handkerchief. He nodded.

Cian pulled out his Colt and aimed it at Freddy.

“What in the world is going on?” Irene asked.

“What is this, Harry?” Freddy said. The old Hun hadn’t moved an inch.

Harry pulled out the jade trinket that Cian had found last night. He held it up for Freddy to see. “Cian found this in your pockets last night,” Harry said. “Do you want to explain?”

“That is not mine.”

“But you recognize it?”

There was a moment of struggle in Freddy’s face. “Yes. I’ve read about it and seen a drawing. Florent de Saint Olivier called it *la clef bleue*. But it isn’t mine.”

“And what does it do?”

Another pause, frustration filling Freddy’s expression. “It is a key, if the stories are true.”

“To?”

“To a Dagon shrine. To the true shrine, where Dagon might manifest himself. It was purportedly carried only by the high priest of the cult.” Freddy leaned forward, and Cian made a cautioning noise. Freddy froze and slumped in his chair. “This is madness, Harry. I have no interest in the Dagon cult. That does not belong to me. Sam must have left it there, to incriminate me. Or—” Freddy glanced at Cian. “Or he did it. What do we even know about them, Harry? They showed up when everything started to go wrong. Do you trust his word over mine?”

Harry paused. He looked at Cian, and then at Irene.

“I was with Cian,” Irene said. “He didn’t plant anything on Freddy. I can’t speak for Sam.”

“Harry—” Freddy began.

“I want to believe you, Freddy,” Harry said. “Truly. But you kept the disc, and—”

“The disc? This is still about the disc? It was a mistake, Harry. A damned big mistake, but a mistake. Not this—not this betrayal. I would never do such a thing.”

Harry tucked the blue carving into his pocket. “Let’s take a break, Freddy. Before anyone does or says anything stupid. You go home, rest, take care of yourself. Let me see what happens with this. We’ll track down that boy. If he admits to planting the artifact on you, then we go back to the way things were. No hurt feelings.”

Freddy nodded. “I do not blame you, Harry, for not believing me. I know how this looks. But I swear to you, I would not betray you.” Freddy stood shakily. He looked old and battered, as though he’d aged ten years since he came into the room. He gathered his coat and cane and left without another word.

After Freddy had shut the front door, Cian said, “I can’t believe you let him go. I don’t trust a Hun any farther than I can throw them.”

“He seemed sincere,” Irene said. “I believe him.”

Cian flashed her a glare.

Harry gathered up the empty plates. “It’s hard to say. Freddy has saved my life any number of times. If I hadn’t caught him with the disc, I would never have believed him capable of something like this. But someone under the sway of a cultic god can seem perfectly normal

and rational right up to the minute he snaps. I hope, for Freddy's sake—" He stopped, shrugged, and carried the plates into the kitchen. A moment later the sound of running water reached them.

Irene sat next to Cian on the sofa, close enough to feel the heat radiating off of him, close enough to smell his hair and the bacon on his breath. He shifted, as though he might put an arm around her, but then settled back into place.

"I suppose I should go back to the hotel and get my belongings," Irene said.

"You can't stay there," Cian said. "It isn't safe."

"I know. That's why I said I needed to get my things."

"Then I'm going with you."

"My noble protector."

Cian snorted. "Protector? I need those clothes too. I'm afraid I'm going to start sounding like you, but I could use a bath and a change of clothes."

Irene wrinkled her nose. "Yes," she said. "You could."

The hotel room was a disaster. The staff—including a man built like a small automobile, who glided into the room and announced that he was the hotel's manager—apologized profusely and explained that a number of rooms had been broken into.

"We've hired additional help to ensure the security of the hotel," the manager said, puffing and wheezing and wiping his forehead. "You can rest assured in the safety and comfort of the Louisiana Grand."

In spite of these formidable promises, though, Irene gathered her belongings, and Cian gathered up his boxes of new clothes, and they took a cab back to Harry's. After a bath and a change of clothes—into a simple gray dress with lavender accents—Irene felt a new woman.

When Cian emerged from the bathroom a bit later, dressed in a new suit and with his hair combed, Irene laughed and said, “I’m sorry. Have we met?”

Cian shook his head. “I’m sure I would have remembered meeting someone so beautiful.”

From the hall, Harry gave an approving whistle, and Cian’s face heated. Irene turned in a circle, showing off her dress.

“You look lovely,” Harry said as he took her hand. “And you clean up rather nice, Cian.”

Cian looked at Irene, but he spoke to Harry. “There’s something else, Harry. I forgot to mention it earlier.”

“Yes?”

“Last night, I was attacked by another of those things. The big kind that Irene and I saw in the alley.”

“A sauria?” Irene said. “One of those lizard things?”

Cian nodded.

“Well why didn’t you say anything?”

“I came back to the hotel to tell you,” Cian said, “but you were too busy playing kiss and tickle with Patrick Hannafy.”

“I was not—”

“And then the golems showed up, and I had to lead them on a chase while you two canoodled in a cab.”

“Cian Shea, I—”

“Stop shouting,” Harry said. “Both of you.”

Cheeks hot, Irene blinked. She was not going to cry in front of this beast of a man. Not now. Not ever.

“You’re telling me you were attacked by a sauria and golems last night?” Harry said.

Cian nodded. “The sauria, if that’s what you call them, spoke to me. It was looking for someone. A man. I thought it meant Sam but—”

“But now you think it was Freddy.”

Cian nodded.

“Well, all the more reason to find the thief and see what he can tell us. Pearl stopped in while you two were gone, and I’ve sent her to start looking for our reluctant guest. If you two are ready, I’m due to meet her and see what she’s found.”

“I’m ready,” Cian said.

Irene tried to clear her throat, but she didn’t want to risk speaking. She blinked her eyes clear and nodded.

Harry squeezed her hand and smiled. A very small, very sad smile. But all he said was, “Then bring your gun, my dear.”

Chapter 43

When Harry pulled up in front of a shuttered fruit stand, Pearl climbed into the back of the automobile and let out a frosted breath. Irene shifted on the seat to give Pearl more room, and Pearl flashed her a grateful smile.

“Union Station,” Pearl said, chafing her hands. “And fast.”

Harry pulled back out into the street. For a moment, the slushy spin of the tires was the only noise. Outside, the sky had hardened into folds of gray, and although the day was less than half over, the world was dim and cloistered. Irene watched as Pearl studied the occupants of the automobile. Her eyes went to Harry, who was bent over the steering wheel, and then to Cian, who sat in the front and stared out the window like a sentinel, and then to Irene.

Irene wished her eyes weren’t red.

“What in the world happened?” Pearl asked.

“It’s Freddy,” Harry said. He laid out the story in quick, spare details, with Pearl asking only a few questions.

When Harry had finished, Pearl said, “Freddy.” She sighed and pushed a strand of dark hair behind her ear. “Maybe Sam can tell us something that will help.”

Harry didn’t answer.

Pearl’s eyes moved to Cian, who was still as stiff as a post, and then to Irene.

“And that’s all?” Pearl asked.

“That’s all that matters,” Irene said. And she wished it were true.

Cian didn’t bother to look back at them.

Without an answer, Pearl squeezed Irene’s hand. And then she mouthed, *Men*.

Irene tried to smile. She ended up wiping her eyes and turning to look out the window.

When they arrived at Union Station, the streets were clogged with cars, freezing the river of traffic. On every side, people tumbled out of stalled cars, dragging suitcases after them as they walked through the street to reach the station.

“Damn it,” Harry said. “I can’t leave the car here. Go!”

They got out onto the frozen pavement. A blonde in a massive, white fur coat brushed past Irene, her hair streaming after her like an angel in a medieval manuscript—all hard lines and angles. Behind the woman came a heavy-set man with at least a dozen bags slung from arms and shoulders. Irene pressed herself against the Ford to keep from being trampled.

By the time Irene circled the car, Cian was halfway to the station, and Pearl was trotting behind him and throwing backward glances at Irene. Irene pulled her coat tight and ran. Her shoes slid over the frozen brick pavement, and she collided with a beautiful silver car before catching her footing and continuing forward. A luggage cart rolled in front of her, pulled by a dour-looking Indian man, and Irene stumbled to a halt.

Ahead, Cian had disappeared into the station, and Pearl cast a single, backward glance before following him.

Irene grabbed the revolver in her pocket.

Cian Shea was being a bastard.

She darted around the luggage cart, crossed the last stretch of crowded sidewalk, and plunged into the station. If anything, the building inside was even more crowded than the street had been. A man with a handle-bar mustache dragged a screaming child past Irene. The two disappeared into crowd like stones into the ocean. Irene raised up onto her toes and looked over the swarm of people. As she looked, Irene focused on the people who stood above the rest of the

crowd. A tall, slender man with a snowy beard cocked his head as he listened to someone who stood below him. A mammoth-sized woman in mink—enough mink to bankrupt a small nation—strode through the crowd, as though the men and women before her were stalks of grass.

Stalks of grass in imminent danger of being crushed.

Irene kept looking. She saw a boy who had climbed onto a shoe-polisher's chair, and a boy who was thin as a reed and looked like he was being carried by the crowd rather than walking, and two men in trench coats with their hats pulled low. And then she saw a shock of ridiculous, dark-red hair. Cian.

Her eyes swept back to the men in the trench coats. They were headed straight for Cian.

Irene pushed her way into the crowd. At first, the going was difficult as she forced a path between sweating bodies and frozen blocks of luggage. Then, after she broke through the dense, outer lines, her passage became easier. Irene ducked between paperboys and porters and pristinely dressed men and women. She kept her eyes on the men in the trench coats as she hurried.

"Irene," Pearl said, snagging Irene's sleeve and dragging her free from the human current. Pearl and Cian had stopped in an alcove. The crowd swept past them. "He wouldn't wait." The last sentence Pearl pronounced as a question, and she glanced from Cian to Irene.

Cian ignored both of them, staring out at the platforms, but obviously listening.

"Golems," was all Irene said.

That got Cian's attention. He looked at her, and when he did, he flushed.

Good.

Irene pointed at the golems. The two bulky figures moved like toy soldiers.

"God damn it," Cian said. "You two keep going. I'll try to slow them down."

“In here? With all these people?” Irene said. “Don’t be mad. You’ll get someone killed.”

“She’s right,” Pearl said.

“They’re coming,” Cian said.

“Do you know how to stop them?” Pearl asked.

“Cut the chain in their neck.”

“Have you done it?”

Cian shook his head.

“I have. You two go ahead. I heard Sam was catching a train east. Start with those platforms.”

Before Cian could argue, Pearl disappeared into the wash of the crowd. Cian swore and started after.

Irene grabbed his arm.

“Irene,” he said.

“She knows what she’s doing. Let’s go.”

He grumbled something, then said, “Hold on.”

Irene kept her grip on his arm as he plowed through the mass of people. It was a bit like being tugged along behind a train. A train that had a very nice, very muscular arm.

A train that had been behaving like a total ass.

After a moment, though, they reached the trainshed, and the crowd separated into streams headed for the different platforms. A dusty layer of smoke hung in the air, lining the back of Irene’s throat with the taste of coal and making her cough. A train whistle shrieked, cutting through the noise of the station. Irene kept a hold of Cian’s arm.

“I see signs for New York and Philadelphia,” Cian said. He started towards them.

“Wait,” Irene said.

“We have to hurry.”

“Cian, stop. Pearl said that her sources told her that Sam was going east.”

“Yes, and if we don’t hurry, we might miss him.”

“But what if that’s what Sam wanted us to think?”

Cian paused. “What do you mean?”

“Sam’s smart. And more than that, he knew Harry wouldn’t just let him go. He knew we’d be after him. And Sam must have had friends.”

“The kind of friends who might tell Pearl that Sam was going east.”

Irene nodded.

“So what now? That leaves a lot of platforms to cover, Irene. We can’t watch them all.”

Irene turned in a circle, studying the trainshed and the platforms, searching for anything that might tell her where Sam was planning to go. The names of cities blurred together. Coal smoke and cigarette smoke and the smell of too many bodies blended in her lungs. A cocktail that reminded her of traveling to Oberlin for the first time. She took a deeper breath and smelled Cian, the smell of his hair and skin, filling her nose and sending electric sparks through her chest. The feeling mingled with despair.

The trainshed was too big to search.

“We can’t just stand here, Irene.”

She nodded. “Let’s split up.”

Cian was staring up at the roof of the trainshed.

“Hello,” Irene said. “Is the air too thin all the way up there? Did you hear me?”

“Irene,” Cian said. “I don’t think we need to search all the trains.”

“Why?”

He pointed up to an exposed steel girder. A massive spider hung from a glinting thread. Two more spiders fell from the girder, dropping towards a train that let out an ear-splitting whistle. With a plume of smoke, the train began to pull away from the platform.

“I think the Children already found him.”

Chapter 44

Irene held onto Cian as he charged towards the departing train. Her feet slipped and skidded across the snow melt and the tiles. Cian ran as though she weighed no more than a feather. His gaze was locked on the train.

Irene had the distinct impression that if she let go, he'd keep sprinting forward and never even notice. There was something exhilarating about it. She realized she was laughing and tried to clamp her mouth shut, but the giggles broke free anyway.

As they came around the corner of the platform, the train began to pick up speed. Cian said something that Irene didn't catch. He hurtled forward. Irene's legs burned as she tried to keep up. As the train let out another whistle, they came even with the caboose. Irene felt herself slip in a puddle of icy water.

Cian grabbed her upper arm. He ran two more steps, dragging her like a doll, and jumped.

Irene saw the gap between the train and the platform. She breathed a burst of clean winter air, like a knife through her brain. She felt her feet dangle in space.

And then a jolt shook her as they landed on the rear of the caboose.

They rolled once and came to a stop against the door of the train. Cian lay on his back. Irene was on top of him. Her brain replayed the jump, registered the ache in her arm where he had yanked her after him, and felt the open space beneath her feet. Cian gasped for breath, his cheeks as red as his hair.

It felt good to lie against him. To feel the shape of his body.

"You all right?" Cian asked. He lifted his head.

Irene stared down at him. At his lips. At his eyes, green and blue and bright. Tropical eyes that had no business in Cian Shea's head.

She slapped him.

"What in the hell—" Cian said.

"Don't ever talk about me like that again."

Cian rubbed his cheek and glared. Then he gave a grudging nod.

"I'm sorry."

Irene nodded. She would have liked to stay where she was—the sway of the caboose, transferred through Cian's body, was giving her all sorts of ideas—but the train was picking up speed as it headed along the tracks. Wind whipped past them, tossing their hair and catching at Irene's heavy coat. She got to her feet and held out her hand to Cian.

He let her help him up. He didn't let go of her hand.

"Shall we?" he asked.

Irene pushed open the door and entered the caboose. It consisted of a single, open room with a desk, a pair of chairs, and two middle-aged men. One stared at Irene with his mouth open. The other had frozen in the middle of packing his pipe.

"What in the—"

"Police business," Cian said, pushing past the men and dragging Irene behind him. "Stay here and make sure nobody else comes aboard."

"Just wait one minute—"

But by then they had already left the caboose and entered the rear passenger car. In contrast to the freezing rush of air outside, the car was warm and smelled of wet wool and, perhaps, wet dog. Only a handful of people occupied the seats. None of them were Sam.

“Do we walk the length of the train?” Irene said.

“Nothing for it but to try.” Cian started down the car. “Stay back in case he does something stupid.”

“Or in case you do something stupid.”

Cian grinned. “Yeah. That too.”

They moved down the cars, studying the passengers, looking for Sam. After three cars, Irene’s heart began to sink. There was no sign of the young thief. Just men and women with suitcases and newspapers and, in the dining car, a ring of younger men enjoying booze they’d smuggled aboard, to the dismay of an elderly train conductor.

In the fourth passenger car, they stopped. Irene gripped a handrail as the train rattled underneath them. Outside, a thick, downy white covered the windows. Snow, her brain noted. More damned snow.

“This was stupid,” Cian said. “He’s not here. He threw the Children a false lead. We should have listened to Pearl.”

The sky had been cloudy. But no snow had been falling. The windows were choked with white. Almost like—

“Cian,” Irene said. “I think—”

Something rocked the back of the train. Metal squealed, the passenger car leaped like a startled horse, and Irene went flying. Cian caught her around the waist and held her against him. Together, they fell back against one of the seats. Screams filled the car as men and women clutched at each other.

The car settled back onto the rails. The screams faltered. Women and men grabbed at hats and at handkerchiefs.

From overhead came the soft hiss. Like a heavy rain on a tin roof.

Or.

A fat drop of metal fell onto the carpeted floor, and the smell of burning fibers filled the air. Irene shoved Cian down the car. A moment later, more liquid metal spattered the spot where they had stood. The chorus of shouts had begun again, but Irene barely heard them. She stood with Cian at the far end of the train car.

Above them, red hot lines of molten steel showed a three-sided box. With a flap and a rush, the roof of the car tore open. Cold air and the acrid stench of hot metal and something else—something that cut at the back of Irene’s tongue—rushed into the car. Giant spiders, the size of hounds, lined the opening.

“St. Patrick’s blessed shit,” Cian said.

An overweight woman surged to her feet, her face purple, her mouth open in an ululating scream. She staggered halfway down the car. The rest of the passengers were frozen in silence. One of the spiders jumped.

Cian shot it out of the air. The giant spider tumbled to the ground, its legs curling up as it rolled to a stop. The gunshot rang over the rattle of the train tracks.

The purple-faced woman’s scream continued as she raced for the door.

That was enough to set the rest of the passengers into motion. Men and women and children stampeded. The giant spiders launched themselves into the car, and some of the people dropped beneath the level of the crowd. Cian shot twice more, picking off two of the spiders before the rest of the abominations had mixed with the crowd.

Irene’s hand was a block of ice wrapped around her revolver. She stared as a pale woman with pearls around her neck disappeared like a sinking ship.

Irene wasn't a good enough shot. She couldn't do a single thing.

"Move," Cian said, shoving her behind him and into the next car.

She stumbled. Everything had gone distant—feet and fingers and face. The only thing that seemed clear, winter clear, was the screams. When they entered the next car, Cian fumbled with the door, but after a moment he gave up and pushed Irene down the car. Two men in this car were already on their feet, shouting questions at Irene and Cian.

Irene stared at them. She felt the lines of the revolver's barrel under her fingers. She felt the lint and dirt trapped at the bottom of her coat pocket. She felt her heartbeat. Steady. Steady as the train's chug.

But all she heard were the screams. And all she saw was the pale woman with the pearls, dragged down under the sea of faces.

Cian was shouting back at the two men, and a moment later, the car began to clear. One of the men took Irene's arm, dragging her a step or two before she came back to herself. She knocked his hand free. The man looked back at her twice, but he didn't stop running. Within moments, the car had emptied.

Cian had his back to Irene and was staring at the door they had come through.

Waiting.

"Cian," Irene said.

He shot her a quick look and then turned back to the door. "Damn it, he was supposed to get you out of here."

"There are too many of them."

"Go, Irene. You saw—" He stopped and shivered.

Irene wished she could see his face.

“How many rounds do you have left?” she asked.

It took him a moment to answer. “Four.”

“Cian.”

“Please go, Irene. Please.”

The car jumped again, as though some new force had threatened to throw the train from its tracks. Irene stumbled, caught the handrail, and held on as the train bucked against the rails.

And then she had an idea.

She grabbed Cian’s coat and pulled. “Cian, now.”

He stumbled after her. Behind them, the door flew open, and the hound-sized spiders surged through, crawling across the walls and seats and roof towards Cian and Irene. Irene ran faster, Cian on her heels. Two more gunshots rang in her ears, but she didn’t glance back to see if Cian had hit.

Of course, since it was Cian, she was fairly sure he had.

They cleared the car, and Cian slammed the door shut. The wood shivered, and one of the giant spiders threw itself against the glass pane. The glass cracked. Cian and Irene crossed to the next car, but before they entered the car, Irene dropped to her knees.

“How do they do it?” she asked.

Cian stood over her, Colt out. “What?”

“Detach the cars.”

For a moment, Cian stared down at her. Speechless.

Irene had to fight a crazed smile. She didn’t know if she’d ever seen him speechless before.

The silence was somewhat nice.

Then she turned her attention back to the car coupling. There was nothing she could grab onto. Not without losing a hand.

A crack came from the car they had just left.

“Irene,” Cian said.

“I’m hurrying!”

Then she saw it, on the corner of the car, a substantial piece of metal sticking out. She wrapped her hands around it and pulled.

It wouldn’t budge.

“Irene,” Cian said.

Glass shattered.

“It won’t move,” Irene said. She yanked on the pin with all her weight, but the damned piece of metal was stuck.

“Of course it won’t move,” Cian shouted. He fired a shot. “They don’t want the cars to come flying off. That’s the whole point!”

“You’re not helping!”

He swore and shot again.

Irene wrapped her hands around the pin. She risked a quick look at the car they had left.

A pair of spiders poked limbs out of the broken window, dragging themselves over the shards of glass. Cian stood with the Colt out, but he hadn’t fired.

He was waiting. He wanted to make the shots count.

God above, he only had three shots left.

The passenger car with the spiders trembled, and from further back along the train, two figures sailed into view. They flew through the air, arms and legs rigid, like carvings dropped

from the sky. With a crash of metal and wood, the forms landed at the edge of the passenger car. The car tipped forward under the weight.

The train coupling shifted. Suddenly the pin had plenty of room to move.

Irene hauled on the pin. Even through the train's vibrations, she felt the click. The coupling loosed, and the passenger car fell away, losing ground as the train continued forward.

"What in the—" Cian stared at the distant car and then at Irene. "How—"

Irene slumped onto the narrow span of metal. Her hands smelled like rust, and her heart jounced inside her head. Only the rush of cold air in her ears, howling like a storm, registered.

"Well," Cian said. He helped her to her feet. "That was . . ." He stopped. His hands tightened over hers. "That was amazing."

Irene wanted to say something, but before she could, a squeal of metal came from the dwindling form of the passenger cars. The car twisted and turned, the wheels tearing free of the rails, and then the row of cars came off the tracks. With a crash, the series of cars plowed into the frozen dirt.

In the sky, two cut-out figures fell towards Cian and Irene.

"Run," Irene said.

They forced their way into the next car. It had already been evacuated, with only an assortment of forgotten items to witness to the departed passengers: a briefcase open with papers scattered across a seat; a stuffed bear with a bandaged paw; a woman's scarf that waved goodbye—or hello—in a draft.

Irene and Cian had made it halfway down the aisle when the rear third of the car collapsed. Metal folded, wood splintered, and the roof and walls of the car crumpled. The shock of the blow traveled through the car, knocking Cian and Irene forward. Cian caught the handrail.

Irene watched him as she flew past and struck the corner of the door. Pain flashed in her forehead, and she felt something warm trickling down the side of her face.

As she got to her feet, she looked back to see what had happened.

From the rubble that had, moments before, been the rear portion of a passenger car, two golems stood. They forced their way through the wreckage, tossing aside metal sheets and broken beams without a pause.

Cian fired. The bullet took one of the golems in the face, knocking off its hat and snapping its head back. The abomination had only the crudest features—a misshapen, melted face that looked like the worst kind of sculpting. The bullet hole between its eyes didn't seem to bother the golem in the slightest.

“Pearl didn't do her job,” Cian said.

In response, one of the golems tore a bank of seats from the car and hurled them at Cian and Irene.

Cian dropped, and Irene slid to the floor. The row of seats struck the wall of the car and bounced back, missing them by inches. Cian scrambled to his feet, grabbed Irene, and then they were off again, racing into the next car.

“Your head,” Cian said as they forced their way into the next car.

“I'm fine.”

The next car, however, stopped them. It was packed with passengers, men in dark suits clawing at the windows, women in heavy coats and heavier stockings huddled with their children at the far end of the car. The door at the other end of the car was blocked.

Irene slumped against the wall and dabbed at the cut to her forehead. It stung. The train had begun to sway in earnest, and her stomach flipped over.

“Irene—”

“I said I’m fine,” Irene said, but then the roof of the train began to loom over her, and suddenly she was staring up into Cian’s eyes. “Such nice eyes,” she said, reaching up to pat his cheek.

For some reason, Cian’s lips came together in a tight line, and he grabbed her hand. He squeezed her fingers until Irene thought they might break, but she didn’t mind. At least, not too much.

Something heavy was coming towards them—pounding steps that rocked the train like a ship in a storm. And then Irene heard a familiar voice.

“Excuse me. Pardon me. If I could just—yes, perfect, thank you.”

Her eyes were heavy, and she was struggling to keep them open. But then she saw his face.

“Sam?” she said.

“Hi there, Irene,” Sam said. His voice was softer, the way Irene would speak to someone who was ill. The tone rankled. “Good of you to come.”

Cian let go of Irene’s hand.

“Now listen, Cian,” Sam was saying. He had his hands up and was stepping backwards. “No need to be hasty. We’ve got bigger problems coming our way. Those golems will be here in seconds.”

“Good. You won’t have to worry about them.”

“Cian, I can help you. I know how to stop them.”

“So do I.”

“Why am I lying on the floor?” Irene asked. Her eyes still felt heavy, and her stomach had twisted itself inside out, but something was pressing on the back of her brain. A warning.

“Did I fall?”

Cian swore. He helped her up and pushed her into Sam’s arms. “Be careful,” he said.

“I always am,” Sam said.

“I meant be careful with her.”

And then Cian threw open the door and stepped out onto the narrow platform between the cars.

The door swung shut, and then all Irene could see was Cian’s shoulder, and the trembling frame of the car, and the landscape unrolling from icy spools. From outside, there was a crack of gunfire. Screams filled the car, and Irene pulled away from Sam, lunging for the door.

Her knees gave out as the car tilted beneath her. Sam caught her and pulled her back.

“He’ll be fine. He’s a big boy.”

Irene pried at his fingers, but Sam wouldn’t let go.

Then there was a muffled crash. Another round of screams from the passengers. The sound hammered at Irene’s head. She squeezed her eyes shut.

She heard the car door open. And then steps.

Sam shifted and he said, “Stop right there.”

“You little piece of shit,” Cian said.

Irene opened her eyes.

Sam still had one arm around his waist, but in his free hand he held a knife. “Listen, Cian. I like you. And I like Miss Lovell here. But I like myself more. I’m going to keep Miss Lovell

with me until we get to the next stop. Then you stay on the train, and I'll go on my way, and Miss Lovell will be just fine."

"You're as dumb as you look," Cian said. "The Children found you. Do you think they won't find you again? You can run all you like, but they won't stop." Cian paused, and a revelation showed in his face. "Good God, you didn't give it to them, did you?"

Sam tensed. Irene slipped her hand into her pocket. The world was still sliding sideways, but she found the revolver.

"What was it?" Cian asked. "You gave them a fake?"

Sam laughed. It was a bitter sound. "I'm smart but not that smart. I wish I'd thought that far ahead. I left the box somewhere safe. I thought I'd just run through the deal and see what they offered. I didn't expect them to lock me up and beat the stuffing out of me."

"They're going to do worse when they find you again," Cian said. "You don't have to do this alone."

"Alone? Look who's talking. You can't see straight when you're around Witte. He says black, you say white. He says left, you say right." Sam took a step back, dragging Irene with him. She stumbled along as best she could. "I think I'll be safer on my own than with friends like that."

"Irene," Cian said. He took a frustrated half-step forward, and Sam brandished the knife. "God damn you."

Irene slipped the revolver from her pocket and set the muzzle to Sam's jaw.

Sam froze.

"I'm feeling quite a bit better," Irene said. "But I've still got a bit of a tremor. Why don't you drop that knife before my finger slips?"

“Miss Lovell,” Sam said.

“Right now, Sam. Drop it right now.”

Sam let out a breath and dropped the knife.

Chapter 45

The train stopped at Kirkwood, a small town to the west of St. Louis. The station had only a single platform, which was crowded as the passengers fled the remaining cars, braving the cold rather than another minute aboard the train. Cian kept a tight grip on Sam's shoulder as they stepped onto the platform. To judge by Sam's face, Cian had found one of the many cuts and bruises that were still healing. Cian tightened his grip, and Sam barked a few choice swears, his face paling.

As far as Cian was concerned, that was just fine.

Cian wanted to do worse. He wanted to break the little thief's arms and throw him into the lion's den. He wanted to knock the little shit to the ground and kick him until he stopped moving. He wanted, most of all, to make Sam as afraid as Cian had been.

But he settled for crushing the boy's shoulder.

"He's going to pass out," Irene said. "Or be sick. Ease up."

"He had a knife to your throat."

"Well I have his knife now. And I don't want his vomit on my shoes."

Cian eased his grip.

Slightly.

Sam wiped sweat from his face in spite of the cold. He was sweating.

With an irritated grunt, Cian let go of the boy's shoulder.

"Run, and I'll shoot you."

Sam nodded, massaging his aching shoulder. When Sam pulled his coat back, Cian saw fresh blood staining the boy's shirt. Cian's mouth tasted as though he'd been chewing limestone all morning. Heavy and dirty, all at the same time.

"Good God, what did you do to him?" Irene said.

"He tried to kidnap you," Cian protested.

"I handled it."

Cian opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Irene smiled and squeezed his hand.

His mouth snapped shut.

And he decided he would probably never understand women. Or, more specifically, Irene.

Automobiles crowded the streets around the station. Some of the new arrivals carried cameras and notepads, pushing their way onto the platform to snap photographs of the ruined train and the surviving passengers.

The surviving passengers. Cian's stomach dropped below his belt. How many had survived? A fraction of those who had originally been on the train. A third? A quarter? How many had been left behind when Irene detached the cars.

Irene's face was pale. Her dark eyes were wet. She was watching the crowd too.

Sam was still picking at his bloody shirt and, in general, looking like a particularly sulky child.

The sky looked like a piece of dirty wool that had been tacked into place by a drunken handyman. In places, the bunched up clouds drooped, sagging folds of gray, while in other parts the clouds had been stretched too thin. It was a dark, shitty day, and Cian wanted a drink.

More cars continued to jam the streets. In addition to the press, there were curious locals and passers-by, and family and friends who must have seen the trouble at Union Station and

attempted to follow the train. Police were already at the station, segregating people for questioning.

Cian watched as a mustachioed police officer moved towards them. A woman in a massive black hat intercepted the policeman, and Cian grabbed Sam. By the arm, this time.

“Let’s go,” Cian said. “We don’t want to answer their questions.”

They moved around the edge of the platform, towards the steps that led down to the street. People on the sidewalk shouted questions, which Cian ignored. A man in a dark hat lunged in front of Cian, holding up a camera, and Cian shoved him back into the mass of bodies.

“You’ve got a good touch with the common folk,” Sam said.

“You’ll find out yourself,” Cian said.

He caught Sam grinning at Irene. Sam paled, swallowed his grin, and looked at the ground.

They were almost at the stairs when someone shouted Cian’s name.

Cian didn’t mean to turn. It was instinct. He glanced around.

And he met Captain Irving Harper’s gaze.

“That’s him,” Harper shouted. He had a white bandage around his forehead, visible under his hat, but he still looked as mean as sin. “Get him!”

Policemen plunged into the crowd, moving towards Cian and his friends.

“Hurry,” Cian said, holding Sam by one arm and Irene by the other as he rushed them down the steps.

“What’s that fellow want with you?” Sam asked.

“Shea!” Harper shouted. “Stop right there! You’re under arrest. Stop that man!”

A blocky fellow with a jaw-strap beard stepped into Cian’s path, holding out one hand.

Before Cian could move, Irene drove her heel onto the bearded man's foot.

He went down with a howl.

"You're both mad," Sam said, staring from Cian to Irene. "Totally mad."

"Keep moving," was all Cian said.

Shouts were spreading now. Cian pushed Irene and Sam between the stalled cars. He kept an eye on Sam, because he didn't trust the boy as much as an inch, but he had to keep an eye on Irene too. She'd gone loopy in the train after hitting her head, and although she seemed better now, there was no telling.

As though on cue, Sam twisted and tried to pull free, and Irene staggered.

"Help," Sam shouted. "Police! Help!"

Cian let go of Irene. He took two steps, grabbed Sam by the coat and the back of the head, and slammed the boy into the closest automobile—a cream-colored Chrysler.

The crunch of a broken nose, and then the spray of blood across the Chrysler's hood.

"My nose," Sam shouted. He turned and swung. The blow was wild, glancing off Cian's shoulder.

Cian landed on a punch on Sam's chin. The boy's eyes rolled up. His legs shivered like two old women in a draft.

Then he folded.

Cian dragged the boy over his shoulder. "Irene?"

"Fine," she said, one hand pressed to her head. "Go."

"But—"

"Go!"

A pair of policemen appeared between the cars, rushing towards Cian. He cast one glance at Irene and then ran, Sam's weight throwing him off balance. The line of cars seemed interminable. Cian's lungs burned as he pounded down the pavement. Sam might as well have been a sack of bricks.

And then, as Cian reached the end of the street, a Ford Model T pulled across his path.

Damn. Not a single break today.

Cian reached for the Colt.

Then the door swung open, and Pearl stared out at him. "Get in!"

"Irene," Cian said. He jerked a thumb.

"I'll get her," Pearl said.

She dropped from the car, alighting with easy grace, and strolled away. Nothing more than a woman out on an errand.

Cian, on the other hand, felt like a sack of dirty laundry. Dirty laundry that had been trampled by a herd of angry cattle. He climbed into the back of the Ford, dropped Sam, and pulled the door shut.

Harry took one glance at Sam's bloodied face. Then he turned his attention back to the street.

As they pulled away from the station, Harry spoke. His voice was careful. Non-committal. The voice of a man walking a tightrope.

"You didn't kill him, did you?"

Chapter 46

Irene wheezed. She couldn't seem to catch her breath. Everything smelled like sweat and fear and the unmistakable need to give her hair a good wash. She leaned against one of the stopped cars. The metal was cold, pulling her skin close with a frozen kiss, but it felt good against the fever heat running in her blood. Shouts came closer along with heavy footsteps.

One of the policemen raced past her. The other stopped. He looked at her and hesitated.

"Miss? Are you alright?"

Irene nodded. His breath smelled like tomatoes.

And then the world went sideways, and her knees went out. The policeman caught her and called for help. He carried her to the ledge of the platform and helped her sit. More policemen raced past them, still in pursuit of Cian. Irene took slow breaths and patted her cheeks with snow. The policeman who had helped her looked up and down the street—anywhere but at her.

Irene wished that falling had been part of a plan. Instead, it was simply convenient. One fewer pursuer for Cian.

It was also hellishly embarrassing.

"Who is this?" a rough voice asked.

"I'm not sure, sir," the officer responded. "She was being dragged along by that big fellow. I think he hit her, sir. See that cut to her forehead? She's having trouble standing."

"Miss?" the rough voice said.

Irene looked up. A bulldog-faced man studied her. His cheeks and jaw were covered with graying stubble. His eyes were folded in sad, dark pouches. Irene counted a half-dozen stains on

his tie alone, and his suit and winter coat were frayed and dirty. He wore a revolver that looked like it could stop an elephant.

“My name is Captain Irving Harper,” he said. “Who are you?”

“Irene Lovell,” she said.

And then she realized that, all things considered, another name might have been a wiser choice. Everything seemed fuzzy after hitting her head. She wanted to lie down and sleep. Right here in the snow, if these men would be kind enough to allow her.

The bulldog-faced man—Harper, he’d said—looked at her as he pulled a crumpled notebook from his pocket and the stub of a pencil. He scribbled something and jammed the pencil between his teeth.

The ache in Irene’s head redoubled.

“You look familiar,” Harper said. “Have we met, Miss Lovell?”

Irene shook her head. But then she remembered where she’d seen Harper before. First in the alley, after the sauria had attacked and almost killed Cian. And then again in the hospital, when she’d gone to rescue Cian. The bulldog-faced man had walked right past her. She turned her face down and massaged her temples.

“Strange,” Harper said. “I could have sworn I’d seen you. No matter. Would you mind telling me how you know Cian Shea?”

“Who?”

“The man you were just with.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know him.”

“You don’t? I find that hard to believe, Miss Lovell. You were running with him. I saw you.”

“I was—I didn’t know him. He grabbed my arm.” Irene’s eyes watered. “I’m afraid my head is aching terribly. Could we speak about this later? I believe I should lie down.”

“Of course, Miss Lovell. Just a few more minutes. You say you didn’t know him and that he grabbed your arm. Why were you running with him then? You weren’t resisting. I heard the young man call for help. You, on the other hand, were silent. There are plenty of men here who would have leaped at the opportunity to help a woman in distress?”

“I’m a grown woman. I hardly need a man for everything that happens.”

“So you were not afraid when Shea grabbed you?”

The throb behind Irene’s eyes had crystallized into luminescent halos that clung to the everything she looked at. She closed her eyes. It helped a bit.

“Miss Lovell?”

“I’m so sorry. My head—”

“A moment longer. Could you explain your relationship to Cian Shea?”

“Cian?” It was growing harder to think. Words and images slipped through Irene’s fingers like sand at the bottom of the river. She cracked open her eyes. Light stabbed the back of her brain. She shut her eyes again. “Are you his friend?”

The man—she couldn’t remember his name—nodded. “Of course. I’m just trying to find him. Do you know where he is? Maybe at a hotel?”

Irene laughed, although the sound danced like broken glass in her head. “No, the hotel is a wreck.”

“Somewhere else, perhaps?”

“Yes. He’ll be at—”

“Irene!”

A woman's voice. Familiar. Irene risked opening her eyes again. Pearl, dressed in a lovely red coat, pushed her way to the platform. Pearl's hair had come loose and hung around her shoulders, and her cheeks were red from the cold.

"Officer," Pearl said. "Thank goodness you found my friend."

"Captain," the man said.

"Irving Harper," Irene said, as the name came back to her.

Harper nodded.

Pearl looked at Harper and then at Irene. "Irene, are you well? Heavens, what—" She turned to Harper. "She's been struck."

"Yes, I was—"

"You were sitting here, questioning her, while she bled to death in the cold." Pearl pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve, scooped up a bit of snow, and pressed the icy bundle to the side of Irene's head.

It felt wonderful. Irene's headache shrank by a mile.

"Of all the brute, cruel things," Pearl was saying. "Officer, I'll be speaking to your superior about this."

"It's Captain, ma'am. Miss Lovell—"

"I see you got her name out of her. And that wasn't enough? The poor thing needs a doctor."

"Miss Lovell is fine. Your name, ma'am—"

"Miss Lovell can't even sit up straight and you're badgering her. She could have been killed on that train. Look at her. Poor thing, she's a wreck. Come on, Irene. Let's get a cab."

“I’m afraid I have a few more questions. Miss Lovell was just about to tell me something important.”

Pearl sniffed and helped Irene down from the platform. Irene’s legs wobbled, and Pearl caught her around the waist. Irene patted her hand.

Had she ever disliked Pearl? It seemed hard to imagine. That headache was a mountain blocking Irene’s memories.

“Nothing so important it can’t wait until she’s seen a doctor,” Pearl said. “That will be all for today.”

The frustration on Harper’s bulldog-face was visible, and Irene had to smother a sudden giggle. The poor man looked so pitifully bewildered.

“If I could have your address, then—” Harper asked.

“No need, Officer,” Pearl said. She guided Irene into the street and hailed a cab. “I can assure you that I will be in touch with your superior as soon as possible.”

Pearl climbed into the cab. As she shut the door, Irene heard Harper protest—one last time—“That would be captain, ma’am,” and then the cab pulled out into the street. Irene leaned back against the seat while Pearl dabbed the damp handkerchief to her temple.

Irene let out a weak chuckle. “You know how to make them dance, don’t you?”

For a moment, silence.

Then Pearl let out a low, melodious laugh. Quiet and beautiful. Like the woman herself.

“I’m afraid I’m an amateur compared to you, my dear. Lie still now. That’s a nasty cut, and you need to rest.”

Irene snuggled closer to Pearl, letting her head fall on the other woman’s shoulder. Irene wanted to ask about Cian, and about Sam, and about all the rest of it, but the questions floated

just out of reach. She shut her eyes, listening to the cab's tires, smelling the dried lavender that clung to Pearl's coat, and fell asleep.

Chapter 47

The sofa was still too small. Cian shifted from side to side. He curled into a ball—a rather large, bulky ball. He let his feet dangle off the edge.

None of it worked.

His mind went back to the train. The brief, adrenaline-fueled fight with the golems. The helplessness, a hand around his throat, when Sam tried to kidnap Irene. And the sick in his stomach now, as though he'd spent an evening doing somersaults with a belly full of glass.

Because he'd left Irene behind.

When he closed his eyes, he saw Corinne. Her face pressed up against the stone wall. One eye wide with terror. Staring at him.

He had left her too.

When he heard someone in the kitchen, he got up and made his way toward the flicker of gaslight.

Pearl stood at the stove in a heavy nightgown. Her hair was up, her eyes shadowed, her full face cut with planes of light and dark. She looked like a statue of Venus that had put on a pair of wool socks.

"I'm sorry," she said in a low voice. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"I couldn't sleep."

"Me neither."

"Is she—"

"She's fine, Cian. Just sleeping."

Cian dropped into one of the chairs and put his elbows on the table. “She didn’t seem fine.”

“She took a bad blow to the head. If she isn’t better in the morning, we’ll take her to a doctor.” Pearl took a pair of mugs from the cabinet. She prepared tea in silence and brought the mugs and teapot to the table. “Honey?”

Cian shook his head.

Pearl stirred a bit of honey into her tea. She slid the second mug towards him. Her large, dark eyes never left him.

Cian sipped at the tea. Chamomile. But bitter. He spooned honey into his as well.

Pearl smiled. It was a losing kind of smile. The kind that only came around at two in the morning.

“It’s not your fault,” Pearl said.

“Of course it is.”

“You can think what you want, of course, but a bit of advice: don’t say that to Irene. She’ll resent you.”

Cian laughed and tried the tea again. Better. “It won’t matter. I’ll say something else wrong and she’ll put her back up. I never thought women were so complicated until I met her. I’d always just—well, things had always worked out.”

Pearl smiled and took a drink of her tea to cover it.

“What?” Cian asked.

“Nothing.”

Cian gestured for her to speak.

“If you thought those other women weren’t complicated, Cian, you were likely doing something wrong. That’s all.”

“No argument there.”

Pearl let out a quiet laugh. She laughed until she was crying, wiping her eyes. It took Cian a moment to realize that the tears weren’t from the laughter. After another minute, Pearl’s laughter and tears subsided, and she stared into her mug.

“Pearl?” Cian asked.

“I’m fine, Cian. Tired. And, as you know, we women are oh so terribly complicated.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

“She does care for you, you know.”

“Irene?”

“Don’t play dumb.”

Cian hesitated. He ran his thumb along the edge of the table. He wanted a smoke and a drink and a man who might understand the shit that Cian was in.

Instead, he looked at Pearl and said, “Sure, sometimes I think that. Then I say something that makes perfect sense, and she rides me like I’m a lame horse. Or she flares up and starts picking fights. Or I turn around and—”

Pearl raised an eyebrow.

“And she was with Patrick. I mean, I’m not blind. I know he’s a good-enough looking fellow. The girls in the Patch practically throw their skirts over their heads when he walks past —”

“Charming,” Pearl said.

“—and it doesn’t take a genius to see that Irene’s taken with him.”

Pearl rearranged the honey and the teapot.

“You don’t agree?” Cian asked.

“I think that girl worries more about you—and about what you think—than she does anything else. I think she’s got spirit and brains that would terrify most men. And I think that if you don’t know that some men and women fight like cats and dogs when they’re in love, you’re as dumb as Irene likes to claim.”

“That doesn’t make a lick of sense.”

Pearl shrugged. Her gaze had moved to one of the walls, as though she were staring through it, seeing something beyond it.

Harry.

He had disappeared with Sam as soon as they had arrived at the apartment, locking himself in the back room and ordering Cian not to let anyone in. The silence from that room had been worse than anything Cian could have imagined.

Then Cian saw the look on Pearl’s face. The realization was a brick to the side of the head.

“You love him.”

Pearl gave him that losing smile again, that two-in-the-morning smile. It was the smile that a statue might wear after a thousand years.

“God, I had no idea. You hide it well.”

Pearl laughed and wiped her eyes. “I wish that were true. Irene knew from the first minute. I imagine that’s why she enjoyed Harry’s attention so much. You, Cian, are a man, so it stands to reason you didn’t notice. I’m not sure Freddy knows. Some days, I’m not even sure Freddy remembers I’m a woman.”

“It’s a hard fact to miss,” Cian said.

Pearl smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Shea.”

He pretended to take off his hat. Then he said, “Does Harry know?”

“Of course.”

The truth about Harry was working its way like a snake through Cian’s gut. “Pearl, it’s not my place to say anything. I know that. You tell me to shut my mouth and I’ll shut it. But Harry. He’s not—well, the thing about him is, he’s—”

“I know,” Pearl said, and the words were a sigh.

They sat for a few minutes in silence. Then Cian tapped his mug against Pearl’s. The tiny clink felt like the only sound in the world.

“To impossible loves,” Cian said.

They both drank deeply.

Chapter 48

Harry came out of the back room at ten the next morning. He had his coat in one hand. His shirt was still pristine. No blood. No signs of struggle. Aside from his immaculate clothes, though, Harry looked like a man who had crawled out of hell backwards. New lines scored the corners of his eyes, and his face was hollow, as though he'd gone a week without eating, or been recently bereaved, or perhaps both. He shut the door and dropped into a chair.

Cian poured him a scotch.

Harry drank it without a word.

"Well?" Cian asked.

Harry held out the glass. Cian poured him another finger of scotch. When Cian passed the glass back, Harry pressed it to his cheek. "He talked," Harry said. Then he downed the scotch.

"God," Cian said, letting out a breath. "And?"

"Is Pearl up? Irene?"

"Pearl is. Irene's still resting."

"I don't want to repeat this."

Cian went to the sitting room. Pearl sat with her knitting basket in her lap and a length of what looked like the beginning of a scarf.

"Harry wants to talk," Cian said.

Pearl tucked her knitting away and joined them in the front room. She sat on the sofa. Now that Cian knew what to look for, he saw it right away. Harry might as well have been the only man on earth, the way Pearl watched him. Cian wondered if he looked that way sometimes.

He wondered if it was too early for a drink for himself.

“Are you ok?” Pearl asked.

Harry nodded. “It was a long night.”

“Is he—”

“He’s fine, for now. Sleeping.” Harry paused. “Pearl, I don’t want you in there with him. Or Irene. Hell, or you, Cian.”

“With that kid? I handled him all right until now.”

“He’s got something wrong with him. Something the Children did to him. You told me he tried to hurt Irene.”

“The boy threatened her, sure,” Cian said. “But threatening her is a lot different than actually trying.”

“He would have done it. He would have done a lot worse than whatever he told you.” Harry stopped. “Stay away from him for now. We’ll see what happens tonight and then we’ll figure out what to do with him.”

“And what happens tonight?” Pearl asked.

“Sam told me an interesting story. What he first told us was true, up to a point. He’d gone looking for the mask because he knew both Byrne and the Dane wanted it and he knew they’d pay good money. He went to the Children because he heard they were willing to pay even more. Now, this is the part of the story where Sam started fibbing. Yes, he went to make a deal with the Children, and yes, they took him captive. The Children, however, weren’t the ones who double-crossed Sam.”

“Sam didn’t take the mask to the meeting,” Cian said. “He told me as much on the train.”

“Exactly. A smart thing to do, since they may have killed him outright if he had brought the mask. Instead, they kept him and tried to get the location of the mask out of him. Sam might be barely more than a boy, but he’s tough. I don’t think he told them.”

“But you’re not sure,” Cian said.

“No, he must not have told them,” Pearl said. “Otherwise, why go to such effort to find him again? They’re desperate for the mask and they know that Sam is the only one who can tell them where it is.”

“Not anymore,” Harry said with a smile. A pasteboard smile.

“He told you,” Pearl said.

Harry nodded. “He hid it right under the Dane’s nose. In a brothel, in the room of a girl Sam had visited a few times. On the south side of the city.”

Pearl wrinkled her nose.

“And we’re going to get it,” Cian said. “Why not go right now?”

“Because it’s too risky. By day, the girls are sleeping. Any strangers are going to get the door slammed in their face.”

“So we kick the door down.”

“And get shot up by the Dane’s men.” Harry shook his head. “Better we go tonight.” Then a faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “As customers.”

“Maybe we should think of a more believable lie,” Cian said.

The smile dropped from Harry’s face. “I’m tired, Cian. It’s been a bad night. So I’m afraid I don’t have my normal patience for your barbs. Let me make something perfectly clear to you: you are here because I allow it. Either you do as I say, without complaint and question, or

you leave. What we do is too important for me to risk everything on an overgrown mick.
Understood?”

“I understand,” Cian said. He stood up. “I’ve known men like you, Harry Witte. Don’t think you can pull the wool over my eyes. I know you. But like it or not, I’m doing this. Not because I give a damn about you, but because I know it’s important. Because I’ve seen what those people can do. Once the mask is destroyed, we part ways.” Cian stopped. He took a breath, shoved his hands in his pockets, and said, “I’m going to check on Irene. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Eight sharp,” Harry said.

Cian nodded. He went down the hallway towards Harry’s bedroom and didn’t look back.

He could hear Pearl’s voice and his name. Then a sharp reply from Harry. Then silence.

Damn Harry Witte. And damn every bastard like Harry Witte, and Harley Dunn, and the rest of them.

Cian paused at the door to Harry’s bedroom. He took another breath, shook the anger from his shoulders, and knocked.

“Come in,” Irene said, her voice thick with sleep.

God, a man could wake up to that voice for a hundred years and never be bored.

The room was dark, the curtains drawn, with pommels of light carved where the curtains met the floor. It took a moment for Cian’s eyes to adjust. Then they almost dropped from his head. Irene lay in bed, the covers pulled down to her waist, in nothing but her camisole. The lines of her neck and shoulders and arms drew his gaze. Her dark eyes drank up the room. Cian stopped for a moment and wondered if he was still breathing or if he had forgotten how.

“Don’t tease me,” Irene said, brushing her short dark hair back. Every movement exposed new, and interesting, inches. “You’ve seen me in my camisole before.”

Cian tried to say something. It came out like a growl. He cleared his throat.

“Really? That’s so interesting,” Irene said with an impish smile. “Come sit down, Cian, before you fall through the floor.”

There wasn’t a chair.

Irene patted the side of the bed.

Cian’s legs felt like he was walking on wet newspaper. He dropped onto the side of the bed. Irene’s smile faded. She studied him in the half-dark. A small white bandage covered her temple. The room smelled of liniment and warm bedding and the unmistakable scent of Irene’s skin. Cian’s cheeks were hot.

“I was having the most wonderful sleep,” Irene said, “until someone started shouting.”

It took Cian a moment to realize that she was speaking to him.

And, more importantly, that he was staring.

“Oh,” he said. “Yes. Well, it was nothing. A disagreement.”

“With Harry?”

“Who else?”

“You’ve been butting heads with him since the two of you met.”

“He’s a presumptuous ass.”

“Not really.”

“He’s—just trust me, Irene. He’s trouble. I’ve known men like him. They’re only looking out for themselves, and if you trust them, you’ll get hurt. Or killed. He’s going to do that to Pearl, one day. Get her killed, I mean.”

“I don’t think so,” Irene said. “I think he loves her.”

Cian snorted. “Trust me. He does not love her.”

“And how in the world would you know, Cian Shea?” Irene propped herself up. “Are you suddenly the expert on love?”

“Not at all,” Cian said. “But I’m fairly sure that Harry doesn’t have eyes for Pearl.”

“Well I think he does.”

“Irene, for God’s sake, would you just—”

“And what makes you so certain? I have a woman’s intuition, Cian.”

Cian took a breath, ready to respond, and then paused. Instead, he said, “Can we make a deal?”

Irene eyed him suspiciously.

“Please?”

“Let’s hear it.”

“We table this current argument—as interesting as it is—because I’m about to pick an even bigger fight with you. I’m tired and I need to conserve my strength.”

“Consider it tabled,” Irene said. “What’s this new fight going to be about?”

“Tonight.”

“I’d like to go out for dinner. Not the Grand. Someplace else.”

Cian laughed. “Not the Grand. But I’m afraid dinner will have to be another night. Harry got answers out of Sam. The mask is hidden here, in the city. We’re going to get it. And it’s going to be dangerous, Irene. And I absolutely forbid you to come.”

“You forbid me.” Irene’s voice could have raised icicles in midsummer.

“Well.” Cian swallowed. “Yes. Irene, you were hurt last night. Badly. And I left you behind. I can’t do that again.”

Her hand found his. “I was fine.”

“But what if you hadn’t been? Irene, I’d have gone mad. If something happened to you—
if I couldn’t protect you—”

“Very well.”

“No, just listen—wait. What?”

“I said, very well.”

“You won’t go?”

“No.”

“Maybe we could find you another hotel. Sam is still here. I don’t like the thought of you
being here alone with him.”

Irene nodded. “That sounds wise.”

Cian waited for the other shoe to drop. “But?”

“But nothing. You make a good point. I’m still a bit rattled from that blow to the head,
and a night off will do me wonders. I’ll stay at the Majestic.”

“You will?”

“Yes,” she said with a laugh. “Goodness, Cian, you’re acting as though I’ve grown horns.
I know reason when I hear it.”

“You do?”

Irene’s eyebrows went up.

“Yes, of course,” Cian said. “Perfect.”

“Now. One last question, Cian Shea.”

Cian felt the trap closing.

“Who is Captain Irving Harper, and why is he looking for you?”

Chapter 49

Cian danced around the question for a half an hour like a dog with his head in a beehive. Irene watched him, feeling a mixture of anxiety and amusement. Anxiety that he wouldn't answer the question truthfully. Amusement that—well, that he was Cian, and he had as much deception in him as a teaspoon. Eventually, and with a look that told Irene that Cian believed he had succeeded in dodging the question, Cian made a flurry of excuses and practically ran from the room.

Irene dropped back onto her pillow. Her head still ached. She felt like she'd fallen down ever step in the Louisiana Grand. She thought about the look in Cian's eyes when he'd walked into the room. She thought about the tremor in his leg as he'd sat next to her on the bed.

She wondered, if she'd shown him her breasts, if he'd have swallowed his tongue.

She certainly hoped not.

Then Irene got up and set to work. She packed her suitcase, freshened up in the bathroom, and carried her belongings to the front door. Pearl sat on the sofa with her knitting. Her eyes were red, and her hands were idle in her lap.

"Pearl?" Irene said. "Is everything alright?"

Pearl lined up the knitting needles and shook her head.

"Is it Harry? I know he and Cian fought, but—"

"No," Pearl said. Her voice was raw. "No, Harry's sleeping. He's fine. It's Freddy."

"Freddy?" And then realization. "Oh, Pearl. I'm so sorry."

The other woman nodded. "Sam told Harry that he didn't know anything about the carving. Harry—Harry says Sam is telling the truth." Pearl paused a moment to recover herself.

When she spoke again, her voice was steadier. “I suppose I believe him. It was one thing to know that Freddy had kept that disc. Considering his past, I thought that it might have been nothing more than curiosity. But that carving.” She stopped again. “I’m sorry, you don’t need to hear all this.”

Irene set down her suitcase and coat. Then she sat on the sofa and embraced Pearl. The older woman sighed and patted Irene’s back.

“Thank you,” Pearl said. “I wish you hadn’t been dragged into this.”

“It’s ok,” Irene said. “We’ll all be fine. We’ll figure things out.”

Pearl laughed. It was a weak laugh, but it brought some color back to her face. “I suppose we will. Harry’s never let anything stop him before.” She glanced at the luggage. “Where are you going? You need to rest.”

“Cian wants me to stay at a hotel. He says you’ll be busy tonight and he doesn’t want me here alone with Sam.”

“And you agreed?”

Irene fought to keep the lie from showing in her face. “Of course. It makes sense, I suppose. I’ll have a good night’s sleep and be right as rain tomorrow.”

Pearl stared at her.

“Is Cian here?” Irene asked.

“He went out.”

“Ok. Well, let him know that I went to the Majestic, would you?”

“Of course. I’ll tell him you left.”

“Thank you,” Irene said. She turned toward the door and stopped. “Pearl, I am sorry about Freddy.”

“So am I,” Pearl said. “Be safe, Irene.”

Irene donned her coat, grabbed her suitcase, and hurried downstairs to hail a cab.

Two hours later, she was settled in a new suite of rooms at the Majestic. Although not quite as spacious or opulent as the Grand, the Majestic had the same straight lines, the same gleaming metalwork and marble floors, and—most importantly—the same lovely, large bathtubs with hot water. After she bathed, Irene studied herself in the mirror. The bruises across her back and legs were dark purple splotches with yellow rings.

Her father.

She dressed. She chambered the revolver. And then she took her coat and her clutch and went out.

Patrick was certain that he needed her father’s help. Irene was about to show him how wrong he was.

Chapter 50

At seven-thirty, Cian arrived at Harry's apartment. By that hour, the streets were already dark tunnels studded with guttering street lamps. In the fitful rings of light, the snow lost its muddied, trampled aspect and turned the walks into forgotten mountains. As Cian knocked on the door to Harry's, his stomach grumbled.

He needed money. He needed a job. And most of all, he needed not to see Harry Witte one more day than was necessary.

Pearl opened the door and ushered him inside. She wore, as she always did, a simple blouse and skirt. Nothing flashy. Nothing shabby, either.

Respectable. That was the word for it.

She made Irene look like a gypsy.

"There's a bite of supper in the kitchen," Pearl said. "Harry thought you might not have eaten."

"He did, did he?"

"Steak and potatoes."

Cian's stomach lunged towards the kitchen, but he held himself still. Then he shrugged. "I already ate. Thank you."

His stomach growled its disagreement.

One of Pearl's eyebrows went up.

"Is he here?" Harry asked. "We should go."

"We're almost ready," Pearl said. "Let me grab my things. Would you like a drink?"

Cian shook his head. "You're coming too, then?"

“Of course,” Pearl said. “With Irene resting, who else will keep you two from killing each other?”

That, Cian thought, was a remarkably good point.

Harry emerged from his bedroom a moment later, dressed like a man out on the town—tailored suit, sharp hat, silver cufflinks, shoes that Cian could see his face in. And a revolver, visible in a holster under Harry’s arm.

“Ready?” Harry asked. His voice was colder than the air outside.

Cian didn’t bother answering.

“After our conversation this morning, I want to make sure we’re clear on something,” Harry said.

“Stuff your apologies.”

Harry’s eyes widened. He gave a clipped laugh. “Apology? Not quite. I want to make sure you understand that I’m giving the orders tonight. That means if I say jump, you jump. And if I say we leave without the mask, we leave. If I say shoot—”

“I got it,” Cian said.

Harry nodded. “Pearl?”

She came out of the sitting room pulling on her coat and gloves. They left the apartment, climbed into Harry’s car, and started south. The silence inside the automobile was thicker than the ice on the streets. Pearl looked at both of them, sighed, and pulled out a compact mirror to check her face.

“You’re going to get someone killed,” she said.

Neither man bothered to ask who she was talking to.

A half an hour later, they pulled up in front of a large house. It was an older building but well-maintained, three stories of white-washed wood with dormer windows. Music and laughter came from inside, spilling out from behind curtained windows. The smell of cigar smoke and cheap perfume hung on the house like a bad pair of stockings.

“You take me to the most wonderful places,” Pearl said.

Harry grinned at her.

Cian thought, briefly, about what that smile would look like with all those pretty teeth bashed in.

“I doubt Pearl is the kind of guest they usually have here,” Cian said. “No offense, Pearl.”

“You’d be surprised by some of these places,” Harry said, “but in this case, you’re right. Pearl will wait here and keep an eye out for any of the Children—or any of the Dane’s men—who show up.”

“More waiting,” Pearl said with a mock-sigh.

“There’s another option,” Cian said. “I spoke with a friend about this place. She knows it well enough and she told me there’s a back door that the girls leave open. Apparently that’s the way the Dane’s men come and go, since they’re not paying customers. If Pearl sits out front, all she’s going to get is a frozen backside.”

“Who is this friend?” Harry said.

“A whore named Eileen,” Cian said. “Know her?”

“Funny. What do you think, Pearl?”

She hesitated. “I think we should consider both possibilities.”

Cian fought not to roll his eyes.

“Did Eileen tell you if the house is closely watched?”

Cian nodded. “She said a woman could stand in the back hall for the whole night and not get a second look. The Dane brings new girls in all the time.”

“No, Pearl,” Harry said. “I don’t like it.”

“Harry—”

“You’re going to walk through the back door all by yourself? And then what? What if something happens?”

“Harry Witte, I am a grown woman. I was taking care of myself long before I met you. I might not have experience with whorehouses, but I know women, and I’ll be safer—and warmer—talking to a few of those poor girls than I would be sitting in the car. I’m going in.”

Harry gave a strangled growl. Then he threw open the door and climbed out of the car.

“Stop smiling, Cian,” Pearl said with surprising heat. “You’re behaving very poorly.”

The men climbed the steps to the double doors on the front of the brothel while Pearl circled around back. She gave Harry a firm nod before she disappeared into the alley. Harry gave a sigh and brushed at his trousers.

“If something happens to her—”

Without finishing the threat, Harry pushed open one door and stepped inside. As Cian followed, he walked into a cloud of cigar smoke. Music—blues, played loud on a piano in one corner—made eddies in the air. They stood in a large room that must have taken up most of the main floor of the house. Chaise longues, sofas, and padded chairs filled the room, and most of the seats were occupied by men and women in various states of undress.

Cian watched Harry’s eyes, to see where the man looked first.

He had to give Harry credit. The man was a consummate actor.

It only took Cian a moment to get a feel for the place. In the front room, the women still wore dresses—although many had been persuaded, undoubtedly with the help of a few dollars, to let their dresses slide down or up, as the case may be, exposing shoulders and legs. The men, most of whom looked like working class types, had their collars open and their ties loosened, shirts free of their trousers, hats forgotten. In contrast to them, Cian and Harry looked like a pair of St. Louis's finest young men who had decided on a bit of adventure.

Cian cursed Irene for buying him those fancy clothes.

A woman with shockingly red hair—much brighter than Cian's—and a lavender dress strolled across the room to greet them. "Hello boys," she said. She walked with her back arched, and between her posture and the dress, certain attributes were made prominent. Quite prominent.

The way mountain ranges are prominent.

"God, pick your jaw up," Harry muttered to Cian. Then, with that too-smooth smile, he said to the woman, "Well. Hello to you too."

"My name's Kate," the woman said. "What can I do for two handsome young gentlemen?"

Harry leaned forward and, in a lower voice, said, "My big friend here is looking for some company. You might say he's new to all this. I was hoping you'd have someone who could . . . show him around." He chuckled.

Cian wondered how whorehouses looked on the act of murder.

Kate laughed softly. Her eyes ran up and down Cian, and he blushed. "Well, he is a big one. I think I know just the right girl to help him out." Then she looked at Harry, and she could have started a fire with her eyes. "But what about you? Such a considerate friend, you aren't going to forget about yourself, are you?"

Harry didn't move, but somehow, his entire posture changed. The air between Kate and him became electric. One of Harry's hands moved to hover next to Kate's without ever touching her. Kate's breathing shifted.

Even Cian was half-convinced.

"I think I've already met someone I'm taken with," Harry said. Then he glanced at Harry, and the look was unmistakable. "After all, I have a thing for red-heads."

Yes, murder was the only possible choice. Cian was almost certain the whores wouldn't mind.

At least, not too much.

Kate's cheeks were flushed, and she was laughing as she called over another girl. A petite blonde with legs that went to the moon, the girl spoke with Kate for a moment and then came over to stand by Cian.

"Evening, sir," she said. "I'm Marie, but you can call me Sweetie Pie. Everyone else does."

Harry was whispering in Kate's ear as they watched Cian. The red-haired woman's face was almost as bright as her hair, and she threw her head back and laughed.

Cian's tongue swelled until he thought he was going to choke.

Marie—Sweetie Pie?—stared at him, obviously waiting for a response. She threw a confused glance over her shoulder at Kate.

For a moment, Cian thought Harry and Kate were going to die from suppressed laughter.

God damn both of them.

"Would you like a drink?" Sweetie Pie asked.

"Yes," Cian said. "God, yes."

Kate was wiping tears from her eyes as she laughed.

“Anywhere but here,” Cian said.

“Come with me,” Sweetie Pie said with a sympathetic smile.

She led him out of the front room and up a flight of stairs. A series of unmarked doors ran the length of the hall. From behind several doors came the sounds—rather exaggerated sounds, from Cian’s limited experience—of love-making.

He wondered if his face could literally catch fire.

“Wait right here,” Sweetie Pie said, showing him into a small room that consisted of nothing more than a bed, a shuttered window, and a pitcher and washbasin. “Anything in particular?”

“Whiskey,” Cian said. “Lots of whiskey.”

She smiled at him, sweet as a spring morning, and shut the door.

It took Cian almost a full minute to stop thinking of new ways to kill Harry and remember why he was here. He dropped to his stomach and crawled under the bed. Aside from the usual dust-bunnies, the only thing of note was a forgotten sock.

No box.

No mask.

Cian swore and squirmed free of the bed. He made his way to the door. He needed time to check the other rooms. He’d send Sweetie Pie—no, God damn him, Marie—he’d send Marie back for something else. What did men need in a whorehouse? Crackers?

Crackers. Cian shook his head. He was losing his mind.

As Cian stepped out into the hall, though, he paused. He was face to face with a massive man with a bushy beard, blond gone to gray. The man looked familiar.

Before Cian could say a word, the man brought his arm up and slammed the butt of a pistol against the side of Cian's head.

A spark of white ballooned to fill Cian's vision. His knees turned to slush. And then he hit the ground.

Chapter 51

The whorehouse spread her legs in front of Irene. The building might have been stately once, standing three stories with dormer windows, but now mold speckled the white siding. Bundled in her coat, Irene rounded the corner to find the back entrance to the brothel. A door on the tenement to her right flew open. A red-faced woman tossed water from a pot, missing Irene by inches, and then the door slammed shut again. Snow hissed where the boiling water landed. A moment later, the scent of defrosting garbage worked its way into the air.

Irene grimaced, hiked up her coat, and stepped around the spreading puddle.

This part of the city pulled darkness over itself like sheets in need of a good wash. The air was heavy with coal smoke. From the next street, a pack of dogs barked and snapped, but the sounds cut off at the sound of a single gunshot. Irene took the cramped street to her left.

Not a soul in sight.

The thought did nothing to ease the prickles at the base of her neck.

It had taken her most of the day to track down Patrick Hannafy. She'd found him in a small brick house tucked into a street of similar, respectable homes on the south edge of Kerry Patch. He'd answered the door in his shirtsleeves and with a towel thrown over his shoulder.

Behind him, a girl of no more than five squealed as she escaped the bathtub and fled, nude, down the length of the house.

Patrick Hannafy had smiled and invited Irene in.

At the next corner, Irene paused and listened. For a moment, she'd heard the crack of ice behind her. When she glanced back, though, the street was empty. The moon was a grainy black and white behind the gauzy layer of smoke.

She checked the revolver in her pocket.

When no further noise came, Irene continued down the street. Her visit with Patrick had knocked her legs out from under her. It was one thing to see Patrick, with his boyish good looks and that million-dollar smile, at his bar or even at the Louisiana Grand. It was another to see him track down a laughing little girl named Lydia, his youngest sister, and dunk her in a rusting iron tub. Patrick had been laughing too.

He looked happy, in spite of the dark circles under his eyes.

He looked hopeful.

He'd told her the name of the brothel when she asked. He hadn't offered any questions.

The lies of omission rode on Irene's shoulders.

And then she'd reached the back of the brothel. The windows were dark. A flight of steps led to a door. Three empty clotheslines were strung along the length of the small lot. A lone clothespin clung to one line, refusing to budge in spite of winter.

Irene climbed the steps and checked the door. The handle turned easily. From behind came the sound of steps and then voices. Irene glanced back and saw a group of men—six of them—come around the back of the house. She darted through the door and shut it behind her.

Growing up, Irene had learned about prostitutes the way most proper young women did—which was to say, as a nebulous sub-class of the more general category of loose women. Loose women was an identification that often overlapped with common women or vulgar women. In church, she'd heard warnings about prostitution and fornication and whoredoms. The Old Testament, for example, had been particularly vexed by whoredoms. But that had been the extent of it.

When she'd gone to Oberlin, though—after her encounter with Francis Derby—she'd heard the other side of the coin. Although her teachers and fellow suffragettes had derided prostitution as an evil, they'd had a much more realistic account of the causes that led women into that profession, and of the need for a sympathetic heart towards such women.

All of which only made Irene's first glimpse of a brothel that much more surprising. She stood in a small kitchen. A wood-burning stove held a kettle and a pan of cold grits. Two girls in camisoles sat on stools, teacups arranged on a table between them. The image of a prostitute that Irene had shaped—of a jaded woman, her soul weary, her back even wearier—did not match these two girls at all. Both were young, and while neither was remarkably pretty, neither showed the lifeless, soulless despair. One was laughing, her mouth clapped over her hand, while the other bared an uneven smile.

The one who was smiling gave Irene a curious look. "Hello, miss. Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Anna," Irene said. "Is she here?"

The girls traded a look. "I'll get Kate," the one with the uneven smile said. "You should talk to her."

"No, please. I only need to talk to Anna. Her brother sent me."

The girl who had been laughing was staring at the floor now. The other girl was still watching Irene.

Irene fumbled with her clutch.

"Put that away. I don't want your money." The girl drained her teacup and stood. "Anna might be working. I'll check."

"Lucy," the other girl said.

"It'll be fine. Stay here in the kitchen."

She stood up and gestured Irene to her seat on the stool. Irene sat and folded her hands over her knees. She felt flushed and couldn't tell if it was embarrassment or simply the heat from wearing the coat indoors. Lucy looked at her one last time, gave a nod, and disappeared into the house.

A moment later, the back door swung open again, and the five men trooped into the kitchen. They gave Irene and the girl looks and traded a few coarse comments, laughing with each other.

"Who's your friend, Jess?" one of the men asked. He had a pair of scars that ran almost parallel from ear to nose. He stood over Irene and looked down at her. "All skin and bones."

Jess—the girl next to Irene—stared at the floor. "She's nobody, Mac. Just a lady that stopped by."

"A lady?" Mac said. He reached down and ran his finger along the side of Irene's face. She slapped his hand away.

"Kitty cat," Mac laughed, but his eyes were hard. He grabbed Irene's chin and tilted her head up. "You look cold. I bet I could warm you up. Would you like that?"

"From where I'm sitting, you don't look like you have much to offer." Irene let her eyes drift to make sure Mac knew what she meant.

"Mac, she's not—" Jess started.

Mac's fingers tightened until Irene grit her teeth. Then he let go and slapped her. Irene blinked and felt tears sliding free. Her cheek felt hot and numb.

A few of the men laughed.

"Come on, Mac," one of the men said. "Quit playing."

Mac's eyes didn't leave Irene's face.

“Right,” he said. “Right, boys. Let’s go have some fun.”

The men filed down the hallway, their laughter rising at another comment from Mac as he joined them.

“He works for the Dane,” Jess said, her voice barely more than a whisper. “You shouldn’t make him mad. He gets mean when he drinks.”

“He gets mean when he drinks?” Irene said. “God help him, I wanted to shoot him when he was sober.” She rubbed her aching cheek.

“You ok?” Jess said. “He likes to hit girls, I think.”

“Probably because he doesn’t have anything else to offer them,” Irene said.

To her surprise, Jess laughed, covering her mouth.

“He doesn’t,” she said, then burst into a fresh series of giggles. “He really doesn’t. I know.”

Irene tried to laugh. Instead, she felt sick to her stomach.

Those sheltered suffragettes—herself included—ought to spend a single night in a place like this.

Perspective was a burden Irene would be willing to share.

The first girl, Lucy, poked her head back into the kitchen and waved for Irene.

“Bye,” Irene said to Jess.

“Thank you,” Jess said.

Irene didn’t know what the girl meant. Instead, Irene smiled in response. She felt like she was sweeping broken crockery under the stove.

“Anna’s alone upstairs,” Lucy said. “She just finished.” As they started up the stairs, Lucy eyed Irene. “You really know her brother?”

Irene nodded.

“She talks about him a lot, but I’ve never seen him come by. Some families are like that. Ashamed. Disappointed.”

“I don’t think he feels that way,” Irene said.

“It’s ok if he does. My folks do.”

“Do they live here in the city?”

“No, out in the country. Dad grows corn. It’s a quiet place, but I thought it was too quiet.” Lucy laughed, her eyes bright. “It’s never quiet here.”

“Are you happy?”

“I have shoes and food and a bed,” Lucy said. She laughed again. “And it’s never quiet. Here’s Anna’s room. Nice to meet you.”

“You too. And thank you.”

Lucy smiled again, showing her ragged teeth, and then trotted down the stairs. Irene wiped her palms on her skirt. She knocked.

“Come in,” a voice said.

The room was spare, if Irene were generous. If she were blunt, it was Spartan. A bed with a flowered quilt and lace-edged pillows was the only gesture at decoration. The gingham sheets were in disarray. So was the blond girl on the bed. She wore a camisole that clung to her skin. Her eyes were wide and heavy, so that she looked as though she were either waking or falling asleep. Her legs were spread, and she made no effort to sit up when Irene stepped into the room.

This was the kind of woman Irene had imagined during all those Sunday sermons.

“Anna?”

The girl turned listless eyes to Irene.

“Anna, Patrick sent me. You need to get up and get dressed. Right now.”

Still no response.

Irene sat on the edge of the bed and took the girl’s hand. Anna’s grip was limp.

“I know it’s been terrible, sweetheart,” Irene said. “We’re leaving. Tonight. Now. Hurry, though. We have to hurry.”

“No,” Anna said.

“What do you mean? Patrick sent me. He told me, Anna. He wanted to come himself, but they’d kill him on sight.” Irene stood and made a circuit of the bed. “I’ll pack you a change of clothes and we’ll leave right now. We just need to get to a cab. Drat. I should have hailed one before I came inside. Oh well.” She glanced over at Anna. “Please, Anna. We can’t linger.”

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean?”

Tears welled in Anna’s eyes. She lay there as though dead. The tears spilling down her cheeks were the only signs of life. Fountains in a dead city.

“He said—” Anna began. She cleared her throat and closed her eyes. “He said if I left . . .”

“Who? The Dane?”

Anna nodded. “He’d bring Lydia here instead. He said there are men that like—men that like that.”

Irene’s knees went weak. “She’s only a child.”

Anna didn’t respond. With her eyes closed, her breathing soft, she might have been asleep.

Or dead.

“No,” Irene said. She grabbed Anna’s hand and pulled her upright. “Come on, Anna. We’re leaving. We’ll protect Lydia. We’ll protect all of them. We can send them away, or hide them—” Irene’s eyes were burning. She dragged at Anna. It was like trying to lift one of those massive rugs, which were always bending and folding in inconvenient ways and far too heavy to pick up all at once.

Irene let Anna drop back onto the bed. She wiped her eyes.

She’d never met the Dane. She thought about putting a bullet in the back of his head.

“Anna, get up right now, or I’ll walk downstairs and tell Kate I caught you trying to go out the back.”

Anna’s eyes flashed open. “She won’t believe you.”

“She will. I bribed Lucy and Jess to get me up here. You think they won’t take a little bit extra to sing a new song?”

“You wouldn’t.” Anna’s breath came faster. “You don’t dare.”

Irene moved towards the door.

“No,” Anna cried. She tumbled off the bed, her legs folding under her, and latched her arms around Irene’s waist.

The two women fell to the floor. Irene pulled at Anna’s hands. Her elbow cracked against the washstand, and tingles ran up Irene’s arm. She heard a thump as they landed.

It took Irene a moment to wiggle free. She flexed her arm. Not broken, which was something, but it still ached. Then she saw Anna.

The fair-haired girl lay on her side at the base of the washstand.

Irene dropped to her knees. Anna was still breathing, but she’d knocked herself out cold.

Perfect. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

Perfect.

Irene opened the door. She had half a mind to call for Lucy and ask for the girl's help.

There was no way Irene could carry Anna on her own.

But when she looked out into the hall, Irene stared Harry Witte in the face as he came up the stairs, his hands moving down the waist of a red-haired woman.

Moving very far down her waist, to be precise.

Shock flashed across Harry's face.

Irene blinked.

"Irene," Harry said. His eyes moved past her.

"Anna," the red-haired woman said.

"Harry," Irene said. It felt somewhere between a swear and a call for help.

The red-haired woman pushed past Irene, and Harry moved to join Irene at the door. He glanced down at the half-dressed girl and then back at Irene, and one of his eyebrows went up.

"What are you doing here?"

Irene fumbled for an answer. Her cheeks might as well have been molten steel.

And then, from further down the hall, she heard the thump of a falling body.

Thank God, she thought.

Chapter 52

Cian tasted carpet. His head felt like a broken egg. He groaned, opened his eyes, and immediately regretted it. The gas lamps overhead drove spears through Cian's aching brain.

The bearded man looked down at him. He raised his pistol and shook his head.

In life or death situations, Cian discovered he was remarkably intuitive. He got the message almost immediately.

Don't move.

That was fine with Cian. He was pretty sure his brain would slip out his ear if he tried to get up.

Voices came from further down the hallway, and the bearded man turned to look. Then he called, "Ian. Joe. You get your asses up here now."

"You find him?" a second voice answered. "Eileen said he'd be here."

"Just get up here."

The sound of steps on the stairs. Cian rubbed his eyes. Eileen, God damn her. She'd sent Byrne's men after him. The realization made Cian tired. The Colt was an uncomfortable wedge of metal against his back, and he thought about shooting the bearded man. Then he thought about how loud that shot would be.

His head ached too much.

The steps on the stairs were closer now.

"Excuse me," a new voice said. A familiar voice. "If you could just—"

There was a surprised shout and then the sound of someone falling down the stairs. Hard.

Cian's eyes flicked open.

Harry Witte stood at the top of the steps.

Cian groaned.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” the bearded man said. He took a pair of steps towards Harry. “I’m going to break your fucking neck.”

“I hope you don’t,” Harry said. “I rather like my neck the way it is.”

The bearded man shoved the gun into his trousers. “You came down here the wrong night, buddy.”

Harry sighed. “It’s always the wrong night for me, I’m afraid.”

Cian got to his knees. For a moment, he was certain that he had been right, and that his brain was about to fall right out of his head. Then the world put itself back together. He pulled out the Colt. Everything was still slightly out of focus, and Cian figured he’d be lucky if he could hit the floor.

“Hey,” he shouted.

The bearded man glanced back.

Before the bearded man could turn back, Harry pulled out his revolver and fired. The round knocked the bearded man onto his backside. He was still twisted about, staring at Cian. He blinked once and fell.

Screams rose throughout the brothel.

“Hey?” Harry said.

“It was the best I could come up with.”

Harry opened his mouth to say something else, but a bullet slammed into the wall next to him, dislodging a chunk of wood. Harry turned and fired. A sharp cry came from below.

“You brought friends,” Harry said.

Cian got to his feet. The world rocked, and he grabbed onto the door frame. He closed his eyes for a minute. Another gunshot came from nearby.

When he opened his eyes, Irene was standing in the hall.

Cian groaned again. "This is a bad dream, right?"

"Unfortunately, no," Harry said. He had taken a position near the stairs, out of sight of the shooters below. "Irene, would you like to explain what you were doing alone in a room with an unconscious prostitute?"

With a blink, Cian said, "Yes. Please explain."

Irene looked like she'd baked in the sun. "It's a long story. How do we get out of here?"

One of the doors along the hall opened. A balding, heavy-set man stumbled out of the room, naked except for a pillow held in front of his privates. His eyes were wide. Behind him, a naked woman stared at Cian and then slammed the door.

The balding man took one look at the hall and turned to pound on the door, begging to be let back in.

Harry shook his head in disgust, poked around the corner, and fired down the stairs.

"Cian, your head," Irene said. "Can you walk?"

"Of course I can walk." Cian did not, however, let go of the wall. Walking was one thing. Standing upright was completely different.

"Check the rooms," Harry said. "Find the damn mask."

Irene looked at Cian.

"Go," he said. "I'm fine."

She darted back to the room she had come from. Cian turned to the next door and tried the handle.

Locked.

Taking hold of the frame, Cian drove his heel into the handle. The frame snapped, and the door flew inwards. A half-dressed girl knelt on the bed, holding a Bible like a weapon. She screamed.

“Stop that,” Cian said, waving with the Colt. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

The girl continued to scream.

“Fine. Have it your way.” He paused again. He hated himself for taking a second look, but then again, she was only half-dressed, and Cian was only a man. And she was—

Cian shook his head. “Pull your dress up,” he said, more for the benefit of his conscience than anything else. Then he got onto his knees and crawled under the bed.

Nothing.

As he scooted out from under the bed, he felt something heavy collide with the back of his head, plastering Cian’s nose to the floor.

Overhead, with something approaching seraphic triumph, the girl shouted, “The Lord is my shepherd.”

Cian probed his nose. Not broken, thank God. Then he got to his knees.

The girl brandished the Bible.

“Damn it,” Cian said, looking focusing on the black book instead of the girl’s more noticeable traits. “I told you to pull your dress up.”

As he got to his feet, though, Cian paused.

The girl raised the Bible in warning.

“There’s a boy who comes here,” Cian said. “Blond. Annoying. The kind that would rob a priest. Goes by Sam. You know him?”

After a pause, the girl nodded.

“Who’d he visit, last time he came here?”

“He always goes to Nell.”

“Always?”

The girl nodded.

“Which room is hers?”

“Two doors down.”

“Good. Now, get under your bed and stay there until things quiet down. And for God’s sake, don’t hit anyone with that thing again.”

“You shall not take the Lord’s name in vain,” the girl quoted.

“Get under the God-damned bed!”

With a yelp, the girl dropped out of sight.

As Cian staggered back into the hallway, he saw Irene dragging a semi-conscious girl out of a room.

“What did you do now?” he asked.

“Nothing. Honestly, Cian, you act as though I make a habit of beating up these girls.”

Harry was still near the stairs, chambering shells in his revolver. “The mask?”

“I’ll get it,” Cian said. “Keep your trousers on.”

A pair of shots came from below, followed by a scream. Harry paused in reloading the revolver and raised an eyebrow.

“They’re shooting at each other?” Irene said.

Another volley of gunfire came from below.

Cian felt his stomach drop. “No. That means that the Dane’s men are here.”

“Perfect,” Harry said. “Now we only have to get past two groups of armed men, both intent on killing us.”

“And killing each other,” Cian reminded him. “That’s something.”

“Just get the mask.”

Cian made his way two doors down and knocked.

No answer.

He opened the door, keeping an eye out for girls who might be caught up in the type of religious frenzy that would end with Cian’s nose being broken. The room was dark, though, and empty. He got onto his belly and crawled under the bed.

And there it was. A small, sealed box.

Damn, he hated that box.

He pulled it free, wormed clear of the bed, and returned to the hall.

“I got it,” he shouted, raising the box overhead.

And that was when the window behind him exploded.

Chapter 53

Glass sprayed the floor as the window shattered. Cian stumbled back. He tucked the box under one arm and raised the Colt.

A spider as big as a hound pulled itself through the window. Light from the gas lamps traced the tiny hairs covering its body. The spider made a clicking noise.

Cian shot. The bullet pinned the spider to the wall. Its legs flexed once before curling in.

“Harry,” Cian said.

“What?”

Two more spiders pulled themselves through the window. In the room behind Cian, he heard the crack of breaking glass and a scream.

“Harry!”

“What?”

“We’re in trouble,” Cian said. He shot twice more. The spiders tumbled across the room.

But more were coming. There were always more of the damned things.

Cian pulled the door shut. Behind him, the scream continued to rise, and then the door flew open. A girl tumbled into the hall. For a moment, Cian thought she was wearing a heavy black coat. Then he realized it was one of the spiders that had latched onto her back. The terror in the girl’s face struck something in the back of Cian’s brain. It had the pull of a magnet, drawing his own horror to the front.

The girl stumbled and went down. Cian fired.

Jerking and dancing, the spider rolled off the girl and curled up to die. The girl didn't move. The back of her dress was gone, and the flesh was corroded and blackened at the edges of jagged puncture wounds. Cian pressed the back of his hand to his mouth.

The girl was crying.

He stepped over her and pulled the door to her room shut. The Colt weighed a hundred pounds.

When he mustered the courage to look back, the girl was shaking. Her eyes were glassy. The poison's progress through her back was visible, a dark spiderweb under the surface of the corroded skin.

It must have hurt like hell.

She was just one girl. They needed to go. Now. He had to leave her.

She was just one girl.

Corinne had been just one girl. He hadn't left her, and look how that had turned out.

"Cian," Irene said. Her voice was impossibly soft, as though she hadn't noticed that the world had gone mad around them. She set one hand over his.

Cian realized he had the Colt pointed at the dying girl. His knuckles were white.

"Cian," Irene said again. "It's alright." She pushed his hand down.

Cian shook his head and swallowed. The girl had stopped screaming. Now she just trembled as the poison worked its way through her. "She's—"

"Harry needs you," Irene said. "I'll take care of her."

"Irene," Cian said. His eyes were hot. He couldn't figure out why. "She's not going to get better. You can't."

"Go help Harry. I promise. I'll take care of her."

Cian hesitated a moment. Then his arm dropped. He wiped his eyes and made his way to the stairs.

The sound of broken glass came from behind closed doors on both sides of the hallway.

“The Children,” Cian said. His voice sounded as though he’d spent the last twenty years eating sand. “They sent those damned spiders.”

“You all right?” Harry asked.

“I’m fucking fine.”

“I was only—”

“Either tell me what we’re doing or shut the hell up.”

Harry frowned. “Fine. You keep them busy. I’ll open a path.”

“How?”

“Do what I say,” Harry said with an angry smile. “Or shut the hell up.”

Cian took Harry’s place. Harry stepped back and pulled an amber disc from his pocket.

“Is that it?” Cian asked.

Harry nodded. “I need a few minutes.”

Cian leaned around the corner. A group of men had set up an impromptu barricade at the base of the stairs. Two men were eying the steps, and one loosed a shot at Cian. Cian pulled back. Plaster and wood puffed into the air.

Harry’s eyes were open. His lips moved, but he didn’t make a sound. In his hands, the amber disc had a faint sheen, as though the gaslight were sliding off a layer of grease.

Further back, Irene had pulled a quilt over the girl on the floor. Irene’s back was to Cian. He didn’t need to see her face, though, to read the pain Irene felt. It was obvious in every line of her body. Plain and simple. Like reading stained glass in church.

He turned around the corner and fired twice. One man fell back, a bullet through the side of the head. The other round clipped the shoulder of a scrawny man, and he sent up a howl. Cian pulled back. The return gunfire sent vibrations through the wall.

Cian counted to ten. His elbow ached from the Colt's kick. The smell of gun-smoke filled his head. His ears rang from the shots.

Alive. He felt alive.

And angry.

As he readied himself to fire off another shot, though, Cian caught sight of Harry's face. The other man's eyes were wide. He looked past Cian. Or perhaps through him. They were the eyes of someone seeing something terrible or wonderful for the very first time. They sent a chill down Cian's spine.

"When I say the word," Harry said. It was a voice carried by a broken wire. "I need you to distract them."

Cian nodded.

Harry shivered. He stood up straight. His pupils had dilated until only a rim of color showed around them. In his hands, the disc glowed like an electric bulb.

"Now," Harry said.

Cian started to turn around the corner. Then, over Harry's shoulder, he saw one of the doors splinter. A massive spider, larger than the other, its fur graying, pulled itself through the broken boards.

"Now, Cian," Harry said.

"Irene," Cian said. "Irene!"

The spider crawled through the shattered door. Behind it, in the light of the gas lamps, lay the body of a dead woman. Her skin was blackened and puckered, as though she had died in a fire. Fear landed a kidney blow on Cian.

He darted around Harry.

“Cian,” Harry shouted.

Cian heard him like a train shooting past a canary. He raised the Colt and fired. The first shot caught one of the massive spider’s legs. The limb snapped, spraying a thick green goo across the floor. Where the sludge touched the boards, it sizzled and steamed, eating away at the wood. The spider rocked forward, off balance, but recovered.

Irene was turning around. Too slowly. Far too slowly.

Cian fired again. His heart was in his hands, throwing his aim off, making him feel as though his fingers were a hundred times too big. The shot skipped off the spider’s back. The wound was no more than a scratch, but more of the thick green fluid showed under the spider’s fur.

The creature reared back, preparing to lunge at Irene.

Cian fired again. This time the bullet flew true. The round caught the spider in the head. There was a wet, crushing sound as a chunk of the spider’s head was torn away. For a moment, the spider wobbled on its remaining legs. Then it fell.

Irene finished twisting around. Her eyes went to the spider’s leg and then to the crumpled body. Color ran from her cheeks like paint in a thunderstorm. With a shaking hand, she pulled out her little revolver and held it, pointed at nothing.

Without waiting for Irene to recover, Cian helped her to her feet. Together, they turned around. Cian froze.

Harry stood at the top of the stairs. His back was to Cian and Irene, and overhead he held the disc. He looked like something out of the pulps, the prophet of a savage god, bathed in the white-gold light that shone from the disc. Irene's nails bit into Cian's arms.

Cian tried to draw a breath.

A moment later, the light coiled in on itself and then shot down the stairs. The flare was tremendous. Cian shut his eyes too late, and a purple-green afterimage of Harry clung to the inside of his eyelids. Heat rolled down the hallway, bringing pinpricks of sweat to Cian's face and chest.

For a moment, silence. Then something in the house below collapsed.

On the superheated air came the scent of wood-smoke, and cooking meat, and the heavier stench of burned cloth. Cian opened his eyes and saw a cloud of ash and smoke boil up the steps. Harry still stood there. His shoulders sagged. His hands had dropped to his sides. The disc was only a piece of amber again.

He was Adam, cast from the Garden.

Harry turned around, exhaustion obvious in his face.

Cian saw the spider too late.

The creature crouched in the closest doorway, a tangled ball of legs and a compact, furry body. It launched itself at Harry without a sound.

Harry never saw it.

The spider landed on Harry's back and reared back. Harry jerked away from it, but it clung to him.

Cian pulled the trigger on the Colt.

An empty click.

The spider dropped its tiny head.

Harry screamed.

Cian crossed the distance to Harry in two huge strides. The spider still had its head buried in Harry's back. Cian brought the barrel of the Colt down as hard as he could. There was a pop, and the spider's head collapsed. The abomination kicked and flailed, still holding onto Harry in death.

Harry was still screaming. Cian had never heard a sound like it before.

And then Irene was there with a knife, prying the thing's jaws open. The spider dropped, still twitching, and Cian kicked it down the stairs.

Harry fell. Cian caught him around the waist and lowered him to the ground. The back of Harry's shirt had been eaten away by the spider's venom. A large circle of skin on Harry's back, surrounded the obvious puncture marks, was already red and corroded, as though Harry had been exposed to acid. Or, Cian thought, remembering France, to one of those awful gases that the Huns had used. Under the puncture marks, two dark stains were visible, marking pools of venom that inched out across Harry's back.

"Is he ok?" Irene asked.

"I don't know," Cian said.

"Well, will he be ok?"

"God, I don't know, Irene."

Irene's mouth was a thin line. She was holding onto the wall for support.

Harry whimpered. His eyes were wide and unseeing as he stared out across the floor. Blood ran from the corner of his mouth. From the venom or from biting his tongue, Cian didn't know.

Irene wiped her cheeks with the heel of her hands.

“We have to get him out of here,” Cian said. He lifted Harry. The man screamed again, then stiffened, and then collapsed. Silent.

Cian checked the man’s breathing, just to be sure.

Unconscious. Not dead.

He put Harry over his shoulder and moved to the stairs.

Irene hadn’t budged.

“Well?” Cian said.

“Cian—I can’t. There’s someone I have to help.”

“Who the hell do you have to help?”

She shook her head. “Go, Cian. Get Harry out of here. Now.”

Cian only had a moment. A moment to think about leaving Irene alone here. A moment to think about leaving Corinne.

Irene disappeared into the next room, and then Cian heard a girl screaming, and Irene’s voice.

She would have to take care of herself, but that didn’t make him feel any better. He took the stairs down. The rug on the steps was scorched in places, burned through in others, and fire had blackened the banister and paneling. Below, an entire section of the house was gone: floor, joists, and walls. Charred edges marked the a rectangular space that was now open to the freezing night air. It looked as though someone had run a match along a piece of paper.

It turned Cian’s guts to water. Nobody should be able to do that.

Nobody.

“Harry,” Pearl called from somewhere nearby. The smoke was thicker here, and the night air stirred ash and cinders. “Cian.”

Cian coughed, cleared his throat, and said, “Here, Pearl.”

A gust of air cleared the smoke long enough for Cian to glimpse Pearl, standing on the far side of the hole that had been burned through the hose. Despair filled her face, and then the smoke thickened again.

“Cian,” Pearl said. Her voice broke.

“He’s alive, Pearl. He needs help.”

“I’ll meet you at the car,” Pearl said.

From above came the sound of a shot. Cian glanced up.

“Irene,” he called.

No answer.

“Shit and double shit,” Cian muttered. “Irene!”

Nothing but the creak and groan of the house. Cian waited a moment longer. And then he stumbled towards the front of the building. The large front room was abandoned. An overturned drink made a translucent pool across the bar. The piano sat with its lid raised, as though there should have been music for the occasion, and someone—God, perhaps—had simply forgotten to start playing. A hat lay on one of the chaise longues.

The freezing air pulled the heat from Cian’s skin and breath. It outlined his gasps and pants as he carried Harry toward the car. In the weak light, the frosted breath seemed to hold together longer than it should have, trailing in Cian’s wake.

Like ghosts.

When he reached the car, he threw open the door and climbed into the back, laying Harry across the seat. Pearl arrived a moment later. She took one glance at Harry and got into the driver's seat. The car rumbled to life, and they pulled out into the street.

The woman could have given the Kaiser lessons in self-control.

"Is he—"

Cian checked Harry's pulse. It was fast. Too fast. Harry's skin was hot and moist, and his breath sounded like an ailing electric fan.

And then, Harry's eyes opened. He looked at Cian. He licked his lips, like a man trapped in the desert. And his hand crept up to take Cian's. His grip was slick with fever-sweat.

"It's ok, Ollie," he said, the words slurred. "It's ok. I won't let them take you again."

Cian froze. Part of him wanted to pull back. Part of him feared what might happen if he did.

"Ollie," Harry said. His grip tightened, and he tried to pull himself upright.

Cian forced him back down.

"Ollie?" Harry asked.

"It's ok," Cian said, and his voice was tight. "It's me. It's ok."

Harry nodded, and his eyes drifted shut.

After Cian had cleared his throat, he said, "Pearl, drive faster."

Chapter 54

As Cian disappeared down the steps, carrying Harry over his shoulder, Irene felt a pang of guilt. This was exactly what he had feared: leaving her behind again. What was worse, she had been caught out in her lie.

But who in the seven hells would have thought they'd be at a whorehouse tonight?

Irene tried to suppress a sigh. All things considered, she should have expected something like this. She stepped into Anna's room. Anna was sitting on the bed, a wadded-up cloth held to the side of her head, her eyes shut. Kate, in a dress that showed more cleavage than taste, stood with her back to the shuttered window. A scraping sound came from outside.

"What's going on?" Kate asked. Her voice had climbed higher, but she didn't look panicked. A bit wild about the eyes, but still in control. "Who are you? Who are those men?"

"You need to step away from that window," Irene said. "And we need to leave. Now."

"Those—those things."

"One of them is about to break through those shutters, I'd imagine. You don't want to be here when it does." Irene bent over Anna and shook the girl's arm. "Anna, get up. We're leaving."

"What do you mean?" Kate said. "She can't—"

The sound of snapping wood came from outside. Kate threw herself to the side. A heartbeat later, a dark body threw itself against the glass. The window shattered.

Irene fired the revolver. It caught the spider, by luck more than skill, and the creature tumbled to the floor. Through the broken glass, Irene could see more of the dark shapes on the building opposite them.

“Now,” Irene said. Her ears rang from the shot. She grabbed Anna and hauled the girl to her feet. “Come on.”

The three women staggered into the hallway, with Kate and Irene helping Anna to keep her feet. At the end of the hall, another spider crept out of one of the abandoned rooms, its abdomen close to the floor as though it were ready to leap. Irene motioned the other women ahead of her and took the stairs backwards, the revolver ready.

Instead of moving towards her, though, the spider seemed completely oblivious. It picked its way across the body of the dead girl, who still lay under the quilt that Irene had fetched. It moved another few paces down the hallway, its hairy legs trembling and twitching. As though searching for something.

And then she saw it.

The box.

The damned box that had started it all. It lay a few paces beyond the dead girl, where Cian must have dropped it when he had gone to rescue Harry. The spider stopped in front of the box. It traced the wood with one leg.

Irene took two steps back up towards the hall. She couldn't leave without the box. There were ancient, evil gods and terrifying cultists who wanted the box. Harry and Cian had risked their lives to retrieve it. But at the bottom of it all, Irene wanted that damn box because of her father. Because she wanted to see his face when she broke it into a thousand pieces.

A second spider slunk into the hall, and then a third. The creatures moved straight towards the box, crawling over each other in their efforts to reach the box. Irene ground her teeth. She had enough rounds to shoot them.

But did she have enough time?

A fourth spider emerged from farther down the hall. And then a fifth.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

Irene took a step down the stairs. And then another.

The box was hidden under the writhing mass of spiders. Between their tangled legs and bodies, Irene saw the dull gray filaments of a spiderweb being woven.

Irene shoved the revolver in her pocket and ran down the rest of the steps. At the bottom, the smoke was so dense that only luck and good reflexes kept her from pitching into the hole that had been burned through the building. Irene gripped the banister, felt her shoes skid across the remaining stretch of wood floor, and her heart flopped into her mouth. She stared down at the drop before her and eased back onto firmer footing.

Anna and Kate had vanished into the smoke. Irene turned, feeling her way along the hall until she reached a swinging door. On the other side, the air was much clearer, and she made out a large room dominated by chairs and sofas and a bar. The front door stood open, and fresh air cut through the dwindling smoke. Irene poked her head outside.

Anna and Kate held each other up as they slid and slipped down the icy walk.

“Wait,” Irene said. She hurried out after them. Her shoes had no grip on the ice, but she ran as best she could. “Wait!” Neither woman turned back.

When Irene reached them, she grabbed Anna’s arm. The girl flinched and went rigid.

“Here now,” Kate said, slapping Irene’s hand. “I don’t know you and I don’t know what you want, but get lost. You and your friends—” She stopped and swallowed. Her eyes were red. She slapped Irene’s hand again. “Go!”

“Stop hitting me,” Irene said. She pulled at Anna, dragging the girl towards her. “Let her go. She doesn’t belong to you.”

“Damn me if she doesn’t!” Kate grabbed Anna’s other arm and hauled the girl in the other direction. “If you have a problem with my business, you can speak to the Dane. He’ll set you straight.”

“The Dane’s men are soot stains,” Irene snapped. “Charcoal scraps in that ruin of a whorehouse. You cross me again and I’ll burn you to ash too!”

The words came out in a ragged shout.

Kate’s eyes widened. She let go of Anna, stumbled back, and fell on her bottom.

Then she started to cry. She turned onto hands and knees and dragged herself towards the frozen walk.

Anna might as well have been an ice sculpture. She didn’t blink. She didn’t shiver.

Irene wanted to empty her stomach. She pulled Anna after her, down the street, towards a cab. She glanced back once.

Kate was nowhere in sight.

When they were in the cab, headed towards the Patch, Irene leaned her head against the door. The chill metal and glass felt like the first substantial thing in years. From the weak reflection in the window, Kate’s terrified gaze stared back at Irene.

Irene breathed on the glass, and for a few moments, the fog covered her own fear.

Chapter 55

“In here,” Pearl said. She turned up the gaslights in Harry’s bedroom and pulled back the bedding.

Cian grunted and lowered Harry to the bed. Harry’s eyes flashed open for a heartbeat and then began to drift shut again. Harry’s wound looked worse. The blistered, corroded patch of skin had spread, covering half of his back, and although the inky venom had attenuated, it spread long, lacy whorls under Harry’s skin. Harry burned like a furnace.

Pearl returned with a bowl of snow and a rag. She sat on the side of the bed, rubbing the slush across Harry’s forehead, dabbing drops of the snow onto the wound.

“He needs a doctor,” Cian said.

Pearl didn’t answer.

“Pearl—”

She nodded. She was crying. Silent, but crying nonetheless.

“I’ll call for one,” Cian said.

“No.” It was a weak sound, barely audible, but then Harry repeated himself. “No. No doctor.”

“Harry,” Pearl said. She cupped his cheek. “Harry, you’re ok. It’s going to be ok.”

He blinked, tried to wet his lips, and sighed. “Ollie?”

Pearl looked at Cian. He shrugged.

“Is Ollie here?”

“Harry, I don’t know who Ollie is,” Pearl said.

“Tell him I’m sorry,” Harry said. He blinked again, so slowly that for a moment, Cian thought Harry had lost consciousness again. When his eyes opened, though, they were fogged. “I won’t let them take you, Ollie.”

Pearl’s hands were shaking as she wet the rag in the snowmelt.

Cian moved into the hall, shutting the door behind him. He walked to the back of the apartment, as far from Harry’s bedroom as he could get, and he made a circle. Then he paused, leaned his head against the wall. He felt hot and sick.

He slammed his fist into the wall. Once. Twice. On the third blow, the plaster shattered, and his hand drove through the laths. The splintered wood cut at his hand. The pain was sharp and nauseating. Cian pulled his hand from the wall.

He shouldn’t have done that, but it felt damn good.

In the kitchen, Cian washed the broken plaster and blood from his hand. He tied a kitchen towel over the lacerations. He pulled the knot tight, still riding the bright line of pain from the fresh cuts.

It was his fault Harry had been bitten.

If Cian had done what Harry asked—distracted the men at the bottom of the stairs—he would have been standing at Harry’s side when the spider emerged from the hall. He could have shot the damn thing before it got close to Harry.

And where would that have left Irene? That massive spider had gone straight for her.

The pain made it easier to think. Cian’s head was clear. It had been an impossible choice. The kind of choice that made anyone feel like shit.

When he left the kitchen, Pearl came out of Harry’s room.

“What happened?” she asked.

He told her in as few words as possible. She nodded. Her face was pale. She looked at his bandaged hand and said nothing.

“I’ll get a doctor,” Cian said.

“No, Cian. Harry was right. A doctor won’t be able to help him. Those spiders were controlled by the Children. They’re not natural.”

“Pearl, he’s—” Cian bit back the last word. He wanted to punch the wall again. He figured Harry wouldn’t appreciate that.

“He’s dying.”

“I’m sorry, Pearl, but he needs help.”

“There isn’t anyone to help him. The only person who might have been able to help him is Freddy, and we can’t trust him. For all we know, he was the one who sent those spiders.”

“Maybe,” Cian said. “Stay here.”

He pushed past Pearl and went for the room at the back of the apartment. The door was shut but not locked. He threw it open and turned up the lights. The room was a spare bedroom, but the bed had been pushed into the corner. A latrine reek filled the air. In the center sat a straight-backed chair. Sam was bound to the chair, his sandy head drooping forward. Cian crossed the room, grabbed Sam by the hair, and tilted his head up. The boy stared up at him, his eyes wide, struggling to breathe through a thick gag.

“I want some answers,” Cian said.

The boy started to cry.

Chapter 56

Cian stood for a moment. Speechless. He stared at Sam, still bound and gagged in the chair, and his mouth tasted like he'd been chewing cotton all day. Sam didn't struggle. He didn't pull back. He stared up at Cian, his eyes terrified and helpless, and cried like a baby.

"God, kid, calm down," Cian said. He fumbled with the gag, pulling it free as gently as he could. Sam took ragged breaths, sobbing now. This time, when Cian reached forward, Sam shouted and pulled back.

"Calm down," Cian said.

But calm didn't seem to be in the cards. Sam's eyes were wild, and he twisted and bucked, hollering for help as he tried to tear himself free from the ropes. There was something mad in the boy's behavior, and it sent a chill through Cian. The Sam they'd caught on the train had been an annoying little shit and as trustworthy as a bag of snakes, but nothing like this. Cian grabbed the back of Sam's head. The boy turned, snapping at Cian's arm like a feral dog.

Cian gave him a shake.

"Stop it. Sam. Stop! I'm not going to hurt you."

Sam continued to strain towards Cian's arm, desperate to sink his teeth into Cian's flesh.

Cian pulled back. He wiped sweaty palms on his trousers.

What the hell had Harry done to this kid?

Sam was still shouting, but the words were a jumble, completely meaningless. Cian stared at the boy for a moment longer. It reminded him, just a bit, of boys who had cracked during the war. When they couldn't take the shelling anymore, or the trenches, or the rats.

He grabbed Sam's hair, held the boy's head straight, and landed an open-handed slap.

The crack of the blow swallowed every other sound. Sam stopped shouting. He went limp, like a dead man.

Cian let go of the boy's hair. Sam's head dropped forward.

After a moment, Sam gave a shake. He lifted his head, blinked, and worked his jaw.

"Cian?"

"That you, Sam?"

"I think you broke my fucking jaw."

That, Cian had to admit, sounded like Sam.

"You settled down? I'm going to untie you."

Sam nodded. Exhaustion had drawn lines on the boy's face, and he looked ten years older. Cian loosed the ropes, and Sam pulled his arms forward. His movements were stiff as he rubbed at his wrists and elbows.

"God," Sam said, wrinkling his nose. "Is that me?"

Cian nodded.

"What the hell, Shea?"

"That's what I was going to ask you," Cian said. "What the hell happened to you?"

Darkness settled over Sam's blue eyes. A tremor ran through his jaw.

"Take a breath, Sam."

The boy shivered, took a breath, and shivered again. "I don't—" His voice was strangled. "I don't—"

"All right, easy, Sam. Never mind. It doesn't matter."

The tension in Sam's body vanished. He sagged forward.

"If I tell you take a bath," Cian said, "you're not going to drown yourself, are you?"

“No.” Sam struggled for a grin. It was an obvious effort. “I might slit my wrists, though, if I ever have to be this close to you again.”

“I’ll start the water,” Cian said.

He went to the bathroom, started the bath, and—just in case—removed Harry’s razor. And, after a second thought, a bottle of sleeping powder.

Just in case.

Sam shuffled into the bathroom like an old man.

While Sam bathed, Cian did his best to clean up the back bedroom. The rug was stained with Sam’s piss, and the chair too. Cian dragged them both out to the rear balcony, and then he set to work scrubbing the floor. The smell of cleaner filled his nose, replacing the stench of fear and torture. It did nothing for his thoughts, though.

Harry had done something to that boy. Something awful.

“You’re going to scrub through the floor,” Sam said.

Cian dropped the brush and flexed his aching hand. Sam stood in the doorway, his hair combed and slicked back, some of the color back in his face. He wore a spare shirt and trousers borrowed from Harry, which were only too large for him, and he looked like a kid wearing his father’s clothes. A kid who wished he had a revolver and a fast way out of there.

“Now what?” Sam asked.

“You tell me.”

“What are my odds of getting a bullet in the back of the head if I try to leave?”

“From me?”

“Who else? You almost broke my nose—”

“When you were trying to escape,” Cian said.

“—and you knocked me around in that cellar—”

“After we rescued you and you tried being smart.”

“And then, on top of it all, you leave me tied up here with a lunatic.” Sam paused for breath. “Yeah. I think I’ve got a good reason to ask. Can I leave? Or should I just go ahead, let you tie me up, and plan on shitting myself in a few hours?”

“The last part of the plan doesn’t sound too strong.”

Sam’s lip curled. “Now you’re all jokes, huh?”

Cian stood. His knees ached. He stretched his back and crossed the room.

Sam took a step back and bumped into the wall.

“Listen, kid.”

“I’m not a—”

“Just listen. Ok, I got a little rough. I’m sorry. There, that’s your apology. Don’t act like you’re new to this kind of game. You had a knife to Irene and you would have used it, if you needed to. You’ve been trying to run an angle on us since we saved your skinny ass. We’ve been protecting you and all we’ve gotten for it is a shit-load of trouble.” Cian poked Sam in the chest, where the bruises and cuts still lingered, and Sam flinched and knocked his hand away. “And don’t forget, kid. You looked like a side of beef when we pulled you out of that house. Aside from your nose, nobody’s put a finger on you here.”

“Harry—”

“Yeah? What did Harry do to you?”

Sam flushed, and his eyes went to the floor.

“Yeah, I figured. Nothing.”

“Just cause I don’t remember doesn’t mean nothing happened. Maybe he gave me some dope or something. I don’t know.”

“Any good at arithmetic, Sam?”

“What?”

“Arithmetic. Did you even go to school?”

Sam told him—in a particularly explicit phrase—what he thought of that question.

“Then start adding up the times I’ve saved your life, in spite of the fact that you’ve caused nothing but trouble. And then tell me if you want to call things square or not. Hell, I’ll even forget you had a knife on Irene.”

Cian waited a minute. Sam locked gazes with him.

“Cian,” Pearl shouted from the other room.

“Stay here,” Cian said.

He ran down the hall. Sam was a step behind him, and Cian gritted his teeth, but he didn’t stop. Pearl stood outside Harry’s door, twisting the handle.

“I went to get more snow,” Pearl said, “and when I came back, he was out of bed. He slammed the door and won’t let me in.” She hammered on the door. “Harry!”

“Harry, open the damn door,” Cian said. He twisted the handle. It turned easily, but when Cian tried to open the door, it wouldn’t budge. “What the hell did he do?”

Pearl didn’t answer.

“What in God’s name is that?” Sam asked. He was pointing at the bottom of the door, where a shimmer of light was visible. Not the muted glow of gaslight, but a wavering illumination like sunlight off of water.

“Pearl?” Cian said.

She shook her head and stepped away from the door.

Cian moved back a pace and charged. He hit the door hard.

His shoulder popped and Cian grunted. It felt like slamming into a brick wall.

Sam let out something that sounded suspiciously like a laugh, but when Cian looked at him, the kid had his hands over his mouth and was pretending to cough.

“What the hell did he do?” Cian repeated, rubbing his shoulder.

“He needs help,” Pearl said. “I’m calling Freddy.”

“Pearl, stop. You can’t trust him.”

“Well what am I supposed to do, Cian? Watch him die? Leave him locked in there, doing God knows what?”

A sudden flash came from underneath the door. Then darkness.

Pearl raised one trembling hand to the door. Cian tried to move in front of her, but she pushed him out of the way and opened the door.

The first thing Cian noticed was the smell. The air had the heavy, salty taste of the sea. It rolled over Cian and vanished. His clothes felt damp, as though he’d spent the day in the humid sea air. The room itself was dark, but Pearl didn’t slow. Cian raised the gaslights.

Harry lay on the floor, bare chested. A shard of glass lay on the floor next to him. The mirror had been broken, and more glass strewn the floor. Cian picked his way across the room and knelt next to Harry.

The furnace heat that had poured off of Harry was gone. The man’s breathing was easier. He was asleep. Pearl struggled to turn Harry onto his side, and Cian helped her.

He couldn’t help his quick intake of breath.

The corroded flesh was smooth. The skin on Harry's back unbroken. No sign of the dark streamers of venom that had slid underneath the surface of his skin.

Pearl pulled her hands back as though she had been burned. She closed her eyes.

Cian picked Harry up and put him in bed. When he turned around, Pearl was on her feet. She looked like a woman who had stepped onto thin air and was just realizing that she was starting to fall.

"What is this?" Cian asked.

Pearl shook her head.

"Pearl, he doesn't have a scratch on him," Cian said.

"I'd be happy to give him a few," Sam said from the door.

Cian and Pearl both glared at him.

Sam quailed and said, "Well, only if it would help."

They continued to stare.

"I'll wait in the kitchen," Sam said.

"Smart," Cian said. Then he looked at Pearl. "Magic or sorcery or whatever you call it."

She didn't answer.

"Pearl, talk to me," Cian said.

"Yes. Yes, that's what it is." Her voice was as broken as the mirror.

"So what now?"

"Now?" She pulled herself together and pushed her hair back. "Now, I'm going to clean up this glass."

Cian watched her a moment longer. Pearl ignored him. She knelt and began picking up the largest pieces of the broken mirror.

“Are you going to be ok with him?” Cian said. “I’m going to find Irene.”

Pearl nodded without looking up.

Cian went to the kitchen, where he found Sam halfway into making an impressive sandwich, layered with cold roast beef and slabs of cheddar cheese. Cian grabbed Sam by the arm and hauled him towards the door.

“Come on, Sammy boy.”

“Wait,” Sam said, swiping at the retreating sandwich. “Hold on.”

At the front door, Cian stopped and released Sam. “Now. This is when you make your choice.”

“I choose the sandwich.”

Cian tried not to grind his teeth.

He tried very hard.

“If you want to leave, you leave now.” Sam opened his mouth, and Cian shook his head. “No sandwich.” Sam’s mouth snapped shut, and a crestfallen look came onto his face. “You want out, Sam, you go. Now. But listen to me before you do. The Children know who you are. The Dane and Byrne aren’t going to forget any time soon. If you leave, one of them will find you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know they found you on that damn train before you’d even left the station.”

“I won’t—”

“Just listen, ok? Maybe you make it out of town. Maybe you make it out to California, or Alaska, or you drop off the edge of the earth. But here’s the thing. Once you start running, you can’t stop. Ever. Every day, you’re still running, even if you sleep in the same bed. It turns into

part of who you are. So if you run now, you're going to be running the rest of your life, whether or not the Children find you."

"You don't know that."

"I do know that. I've been running for five years."

Sam ran a hand through his hair, disrupting the neat part and sending it back into its normal, disheveled state. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Now, I want you to stay. I need your help. I need someone here for Pearl. In case. Well, in case of anything. And if you stay, you'll have us at your back. We're not going to let the Children have you."

"What about Harry?"

"Let me deal with Harry Witte."

"You promise? You won't let him—"

"Promise."

"Hell, I can't remember anyway." Sam held out his hand. "Let's say we're square, and I'll stay. I'll help you. On one more condition."

Cian raised an eyebrow.

"The sandwich."

Chapter 57

As Cian walked through the doors to the Majestic, he decided he liked it quite a bit more than the Louisiana Grand. The Majestic shared many elements with the Grand: the modern design, the geometric patterns, the chandeliers and the gold leaf and the marble floor. But unlike the Grand, the Majestic wasn't a soaring monstrosity of a building. It was a decent size, several respectable stories. The kind of building a man could walk into without feeling overwhelmed.

And, more importantly, the kind of building from which a man could escape through the window without almost certain death.

Cian's type of building

An inquiry at the front desk, after a protracted argument, led the clerk to send a bellhop to Irene's room—to make sure, as the clerk put it, that her guest was expected.

In other words, to make sure Cian wasn't the riffraff that he seemed like. Suit or no suit, the clerk, and the bellhop, for that matter, both sensed it within seconds. Cian wasn't money. Cian was Kerry Patch, through and through.

It didn't bother him the way it used to.

When the bellhop returned with Irene's answer, the clerk gave Cian the room number, and Cian hurried upstairs.

No elevator. Another good sign.

He knocked at Irene's door. She opened it a moment later, wearing a robe that clung to her hips and breasts. The robe probably had a color. Blue? Gray? Cian would never be able to tell.

He wasn't looking at the robe.

“Cian?”

Cian pulled his eyes up to her face. Her short hair was messy. Her eyes were bright.

“Evening, Irene.”

“I think it’s past evening,” she said, stifling a yawn. “Come in?”

He followed her into the set of rooms. As she had at the Grand, Irene had rented a suite, with a sitting room complete with an elaborate, gilt-framed sofa and a pair of chairs. A diamond-patterned paper covered the walls, and a painting dominated one side of the room. It showed a woman in a dressing gown, staring over her shoulder. Staring, it seemed, right at Cian.

Saying, *I’m already half-naked. Let’s finish the job.*

Cian told the painting to mind her own business.

Irene sank into one of the chairs. Cian dropped onto the sofa, and the springs creaked under his weight. For a moment, neither spoke. One of Irene’s eyebrows climbed, and she was fighting a smile. Her robe had slipped, exposing her collarbone and a hint of shoulder.

The woman in the painting wouldn’t shut her damn mouth.

“Well?” Irene said.

At the same time, Cian said, “What were you doing at that whorehouse, Irene?”

She blinked. Her voice had dropped ten degrees when she said, “What were you doing there?”

Cian blinked. “It’s—I was—”

“Really?”

Cian stood up. “Damn it, Irene. You know that’s not why I was there. That kid. The thief. He told Harry that’s where he hid the mask.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I saw the box.”

“Did you get it?”

Irene shook her head.

“Damn. It’s not your fault, but damn.”

“Those spiders. They were all over it.” She paused. “How’s Harry?”

“I don’t know. The bite was bad. You saw. Pearl and I got him home. He wasn’t getting better, Irene.”

“What do you mean, wasn’t? What’s happened?”

Cian told her. When he’d finished, Irene leaned her head on her hand, staring at the wallpaper.

“But he’s well?”

“He hadn’t woken up when I left, but the wounds were gone.”

She stared at the wall, as though the pattern held the key to a puzzle.

Cian let a minute or two drag by and then said, “Don’t think you’re going to get out of answering my question, Irene. What were you doing tonight?”

“Looking for company,” she said distractedly.

Company.

Irene looked over and laughed. “Cian, you should see your face. I was kidding.”

“I know.” Cian shifted on the sofa. “I knew that.”

“Of course.”

“No jokes, Irene. What were you doing?”

“I was doing something for Patrick.”

“He can’t get a girl himself?”

“Now who’s making jokes? That wasn’t it at all. It was his sister. She was in that awful place.”

“Was she—”

“Yes, she was working, Cian. And God, try not to sound so judgmental.”

“I wasn’t—”

“She didn’t want to be there, Cian. It wasn’t by choice.”

“All I meant—”

“And if you have to know, I was helping her leave. Although heaven knows she made it more difficult than it should have been. The situation was more complicated than I knew, and I had to adjust.”

Cian’s throat felt like it had been lined with wool. Tight and scratchy. “Which part do you mean?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Which part was more complicated? The shootout between Byrne’s men and the Dane’s thugs? Or the Children’s spiders? Or something else?”

“I don’t know why you’re taking that tone with me.”

Cian waited.

“It was something else,” she said. “Something with Anna.”

“So you mean to tell me that Patrick sent you into that place, where you could have been shot or bitten by one of those monsters or only God knows what, and that was fine with you? Just one minor hiccup with Anna, and the rest was fine.”

“You make it sound as if Patrick knew—”

“Of course he knew!” Cian stood up too fast. His leg caught the coffee table. The flash of pain in his shin turned to rage, and he kicked the table out of the way. “He knew and he didn’t give one damn, Irene. And neither did you.” Cian stepped towards Irene. Her eyes were wide. Wide and dark, and he knew he was scaring her, but he was too frightened and upset himself to care. “God, Irene. You could have been hurt. You could have been killed. And you know what the worst part was?”

Biting her lip, she shook her head.

“I did it. I did what I told you I didn’t ever want to do. I left you there. Alone.”

“I’m fine—”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not fine, Irene.” His hands were shaking, so he shoved them in his pockets, but then the pockets felt too tight. Cian yanked his hands out. He grabbed at the coffee table, trying to right it, and then gave up and tossed it back to the floor. Cian turned back to Irene. “I’m not fine, do you understand?”

Irene sat up straight in her chair. Her eyes were liquid. She took a breath and folded her hands. “You should leave.”

“Patrick put your life in danger, Irene. He doesn’t give a damn about you.”

Color rushed into her cheeks, and Irene stood. “Enough, Cian. You don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about. I want you to leave.”

“Fine,” Cian said. His hands were still shaking. He smoothed his trousers, ran a hand through his hair, and wished his mouth didn’t taste like dry fear.

Then he put his hands on Irene’s arms, bent down, and kissed her. It was a hard, angry, desperate kiss, and he hoped she didn’t sense the desperation.

When he pulled back, Irene shrugged his hands off, but she didn't move. She looked up at him. Silent. She smelled good. Like bath soap and clean skin.

"Fine," Cian repeated. He grabbed his coat and left.

She didn't call after him.

Cian's injured hand ached. His pride ached more. He wanted a drink and to punch Patrick Hannafy in the face.

And he knew where he could do both at the same time.

Chapter 58

By the time Cian reached Patrick's bar, he wished he'd remembered a hat. He wore a helmet of ice and snow instead, his ears had fallen off two miles back, and his breath had lost any semblance of life. He rapped on the door.

It was late. Late enough that the lights were off. Late enough that the last of Patrick's customers had left. But Patrick would be here. He slept here, in case anyone had the bright idea of helping themselves to a free drink.

Cian pulled out the Colt and checked it.

Plenty of bullets to kill one man.

He hammered on the door again.

"Who is it?" Patrick's voice was muffled by the thick wood.

"Open the door, Patrick."

"Cian?"

"Yeah."

A moment later, the door opened. Cian shoved his way into the bar. He kicked the door shut, grabbed Patrick by the undershirt, and slammed the dark-haired man onto a table. The smell of cleaner and spilled beer filled the room. Patrick struggled to sit up. Cian knocked him back and jammed the Colt in Patrick's face.

Patrick froze.

"You stupid, selfish coward," Cian said. "You sent her there alone. Alone, Patrick? What were you thinking?"

"What are you talking about?"

Cian shook his head. “Don’t.”

“I—”

“What if she’d gotten hurt? What if they’d killed her? Did you know Byrne sent a group of men? They had it out with some of the Dane’s boys. And then—” Cian forced himself to stop. Take a breath. His finger was steady on the trigger, but it was the only part of him that was.

“Irene,” Patrick said. “Holy God, you’re talking about Irene. What happened? Did someone—”

“She’s fine, no thanks to you.”

The anger drained out of Cian. He shoved the Colt into his trousers and rubbed his eyes. Then he held out a hand and helped Patrick up.

Patrick stared at him the way people stared at a sick dog. A big, redheaded, stupid-as-shit, sick dog.

“You got something to drink?” Cian said.

With a nod, Patrick led him back to the bar. He poured them each a whiskey.

Cian drained his glass. Without asking, Patrick poured more. Cian drank it down again, and then waved his hand when Patrick lifted the bottle. The whiskey was curling up like a cat in Cian’s brain.

God, he’d been a fool.

That kiss. That damned kiss.

“She went herself, didn’t she?” Patrick said, interrupting Cian’s thoughts. “I didn’t know, Cian. I should have realized but I was so . . . so grateful. She told me she’d spoken to her father. That the raid was going to be tonight. She told me she’d have Anna back tonight, she just needed the name of the brothel. I told her. I swear to you, if I had even suspected—”

“It doesn’t matter, Patrick. It’s over. She’ll do whatever she wants. She’ll be with whomever she wants. She’s got her own mind to make up.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means congratulations, my friend.” Cian slid the glass across the bar. Patrick caught it. Cian stood and walked away from the bar. When he reached the door, he stopped and looked back and gestured at the table. “Sorry.”

Patrick leaned on the bar, swirled his glass of whiskey, and didn’t answer.

“Right,” Cian said. He let himself back out into the cold.

By the time Cian reached Harry’s apartment, he was frozen head to toe. Even the whiskey had frozen, forming a hard lump at the back of his head, stopping his thoughts like a clogged drain. It was better that way. Easier not to think about Irene, or Patrick, or that damned, fool kiss. Pearl answered the door at the first knock.

“Irene?” she asked.

“Fine.”

He stumbled past her and dropped onto the sofa. Pearl shut the door and stood there. She was still dressed, although she had shed her shoes. Exhaustion rubbed shadows under her eyes.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“No.”

“You’ve been drinking.”

“Not enough.”

“You sound like Harry.”

There wasn’t much to say to that. After a moment, Pearl walked towards the hall.

“How is he?” Cian asked.

“Still sleeping,” Pearl said.

“Sam?”

“Sleeping too, I think. I’ve been with Harry.”

“Pearl?”

She paused.

“Get some sleep. I’ll sit up with Harry. Make sure nothing happens.”

Hesitation was obvious in Pearl’s face.

“You need sleep,” Cian said.

“So do you.”

“Trust me,” Cian said. “I’m not going to sleep any time soon. Get some rest.”

The struggle in her face was obvious. Love and concern against fatigue. Cian felt something splitting open inside him as he watched her.

Had anyone ever felt that way about him?

It was a tiny, selfish thought, and he crushed it under his heel like a spent cigarette.

Fatigue must have won, because Pearl nodded. “Thank you. Just an hour or two, and then I’ll let you rest.”

“No need, Pearl. Take care of yourself tonight. You’re always taking care of others.”

Cian thought she might say something else. There was surprise in her face, and a shocking loneliness, as though he had pulled back the curtain and caught her unawares. But she turned and disappeared down the hallway without another word.

That made two women who didn’t talk to him.

When Cian entered Harry’s room, the smell of the sea was gone. The room was dark, with only the glimmer of the gas lamps overhead by which to see. Harry’s steady breathing

seemed magnified by the solitude. Cian settled into a chair near the bed. He kicked off his shoes and leaned back, staring up at the ceiling.

The warmth had thawed the whiskey. It rolled over him like summer fog, clinging to the inside of his mouth, and Cian felt himself dropping off to sleep.

He wasn't sure what woke him, but he noticed the change in Harry's breathing almost immediately. Cian sat up and looked at the bed.

Harry had propped himself up against the headboard. He was watching Cian, his expression unreadable. In the deep shadows, the distance between them dwindled to nothing, and the whiskey still rumbled through Cian's brain like a summer thunderstorm. The rest of the apartment was silent. Outside, a cat yowled, and the sound pressed itself against the window like a vagrant thing.

"I'm sorry," Cian said. "I should have done what you asked. If I had—" He stopped and shrugged.

Harry was silent so long that Cian wondered if the man had heard him.

"Irene?" Harry asked.

"She's fine."

"What happened?"

"I saw one of those spiders going for her. I lost my head. I should have—"

Harry shook his head. "What happened between you and her? You sound like a boy with his first broken heart."

"It's nothing," Cian said. He forced a chuckle. "I'm fine. Women, you know? Hell, maybe you have the right idea."

Then he froze and realized what he had just said.

The darkness made it difficult to read anything on Harry's face. The other man's voice was even, though, when he said, "How long have you known?"

"Harry, I didn't—listen, I mean—"

"Stop, Cian. I'm not embarrassed by this. I certainly don't care what you think. Men like you have always hated—what do you call men like me? Inverts? Fags? Is that right?"

Cian wasn't sure if he nodded or not. So much blood had rushed to his face that he thought his head might fall off.

"It's nothing new to me," Harry said. Then he paused. "You don't have to stay here, Cian. Go get some sleep."

"Harry—"

"Save us both the embarrassment, Cian. Your dislike of me has been patent. At least now we've cleared the air." He looked away and added, "Good night."

"It's not—it's not what you said."

They were the hardest words Cian had ever spoken. They were barbed and slippery all at once, and Cian had to yank them out one at a time, ripping out his own guts as he did.

"Not that I'm a fag?" Harry asked. He turned back to Cian, pulled his knees up to his chest, and wrapped his arms around them. "You can say it."

Cian shifted in the chair. The wood squeaked.

He didn't know what to say.

But Devil take him if he was going to leave.

Several long minutes passed. Harry relaxed by inches, like a man coming off the rack. He looked over at Cian. The air might as well have been gunpowder that they were both breathing, waiting for the next word to be a spark.

“I’d kill for a smoke,” Harry said to the room.

The gunpowder smoldered.

Cian grabbed a pack from the dresser. He passed one to Harry and lit it. Then he lit a second for himself and dropped back into the chair. The two men smoked in silence. The scent of the tobacco leached some of the bitterness from the air. Cian’s shoulders dropped as he took another drag. He rubbed his eyes.

He knew what to say.

And Devil take him if he was going to be a coward now.

But it still took him the length of the cigarette to drag up his courage kicking and screaming. He ground out the butt in an ashtray. Then he looked at Harry, who was staring at the corner of the room as though he were going to ask it to dance.

“His name was Ollie, wasn’t it?” Cian asked.

Harry didn’t answer. He took another long draw on the cigarette. In the darkness, that speck of orange was like a light in port, signaling someone home. Cian didn’t know who. Someone lost, he thought. Someone who had been lost for a very long time.

Then Harry nodded.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Cian asked.

“Please don’t do this. Don’t pretend.”

Cian waited again. The minutes measured themselves out to the flare of Harry’s shrinking cigarette.

“When you were hurt, you said his name,” Cian said. “A few times, actually. You said you weren’t going to let someone take him. Did he die?”

Harry nodded. He dropped the cigarette butt in the ashtray. It glinted like a dying star.

“I’m sorry,” Cian said.

“His name was Oliver Dupont,” Harry said. It had the sound of an iceberg meeting a ship. A sudden, fatal break in the silence. “He was two years younger than me. Our families were great friends.” Harry leaned back against the headboard, stretching his legs out.

“Was he . . .”

Harry rolled his eyes, and Cian tried to swallow his tongue. “Yes,” Harry said with a small smile. “He was . . .” He exaggerated the pause and then smiled again to take the sting from the mockery. “I loved him. I don’t know how he felt about me. I thought he felt the same. Now,” Harry shrugged. “We were young. Who knows?” He stopped. His eyes were drinking up the shadows in the room. Cian remembered a bit of mythology. He remembered a river that made you forget. He thought, right then, that Harry was trying to drink deep from that river, like putting his mouth to the Mississippi. Cian was fairly certain that there wasn’t enough forgetting in the world. Not for someone like Harry Witte.

“What did you mean when you said you wouldn’t let them take him?” Cian asked.

“That’s a long story. The short version is that the Children took him. By the time I found them.” Harry paused and shrugged again.

“That’s why you hunt them. That’s why you do all of this.”

“It’s part of why. The story is too long. I won’t bore you. But what happened to Ollie was my fault, at least in part. I won’t let it happen to anyone else.”

The room swallowed up the last words. The words disappeared into the silence like snowflakes into a drift. Harry turned his head away, brushing at his eyes.

“You healed yourself,” Cian said. “Using magic.”

When Harry answered, his voice was thick. “Yes.” He cleared his throat. “It was the only way. The venom is not natural.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

Harry turned back. “Yes. Very. But I didn’t have any other choice. I’m not ready to die, Cian. The Children have too much to pay for. I took a risk. This time, it paid off. I live to fight another day, for whatever that’s worth.”

“I’m glad,” Cian said. “We were worried.”

“We?”

“God, yes, Harry. I was terrified. I mean, I don’t know shit about any of this.” Cian surged to his feet, shoved his hands in his pockets, and stalked across the room. He pulled back the curtains and stared out at a wall of darkness broken by pale lumps of snow. It reminded him of France, of the bodies in the fields, of moonlight on dead flesh. He let the curtain fall back into place. “You die, and I’m left without a clue in the world. The Children? Cultic magic? Ancient gods awakening? I might as well go piss in the wind for all the good I’m going to do.”

“Poetic,” Harry said with another small smile. “I’m touched.”

Cian took a deep breath and left the window. Harry was watching him. Cian would have rather faced a loaded gun.

“You think I don’t like you because, well, you know.”

Another smile played at the edge of Harry’s mouth. He nodded. “You’ve made it fairly obvious.”

“That’s not why, although I’d be lying if I said I were . . . hell, I don’t know.”

“My point.”

“No, damn it. Give me half a second. I don’t care about that. The truth of it is, Harry, you remind me too much of someone I knew.” Cian marched across the room. His bandaged hand was hurting, and he pulled it out of his pocket, forcing himself to relax. Fresh, dark spots marked the cloth. “You weren’t in the military. That’s what you said.”

Harry shook his head. “Morally unfit,” he said. Then a grin. “Father almost died. He would have rather had me declared mentally unfit, but it was too late.”

“Mentally unfit wouldn’t have been too far off.”

Harry’s face went cold for a half a second, and then Cian grinned. Harry wrinkled his nose and laughed. “I asked for that, didn’t I? All right, go ahead. Military.”

“You know I was in the army. In France, I had this lieutenant. A lot like you, Harry. Nice guy, smart, funny. Everybody liked him. Good looking too, and all the local girls were practically crawling out of their dresses to get at him. The men, they loved him. Hell, we loved him. He was on our side, he looked out for us. When we went into battle, he was right there too. Nobody thought anything would go wrong with Harley Dunn by your side.

“I remember watching this boy, his name was Felix something, I think he was a Jew. Anyway, he’d caught a stray bullet. It was bad, clipped an artery, he was bleeding out in the trench. He screamed murder. I was sitting right there, calling for a medic, trying to do anything I could. It didn’t make any difference. And then Lieutenant Dunn got there. He took Felix’s hand, told him things were going to be all right, and the boy quieted down right away.” Cian paused. The ache in his hand had doubled, and his eyes stung. “He died a few minutes later. Quiet as a lamb. I think he thought Harley really was going to make things alright. Hell, I half thought it myself.”

Cian stopped. He looked at Harry. The other man sat and watched him. The silence crawled up Cian's skin on spider legs.

"Anyway, that was Lieutenant Dunn, and you remind me of him. The way Pearl and Freddy and, hell, Irene—especially Irene—the way they look at you reminds me of the way those men looked at Lieutenant Dunn. Of the way I looked at Lieutenant Dunn."

"What did he do to you?"

Cian grinned, and he wondered why his face felt like it was breaking. It was a funny story. Damned funny. He couldn't quite catch his breath, though, and the room was hot.

"There was a girl," he said, and he tried to laugh.

Harry didn't move.

"Her name was Corinne," Cian said. "She had these eyes. Dark eyes, and skin like you never saw at home, and she was French. Of course. They were all French. But Corinne, she was the kind of girl every man wanted."

He paused and looked at Harry.

Harry waved his hand. "No offense meant, present company excepted, all of that. I get it. Go on."

"For whatever reason, she took a fancy to me. We had pulled back to the village. She and I saw each other every day, whenever I had a free minute." Cian tried to laugh again, and this time, the sound didn't even make it out of his throat. "I didn't speak a lick of French. She knew about ten words in English. It didn't matter."

"Cian," Harry said.

Cian shook his head. “Anyway, I’d seen Harley talking to her, but it was always innocent. I knew Corinne only had eyes for me. It was the first time I’d been in love. You know what it’s like.”

“I do.”

“One night, I was supposed to be on watch. I traded with another guy. I’d already planned to meet Corinne. I went to find her.”

He stopped.

Her face pressed against the stone. The terror and pain in her eyes. Dunn behind her.

The sound of his breathing. Ragged.

“Dunn was . . . was having his way with her, or whatever you want to call it. His trousers around his ankles, Corinne pressed up against the wall, crying. I should have been shocked or horrified. I just felt cold. Like this wind was blowing and it had pushed everything out of me. I pulled out my pistol and shot Dunn. Right in the head.”

The crack of the gun. The sudden silence.

“Corinne ran. I knew she was hurt and scared. I didn’t blame her. I ran too. I’d just killed my commanding officer. I knew what that meant. I didn’t care, though. Dunn deserved to die. The fact that he could do that to Corinne—” Cian took a breath. He felt calmer now. As though someone had cut him in half at the waist. That kind of calm. “I hid out in the forest for a few days. I remembered other places we’d been. Girls Harley had taken an interest in. Bits and pieces of stories. Corinne hadn’t been the first. At least she was the last.”

“I’m so sorry, Cian.”

Cian shook his head. "I went back, you know. This part of the story doesn't really matter, but I'll tell you anyway. So you know that God believes in irony. I went back, late one night, for Corinne. I climbed up to her window and knocked. She opened it, saw me, and started crying."

Her eyes had been so dark in the moonlight. She had never been more beautiful. He had wanted to tell her that. He hadn't known how. Not in French. Certainly not in English.

"Then she shut the window and screamed for help." Cian picked at the bandage on his hand, pressing on the cuts that hid underneath. The pain was distant. "I ran. I haven't stopped running."

Harry got out of bed. His movements were stiff and slow. He wore a pair of drawers and that was it. He crossed the room and put his hand on Cian's shoulder. He didn't say a word. He didn't have to.

"I haven't told anyone that," Cian said. His voice sounded like it was coming down a paper cone. "Sorry." He wiped at his face. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I am sorry, Cian," Harry said. "Truly."

"It doesn't matter. It never did."

"It does matter. I don't know what I can do to tell you I'm not that man. But I'll try my best to show you that I'm different."

"Hell, Harry, that's why I told you this. I'm not stupid. I'm just slow. I know you're not Harley Dunn. It took me a while to realize it, and I'm sorry for the way I've treated you. That's all I wanted to say." His eyes were still hot, and he wiped his face again. "God, honestly, I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I do," Harry said. He gripped the back of Cian's neck, a firm, friendly, and shockingly intimate touch, and then dropped onto the bed. "Neither of us is nearly drunk enough for this."

Cian laughed and rubbed his nose. “We can fix that.”

Chapter 59

At the Majestic, Irene took a bath. It wasn't a relaxing bath. It wasn't the kind of bath with her favorite soap and the heat soaking into tired muscles. It was an angry bath. Lots of unnecessary splashing. Scrubbing at invisible patches of dirt. And, for the most part, thinking about Cian Shea, who was an ass.

When she'd finished bathing, though, and the water had begun to cool, she got out and dried herself and combed her hair. The bruises along her back and sides were purpling like a summer sunset. The worst of the pain had passed, and now she was left stiff and sore. It wasn't a bad analogy for her life with her father. After Francis, when Father had refused to believe Irene, she had thought the pain was too much to bear. But then life had gone on, the way it always did, and now she was only the slightest bit stiff and sore.

Irene sighed, set down the comb, and stared at the woman in the mirror. The other Irene stared back, her lips pursed, and looking decidedly judgmental.

"Mind your own business," Irene told her.

Cian had been worried. Worried about her. And frightened. And because he was a man, with half the brains of a bedpost, instead of just saying he'd been worried, he got angry and huffed and puffed. For half a second, Irene had been frightened too, and so she'd pushed him right back.

The Irene in the mirror had a look that said, *I told you so*.

Irene walked away from the dressing table. She was afraid she'd give herself a black eye if she stayed there a moment longer.

But walking to the other side of the room and fumbling with her cigarette case did nothing to help. She lit a cigarette, drew deeply, and breathed out a thin line of smoke. The cigarette didn't help either.

Because of that kiss. That damned kiss. She could still feel it. Hotter than a cigarette. Smoother than smoke.

Damn Cian and damn that kiss.

After another pull on the cigarette, Irene ground the tip out in an ashtray. Then she started getting dressed. One of her more conservative dresses: purple, with a high neck, paneled with rose and maroon. Her stockings, her black heels, the little white hat with purple trim. Her clutch. Her coat.

At the door, though, she stopped. They had lost the box and, more importantly, the mask. Again. All this madness had started with the mask. But what happened when they found it?

That was the real question.

Harry would destroy it, given half a chance. As would Pearl, or even Cian. All they could think about was the threat that the mask represented: inbred priests calling up a forgotten god. But what would happen to Cian if the mask were destroyed?

Irene needed that box. She needed it so she could look her father in the eye and be free. Finally free. Did Harry care about that? Did Pearl? Perhaps, a little. But they had other concerns. They wouldn't sacrifice the mask for her.

All of which meant that Irene had to find the mask first.

She left the hotel and hailed a cab. At the Old Cathedral, she paid the man extra to wait for her and hurried across the frozen pavement. Behind the cathedral's pillars, the massive

double doors were closed. Irene hammered on the wood, but the doors were so thick that she couldn't hear a sound.

"Marie-Thérèse," she called.

The wind snatched the word away. Irene clapped a hand to her hat to keep the wind from taking that too.

When Irene had come here the last time, Marie-Thérèse had been gone, and there had been signs of a struggle. The spirit had been driven away, Harry had said. Driven away by something powerful. The same person that had summoned the snowstorm to trap Irene? The same one who had called up that creature to hunt her? Patrick had said it had to be someone powerful. Harry had implied as much.

The cathedral, though, offered no answers, and Irene's legs were freezing. She hurried back to the cab and climbed into the back.

"Late to be out," the cabbie said. "What's your husband thinking?"

"I don't have a husband," Irene said. "And I can do my own thinking, thank you very much."

"It isn't decent," the man grumbled. "Ought to be at home in bed."

Irene opened her mouth to respond and then paused.

"Yes," she said. "That's a fine idea. Take me home."

Instead of the Majestic, though, she gave the cabbie her father's address. Who better to ask about the box and the mask? The box had, after all, been delivered to her house. Her father had been expecting it. He had been terrified when it disappeared and yet had refused to tell the police about it. He had denied its existence, until Irene had revealed that the box was lost. And then—

Through the thick coat, Irene probed the still-healing bruises.

And then he had been angry.

She checked the revolver in her pocket. It was a small thing. Like her. But it had enough kick to stop a man.

Even her father.

The cabbie took her around back. Irene paid him from her dwindling reserves of cash and climbed out. She let herself into the kitchen. The smell of hot oil still clung to the stone and copper, but it was old now, faded. The house was dark and silent. It was late, later than Irene had realized. Her parents would be asleep.

In the stillness, Irene followed the darkened hallways, relying on long years of familiarity to navigate creaking boards and unseen steps and the endless series of decorative tables and lamps and vases that were her mother's sentinels. When she rounded the next corner, though, Irene paused. The lights were on in her father's study.

She found the revolver, closed her eyes, and counted to ten. Ten deep breaths.

In the darkness, she could practically smell Cian. Could taste his lips on hers.

That damned kiss.

She needed the box. So she walked to the study door and knocked and pushed it open.

Her father sat in his shirtsleeves, his necktie hanging lying limp like a noose in the moments before execution. Coarse, gray stubble covered his cheeks and neck, and his eyes had fallen to the back of his head. He had one hand over his mouth, like an overgrown child holding back a scream, and in the other hand he held a pistol. When he saw Irene, he hesitated. The pistol wavered, as though dragged by a river current, and then dropped.

George Lovell covered his face and wept.

Irene hurried forward, dropped to one knee, and put her hands on the sides of her father's head. He shook with each sob.

"Father," Irene said. "It's ok, Father." She pulled his head against her.

He cried for a moment more, and then he pulled her arms away and drew back. "Irene, please forgive me. You must—please, you must—tell me you have it. Tell me you know where it is." He gripped her arms.

Irene winced and tried to pull free. "Father, you're hurting me. Let go."

He dropped her like a hot coal, stood, and knocked his chair back. "I'm sorry. Irene. Please."

Irene stood as well, massaging the red marks of his fingers, and moved to stand by the door. She put her hand in her pocket. The silver handle of the revolver was cool and solid.

"I don't know where it is," Irene said. "The Children have it, Father."

His breathing sharpened. "What? Impossible, Irene."

"I saw it, Father. They have it."

"I'm telling you, Irene. We don't have it."

The words lingered in the air with the smell of pipe smoke and leather.

"You're helping them," Irene said.

"I'm not going to stand here and explain myself to my daughter." He stood up straighter, pulling at his collar, his face reddening by the second. "What I've done, I've done for my family, Irene. For you. You should remember that and be grateful."

"Those things—those spiders, the golems—that was you."

“Don’t be foolish. I’ve done everything I could to keep you out of harm, but you insisted on running around with Harry Witte and his troop of fools. If you’d listened to me for once in your life—”

“You know Harry.”

“I know who he is, Irene. Now. Where is the mask? Who has it?”

“The Children,” Irene said. She had forgotten about the revolver. She had almost forgotten how to stand. “I saw the spiders take it.”

“Impossible,” her father said. He yanked at his collar again, and this time the collar popped off. He held it for a moment, staring at it, like Columbus spotting land, and then tossed it on the desk. “Impossible.”

Irene barely heard him. He had known. He had known about Harry, about the mask, about the spiders and the golems. He had known they were real. He had never told her. He had known about the Children.

He was one of the Children.

Not some poor man tricked into helping them. Not a patsy, not an innocent. He was one of them.

George Lovell had moved to the fireplace. The hearth was cold, but he looked into the ashes, one hand smoothing wrinkles from his forehead. He might as well have been a stranger, some grizzled man who had broken into their home seeking a bit of warmth. Irene’s finger trembled against the revolver’s trigger. One shot. One loud, explosive shot, and the stranger would be gone.

“Why did you come here?” her father said. “What do you want?”

“Help,” Irene said. “I thought you could help me.” She swallowed a giggle at the ridiculousness of it and bit the inside of her cheek.

Father gave a disgusted shake of his head. “You can’t take a damn thing seriously. Fine, Irene. We’ll help each other. What do you need?”

“The box. I thought you might know how to find it. Who might have it.”

“Well I don’t,” he said. “But—” He paused and took a step toward her.

Irene’s hand tightened on the revolver. One shot. A shot loud enough to knock her life down like a house of cards. That’s all it would take.

But she didn’t fire.

George Lovell never noticed. He was still talking. “I think I have a way to find the box. Come with me.”

He pushed past her and started towards the back of the house. Irene followed him. She stumbled over a step in the darkness. She collided with a small stand and sent its porcelain vase and silk flowers to the floor. The crack ran through the house. The sound snapped something in Irene’s head. The sound of a continent shifting.

“God, Irene,” Father said. “You’d think you’d never been here before. Your mother loved that vase.” But he kept walking.

He led her into the cellar. Irene followed down the rough stone steps. The air was chillier here, and she was glad of her coat. A single electric bulb—Father was still having the new lights installed throughout the rest of the house—sizzled to life and illuminated the large underground room. A few wine racks took up one corner, while rows of shelving filled with food—potatoes and onions and wilted cabbage, flour and sugar and butter, and on and on—filled the rest of the cellar.

“Damn,” George Lovell said. “Wait here a moment, Irene. I’ve forgot something.”

She leaned against one of the shelves. The late hour had finally caught her. Father trotted up the steps. It took a moment for her to realize what was wrong. And by then, it was too late.

Irene was waiting for the sound when it came. The cellar door shutting. Then the lock being set.

She didn’t even bother to go and check. Instead, she let herself sink to the ground and rested her head against a sack of flour. She didn’t feel like crying. She felt like a woman who had been on a long voyage and somehow ended up right where she had started. In other words, she felt hungry and cold and frustrated. And a bit chagrined.

But mostly, sleepy. And with the feeling that solid ground wasn’t quite as solid anymore.

Chapter 60

After a time—an hour? Ten minutes? Irene didn't know—she stood up and brushed dust from her coat. There were, after all, only so many minutes that a woman could spend staring up at peach preserves without getting bored. The rows of glass jars sparkled in the electric light. They had been Sally's work, the peaches, and seeing them made Irene feel as though she'd swallowed all the pits on a hot summer day. She climbed the stairs and checked the door. Locked, of course.

She set the tip of the revolver against the lock.

Then she hesitated.

Would it explode?

Since the more technical aspects of revolvers—such as their likelihood to explode when jammed up against a lock—were beyond Irene's expertise, she pocketed the revolver and went back down the stairs. She made a circuit of the cellar. Aside from a cobwebbed barrel at the back, marked *Wheat*, and a mummified loaf of bread on a top shelf, there were no surprises. Irene wondered about the bread, though. Had it been intended for a dinner and then forgotten? Or had it been hidden on purpose, promised and then taken away, the only kind of punishment that Sally—or perhaps, Irene's mother—had the power to inflict?

There was something funny, Irene supposed, in the fact that she was going to die in a cellar. A suffragette, a woman with a college education, freed from the tyranny of the household, and she was going to die and be buried down here like that damned loaf of bread.

Or perhaps her father would let her live. That would be a serious mistake on his part.

Irene swept the bottom step clean and sat so that she could watch the cellar door. She balanced the revolver on her lap.

Now, the waiting.

It took some time before Irene noticed the change to the light. The electric bulb buzzed like a bee in a bottle, and the light surged and waned. Perfect. Simply perfect. The bulb would go out, and Irene would be trapped in the dark. Perhaps that had been Father's plan all along.

As though answering her thoughts, the bulb flared one last time, hissed like a cheap kettle, and died.

Irene leaned her head back and closed her eyes against the dark.

Yes. Perfect.

But when she opened her eyes again, Irene realized she could make out the shape of the closest set of shelves. They were nothing more than a charcoal smear against the rest of the darkness, but she could see them, and that meant she wasn't in total dark. A pale, sourceless light began to grow, and Irene's eyes adjusted, until she could make out the far wall of the cellar and the wine bottle offering salutes from the racks.

After a time, the light steadied. And then a dark-haired woman stepped out of the cellar wall.

Irene sighed. "I was looking for you."

Marie-Thérèse, even for a dead woman, looked a bit worse for the wear. She was still a diaphanous figure, translucent and filled with a cold glow, like sunlight off a patch of ice. She wore the same white dress, although now the hem was ragged and blackened, as though she had been dragging it through the mud—or, perhaps, as though it had been burned. Lines of fatigue marred Marie-Thérèse's face, and she cast a backwards glance at the cellar wall.

A fox watching for hounds.

But when Marie-Thérèse turned back to Irene, she offered the same smile and said, “I’ve been busy, Irene. It’s good to see you again.”

“Harry said you were driven out of the church. How’d you get here?”

Marie-Thérèse pulled back her hair, and now Irene noticed silver mixed with the dark strands. The silver strands of hair glowed brighter than an electric filament. One more advantage to being dead, Irene supposed. Even gray hair looked beautiful.

“I was not driven out,” Marie-Thérèse said.

Irene tapped her lips.

“Very well,” Marie-Thérèse said. “Perhaps I left not entirely of my own design. As to how I came to be here—did you really think I could be kept out of the home of one of my descendants?”

With a prolonged eye roll, Irene stretched out her legs and lifted the revolver, aiming it at Marie-Thérèse.

“I don’t think this would hurt you,” Irene said. “But then again, I’m terribly bored, so I don’t particularly care.”

“Be thoughtful, child. I’m here to make you an offer.”

“Another?”

“Irene, you have not told me where the mask is.”

“I haven’t been able to find it. As you said, I’ve been busy. Your visions led us right into a trap. Or was that not entirely of your own design either?”

Marie-Thérèse was silent for a moment. The strands of silver in her hair shone like starlight. Then she said, “I was . . . misled.”

“Did your father lock you in a cellar too?”

With a surprisingly human snort, Marie-Thérèse shook her head. “He sent me to a nunnery.”

“You don’t seem particularly religious.”

“Appearances are deceiving, child. The dead are far more religious than the living. We have the most to lose, after all.”

“Did you like being a nun?”

Marie-Thérèse burst out laughing. “No. Not at all. I left the convent and married. I was not meant to be a bride of Christ, I think. I was not meant to be a wife at all, at least, not the way men wanted.”

“You should have been a suffragette.”

“I would have rather liked that, I think. The dancing, especially. And the skirts.”

“I’ll be sure to invite you the next time I go out.”

“You won’t go out again, child. You know that. Your father has thrown himself in with the Children, but he is not the only player. A man with big eyes and a big stomach, but without the skills or resources to be of value. He knows this. He is not a fool. He also knows that to keep his place with the Children—and to keep his wealth, his status—he must recover the mask. The mask is everything now. Dagon is restless. The Children hear him stirring. Your father will give you to the Children as a sign of his good will and faithfulness.”

“But the Children have the mask,” Irene said, gesturing with the pistol. “I saw those spiders take it.”

“The spiders did indeed have it, but the problem is that those spiders, in spite of their size, still have the brains of bugs. I had sent an agent to intervene and recover the mask. There

was a struggle.” Rage flicked across Marie-Thérèse’s face like a lightning stroke. “My agent turned out to be less faithful than I had hoped.”

“So who has the mask? Where is it?”

“My agent, true to the American spirit, has decided to put the mask up for auction. The Children will be there. As will the two bands of thugs who have been squabbling over the mask.”

“Why not go get the mask back, then?” Irene asked. She paused, then laughed. “You can’t, can you? All this show, and you can’t get the mask back. You might as well be a girl hiding under a sheet. Boo!” Irene laughed again.

“Boo indeed,” Marie-Thérèse murmured. Her eyes were huge and dark, swallowing up the cellar’s light. “As you have so eloquently pointed out, I am . . . limited. Particularly now, without access to certain resources.”

“The cathedral.”

“In part. This is why I have come to offer you a deal, Irene. The same deal I made to you when we first met. The deal that I offer you as one of my blood.”

“And what do I get out of it?”

“You will not die here, alone, in this cellar. You will not be given to the Children to be used in their rites. You will not see Dagon rise to take the River Throne. Three things, I offer you.”

“I’ll pass.”

Marie-Thérèse stood and stalked towards Irene. “Don’t be foolish.” The pale light flickered, like a candle tipping over, and Irene’s hand was sweaty on the revolver. “You can’t do anything from here. Your friends will be hunted down once the Children have the mask. You will be another meaningless victim to the Children’s lust for power.”

“Then sweeten the offer.”

“What? What do you want?”

“This pays for all,” Irene said. “It cancels our previous deal. Cian will remain healthy, and I am absolved of finding the mask.”

Marie-Thérèse paused. The light in the room had wrapped itself around her like skeins of yarn until she stood at the center of darkness. For a moment, something fluttered behind her translucence, like a cloud passing over the sun. Irene felt all those peach pits in her stomach tumble around as though she’d been doing somersaults.

And then Marie-Thérèse held out her hand. “Agreed.”

Irene pocketed the revolver. She stood, but she didn’t take the other woman’s hand.

“It is all right to be afraid,” Marie-Thérèse said. The compassion in her voice was surprising for its sincerity. “The old nun who first taught me these secrets told me that knowledge is a burden. The things you have seen, the things you know, men and women were not meant to know. This knowledge, these secrets, the old nun called them *la sagesse des larmes*. The weeping lore.”

“I’m not afraid,” Irene said. She reached out and took Marie-Thérèse’s hand. “And I’m not weeping.”

And then the world became a wall of white.

Chapter 61

At some point during the night, something large and fuzzy had crawled into Cian's mouth and died. A rat, perhaps, with a bad case of mold. Or an especially mobile piece of that awful-smelling Hun cheese. Whatever it had been, it had plastered itself to the back of Cian's throat and was now trying to kill him by smell alone.

Cian groaned, stretched his legs, and immediately regretted it. The movement sent him tumbling off the too-short sofa, and he landed face-down on the rug. The headache lurking behind his eyes sprang forward and started hammering at his brain.

"Morning, big boy." Sam's voice was bright and cheery and loud. It had all the charm, at that moment, of an icepick to the ear. "I was wondering if you were going to go ahead and die, or if you thought you'd linger a bit longer."

Cian spoke into the rug.

"What was thought?"

"Kill me," Cian croaked. Then, in a stroke of genius, he added, "Quietly."

A soft thud came near Cian's head. He managed to turn and saw a glass of water and two aspirin. He took them, drank the glass of water, and dropped back to lie on the rug.

"I didn't have any decent poison," Sam said.

"Please don't talk."

"But I have so much to tell you."

"Please. I'm begging you."

"I suppose, if you don't want me to tell you, I could find some other way to let you know. A song, maybe? Or maybe a message conveyed by drum? I read somewhere that's how the

Indians send messages. I tried my hand at the trumpet once. Well, not so much tried my hand at as stole and played for a few hours, but you get the idea. I could go find a trumpet and see if I still remembered something—”

“Sam,” Cian said.

“Yes, Cian?”

“Please.”

“Cian, this is very important. I take things like this very seriously. We can’t all spend our nights getting sloshed beyond redemption.”

Cian groaned again.

“Sam,” Pearl said.

“Pearl, good morning. I just got home and I was telling Cian that I have wonderful news, important news.”

“Pearl,” Cian said. “He’s being very loud.”

“Come tell me in the kitchen, Sam,” Pearl said. “Quietly.”

“But—” Sam said.

“Now, Sam. You’ll have time to torture them later.”

Sam grumbled and followed Pearl out of the room.

Cian thought, for half a second, about naming Pearl for sainthood. Then the headache took a sledgehammer to his right eye, and Cian struggled to keep from emptying his stomach.

It was not a promising way to start the day.

After a half an hour, though, the aspirin massaged away the worst of the ache, and Cian managed to sit up, finish the glass of water, and not vomit. He considered all three major accomplishments. From the kitchen came Sam’s voice punctuated by Pearl’s soft laughter. When

a few more minutes had passed, and Cian was fairly certain that he wasn't going to die, he got to his feet and made his way to the kitchen.

The small room smelled of toast, eggs, and cheese, and Cian swallowed to keep from losing the contents of his stomach. Sam and Pearl sat at the small table. Behind them, sunlight poked through the window like an ill-intentioned neighbor. Pearl set to work buttering a piece of toast, and the scrape of the knife across the dry bread sounded louder than a Wisconsin sawmill.

Sam whistled. "You look like death."

Pearl nodded, her expression sympathetic.

"Eggs?" Cian said. "You had to cook eggs?"

"They're good for a hangover," Sam said. He got to his feet, scraped eggs from a pan, and brought the plate over to the table. "And toast. And we would have cooked up some bacon, but we used it all for the sandwiches yesterday."

Cian dropped into the seat. He accepted the piece of toast like a flag of surrender. At least the worst of the noise had stopped. He swallowed another wave of nausea as he contemplated the eggs.

"You're not going to feel better unless you eat," Sam said.

Cian squeezed his eyes shut. "And the cheese?"

"Oh. That was just for me."

Of course.

Cian took his first bite. His stomach decided to stand on its head. He pushed the chair back, ran to the bathroom, and emptied his stomach into the toilet.

After he'd washed his face and brushed his teeth, his head felt like it had shrunk to half its size. When he came out of the bathroom, Harry was standing in the hall. The other man's face

was pinched and white, his eyes shadowed, and he looked like he'd spent the night wrestling a pack of dogs. Sick dogs.

"My turn," he croaked and pushed past Cian.

Cian returned to the kitchen. Sam had a huge smile plastered across his face.

"Better?" he asked.

"I am going to kill you. Later."

"Eggs," Sam said. "They always do the trick. I bet you're feeling a hundred percent."

"Pearl," Cian said. "Make him stop."

She frowned, handed Cian a piece of toast—no eggs—and pointed to the chair.

Cian sat and ate. It was a bit like chewing a tray of sawdust, but the toast dropped to the bottom of his stomach like anchor and sat there, soaking up the last of the sickness. Harry came in a few minutes later. When Sam offered eggs, Harry glared at the boy until Sam's smile fell off like a piece cheap of plaster.

Point for Harry. And for bad drunks everywhere.

Without a word, Harry accepted a piece of toast and dropped into the chair next to Cian. He ate with savage bites, still staring at Sam.

Sam paled.

"There's no need to walk around wearing a thundercloud," Pearl said. "Stop it right now, Harry."

He gave the toast another unnecessarily vigorous bite and turned to look at her.

"Sam has something to tell both of you," Pearl said.

"I went out last night," Sam said.

"I thought you were asleep," Cian said.

Sam shrugged. "I couldn't sleep. And since I wasn't invited to join what has to have been the loudest drinking party ever thrown by two men, I decided to go out."

Cian swallowed the last bit of sawdust in his mouth. He looked at Pearl.

She nodded. "It was . . . impressive."

Cian glanced at Harry.

He shrugged, but a blush was steadily mounting his cheeks.

"Where did you go?"

Sam smirked. "You know, if you're going to drink, you should really learn some new songs."

Cian groaned.

"Don't tease them, Sam," Pearl said, but she was fighting a smile.

"I thought I'd look around. Nothing major. I wanted to get my ear to the ground and see what I'd missed over the last few days."

"And?"

"And the Children have still got a price on my head."

"Of course."

"Well, a fellow can hope, can't he? I thought for sure they'd forget about me once you two showed your faces again."

Cian opened his mouth, ready to tell Sam exactly what he thought about the conversation, Sam's usefulness, and the dubious quality of the boy's maternal genealogy.

Pearl grabbed another piece of toast and shoved it towards Cian.

"Faster, Sam," she said.

“Right,” Sam said. The boy was making a point of not looking at Harry. “Well. I was going to come back here. I promised, didn’t I? I told you I’d help you. But then I started thinking, maybe I’d just head over to the docks and see about a trip south.”

“Street rat,” Cian grumbled around another mouthful of toast.

“I was just going to look. And besides, I came back, didn’t I? Anyway, I was on my way over there, freezing my ass off, and I saw my buddy Larry. He was all bundled up, but it was Larry, and he had a pint of whiskey with him, and—”

Harry had finished his toast. The sudden silence, after his vicious chomping, made Sam lick his lips.

“Anyway,” Sam said, “to make a long story short—”

Cian snorted.

“—Larry told me he heard about a big deal going down tonight.”

A long pause filled the kitchen. The sun had slanted up, driving yellow nails into the edge of the table. From outside came the sound of morning traffic: automobiles, the shouts of paperboys, and the mingled voices of everyday people going about everyday lives. The smell of eggs had faded slightly, or perhaps Cian’s stomach had truly settled, because he eyed the pan and felt a grumble of hunger working its way through his gut.

“And?” Harry said.

“And what? That deal is going to be where we find the mask.”

“Why?”

“Larry told me Byrne’s going to be there. That’s how Larry knew about it—he works for Byrne, big stuff, important stuff, and so he knew all about the meeting. Oh, and he told me they’re still trying to kill you, Cian. Sorry.”

Cian shrugged and grabbed the pan of eggs. He eyed them. Considered his stomach.

“And that’s it?” Harry said. “Byrne is going to a meeting?”

“No. The Dane is supposed to be there too.”

“They could be meeting about a dozen different things,” Harry said. “Pass me some of the eggs, Cian.”

Cian started shoveling food onto two plates.

Pearl leaned forward. “Harry, they’re meeting with a third person, which I’m sure Sam would have told you at some point. What if it’s one of the Children? Or one of their representatives? It seems like it’s worth a shot.”

“But why both of them?” Harry asked. “Why wouldn’t whoever had the mask just sell it to the Children?”

“That’s the question,” Sam said with a smile. “Larry told me the three of them—the Dane, Byrne, and this out of town fellow, are there for an auction.” He paused. “Don’t you see? Someone else has the mask and they’re going to sell it.”

“Or it’s a load of Canadian beer, or firearms, or stolen textiles, or a hundred other things that they could be trying to unload illegally. It doesn’t have to be the mask.”

“Who’s the third person?” Cian asked over a forkful of egg. His stomach had, after serious thought, decided to collaborate.

Sam shrugged. “Some Hun. Ehm. Ehm. Something like that.”

Harry set his fork down. “Friedrich von der Ehmke?”

“Yeah. Sounds right.”

The eggs were cold and sticky in Cian’s mouth. He looked at Pearl.

“Freddy,” she said.

Chapter 62

Cian stood out like a sore thumb as he walked down the street in Kerry Patch. Part of it, of course, was the clothes. He was wearing one of those damned fine suits Irene had bought for him. Even with mick hair and a mick name, Cian might as well have worn a sign asking to be mugged.

But there were places he needed to go in the Patch. And the clothes were only part of the reason he felt out of place. The last few days and weeks seemed longer than all the rest of his life put together. He felt like he'd lived in a foreign country—a place with golems and giant spiders and ghosts and magic, a place better left to anyone else besides Cian Shea—and now, walking in the Patch, he couldn't feel comfortable. As though he'd come home and was standing on the wrong side of a window, watching from the outside, unable to get back in. Not that anybody ever really wanted to be in the Patch.

It was a shit feeling and it matched a shit day. Cold, gray, wet. Not snow, but an icy drizzle that soaked him by inches, never hard enough to be called a storm but never letting up. In the Patch, and with the morning rush over, the only sound was the crystalline music of the runoff. Nobody walked the dirt roads that had turned to rivers of mud. Nobody except Cian Shea.

And he, of course, was an idiot.

They had agreed to go to the meeting that night. It was to be held at the Louisiana Grand at nine in the evening. After hearing Freddy's name, Harry had disappeared into his study. Pearl had looked like a wet sheet. Cian had done the dishes—and twisted Sam's arm until the boy helped—and then he had gone to find Irene.

It was no great surprise that she was not in her hotel room. Maybe she'd stepped out to run an errand. Maybe she was already on her way to Harry's.

Then again, there was that damned, fool kiss to consider.

She was a woman, and Cian Shea had kissed her. If she were smart, she was probably entering a convent.

The sight of Cian's destination dragged him from his thoughts. He pushed on the door to Patrick's bar. The door was locked.

That seemed strange. True, it was still morning, but this was the Patch. There were plenty of mick bastards—Cian Shea among them—who started drinking in the morning and didn't stop until they hit the floor. Patrick should have had his place open. Cian tried the door again and then knocked.

No answer.

He circled around back, but that door was locked too, and the windows were dark.

In part, he had hoped to apologize for the other night. Patrick couldn't have known that Irene would dash off and risk her neck. And if the man liked Irene, Cian wished him the best—well, he wished him a solid punch in the jaw, and then he wished him the best. Irene had no interest in Cian, and Patrick seemed decent enough for a fellow mick from the Patch.

Beyond the apology, though, Cian had wanted to ask about the night's meeting. Sam had all the energy of a puppy and just as much brains, and Cian wanted to know as much as he could about the meeting before he showed up. Patrick seemed a likely source.

But likely source or not, Patrick wasn't going to tell Cian anything if Cian couldn't find him.

After one last knock, Cian left the bar and started walking again. There was someone else he could ask. Someone who had information as well.

Eileen.

Granted, the last time he had asked for information—about the Dane’s brothel—Eileen had turned around and sold that information to Byrne. Byrne’s men had shown up, either trying to find Cian or, perhaps, trying to find the mask. Talking to Eileen was a risk, but Cian didn’t have any other options.

He thought, briefly, that maybe he should sleep with Eileen. As a way of gaining her silence. Purely for necessity’s sake.

Cian knew what Irene would say about that idea. And, for that matter, what Eileen would say. His cheeks were hot as he tried to forget the idea.

The clouds hunkered lower, and thunder rumbled, as though God were chafing his hands for warmth. After a minute, the icy drizzle turned to a sheet of freezing rain. It fell across the street, iron gray and twisting the flickering gas lamps into halos. Cian picked up his pace.

The dirt paths of Kerry Patch were a maze of mud, bridged in a few places by boards that flexed under Cian’s weight, but for the most part threatening to suck off his shoes with every step. As he went deeper into the Patch, the buildings devolved. The stout brick-and-timber constructions that were closer to the edge of the Patch dwindled, and the buildings that took their place had a starved, angry look about them. Tails of smoke curled up from a few of the houses and were slashed by the rain.

By the time Cian reached the cramped cloister where Eileen lived, he was soaked to the skin and shivering. Around him, the buildings were dark. They shouldered together, blocking out what little light was left like bullies on a back street. The hiss of the rain, like steam escaping,

trampled any other noise. Cian didn't like the sound. He didn't like the dark, shuttered windows. His breathed on numb fingers and knocked.

There was no answer.

Damn and double damn. It was bad enough Patrick had been gone. Now—wetter than a cat dropped in the river and frozen to the bone—he'd wasted half the morning for nothing.

He knocked again.

A crack made Cian spin about. He grabbed the Colt and looked for the source of the sound. A gunshot, he was certain.

Then he saw the loose shutter flapping overhead. Another breeze stole into the tiny square of buildings and slapped the shutter against the wall. Crack. Crack.

A bead of ice rolled down Cian's throat. He didn't like this. He didn't like any of it.

He turned to exit the muddy yard and stopped. A pair of men walked down the alley toward him. Cian threw a quick look around the yard. No other exit appeared. The buildings offered no escape. They were old hands at this sort of thing: muggings, murders. They were, in their way, accomplices. After all—this was Kerry Patch.

Cian turned back to Eileen's door. He drove his heel into the door, near the lock, and the rotted wood split. The door flew in. Shouts came from the men in the alley, and Cian plunged into the dark room. In the weak light from outside, the outline of a bed was visible, and a pale arm, hand open and turned up, spread across the quilt. The rest of Eileen was in shadow.

Cian didn't need to see her. He knew she was dead. The slaughterhouse smell told him that much.

He crossed the room, barked his shin on a chest hidden by the darkness, and ran his hands across the wall. He didn't remember seeing a door, but then, he hadn't spent much time here.

Behind him, the hiss of the rain masked any other sound. The wood was rough. Splinters caught the tips of his fingers, and then the dry, crumbling brush of paper, and the smell of the wet wood mixed with Eileen's death in the air.

They had killed her.

Byrne. It had to be. Because Byrne's men had died, burned to ash when Harry had unleashed that magical fire in the brothel. Had Byrne killed Eileen as punishment for sending his men to their deaths? Or had he killed her beforehand, to ensure that she didn't warn Cian?

Or had she died like so many others—men and women and children—in Kerry Patch? Died because she was a mick and she was poor and she'd picked up the wrong man on the wrong night.

His fingers caught the sill. Cian fumbled with the shutters and lifted the latch. A burst of stormy air hit his face like wet linen. The street outside was almost as dark as Eileen's room. Cian didn't care. He dragged himself through the window and glanced back.

One of the men had reached the doorway. His hand was raised. In the rain, the gunshot might as well have been the sound of Moses parting the Red Sea. Cian threw himself from the window.

He landed on his back in the mud and squirmed to his feet. Behind him, a chunk of the window frame had vanished. Splinters poked out of the shoulder of Cian's coat like a porcupine's quills.

Without looking back, Cian ran.

Chapter 63

At seven, they arrived at the Louisiana Grand.

Cian was bathed, shaved, and changed. Pearl, in a surprising fit of insistence, had forced him to run a comb through his hair with a bit of pomade, and now he looked as dapper as a red-haired eel. Harry wore a suit that might have cost more than the car. He looked completely recovered: handsome and charming and well-bred as ever. Pearl had varied from her conservative skirt and blouse and wore an elegant, cream-colored dress and a strand of pearls. Her hair was up, her eyes bright, and Cian wondered if she were excited about the night's activities.

Or if, like most women, she simply enjoyed dressing up.

As they pulled up to the hotel, Cian found himself checking the Colt again. Harry had surprised him with a shoulder holster. It was a bit strange, but decidedly more comfortable than carrying the Colt at the back of his trousers.

Pearl smiled and tapped Cian's arm. He released the Colt and clasped his big hands in his lap. Pearl laid her hand over his and her smile faded.

"Are you sure you're ok?"

"She's dead, Pearl. There's nothing to do about it now except make sure Byrne doesn't get away with it."

"A bullet in the head will take care of that," Harry added from the front seat.

Pearl nodded. It was the kind of nod that indicated understanding and, at the same time, complete disapproval. It was familiar, something Cian had seen on his mother a hundred times, and felt so out of place in that moment that Cian smiled in spite of himself.

With a roll of her eyes, Pearl said, “You’re both such boys.”

“You wouldn’t expect anything different, would you?” Harry asked.

Pearl laughed but didn’t answer.

When they stopped in front of the hotel, Harry helped Pearl out of the car, and a young man drove the Model T away after giving Harry a chit. Harry and Pearl took the lead, arm in arm, like a pair of St. Louis’s finest. Cian trailed after them. He thought of Eileen, dead and frozen in her tiny room, and checked the Colt again.

One bullet would be enough.

The inside of the hotel had been transformed. It looked as though winter had received a sudden inheritance, dressed itself up, and moved into the lobby. Drifts of fake snow—cotton and paper—covered most of the floor, surrounding evergreen trees draped in lights and tinsel and glass ornaments. Gold and silver snowflakes hung from the ceiling, glimmering in the light of the chandeliers. Oversized boxes wrapped in red and blue and silver papers were stacked throughout the false snow, as though a cavalcade of Famous-Barr shoppers had died from exposure and left only their shopping as monuments to their passing.

Overhead, a banner of red and green letters on white cloth read, “Merry Christmas.”

Cian stared at the hotel. For the last four years—or had it been five? Six?—his Christmases had been no different than any other day: scrounging for work, scrounging for drink, and letting a wave of booze drag down his brain. The inside of the Louisiana Grand was another world: men in perfect suits and hats, women in dresses of silk and velvet and satin, as though they had stepped off the pages of a Stix’s catalogue. People seemed happy, laughing and chatting among the piles of fake snow. Waiters moved through the crowd with trays of drinks. So much for temperance and the Volstead Act. Tonight was Christmas Eve, and the law be damned.

Which suited Cian just fine.

“Merry Christmas Eve,” Pearl murmured to both of them. “A strange night for what we have planned.”

“Peace on earth,” Harry said. His eyes glinted in the hotel lights. “Good will toward men.”

They both paused and looked at Cian.

“Merry Christmas Eve,” he said. “I didn’t have a chance to pick up any presents.”

Pearl laughed and squeezed his arm.

“Let’s just get the mask,” Harry said. “That’s present enough for me.”

“Of course,” Cian said. “Just let me get a drink.”

Cian snagged a drink from one of the waiters as they crossed the lobby. It was a cocktail, more bitter than he had expected, and it left him wanting a good whiskey. Or, for that matter, a bucket of moonshine he could stick his head in. But one cocktail would have to be enough, and he set the glass down as they started up the stairs. Harry led them to the second floor. Opposite the stairs, a massive ballroom opened up, revealing men and women dancing to the music of a band. Broad hallways led to the left and right.

“Sam said they’re supposed to use one of these meeting rooms,” Harry said. “Let’s hope he’s right. And that he can do his job.”

“He’ll do it,” Cian said. “He’s not that bad, once you get past—well, once you get past just about everything.”

“We’ll see. Now we need to find where they’re going to be. We’ll split up and meet here in an hour. Stay near crowds. And don’t make a scene.”

“Why are you looking at me?”

Harry stared at him a moment longer.

“Fine,” Cian said with a sigh. “I wish we knew where Irene was.”

“At least I don’t have to worry about the two of you bickering. Remember. One hour.”

And then he was gone, disappearing into the ballroom. Half the heads in the room turned to watch Harry Witte enter. That was the kind of man he was. Which explained, in part, why Cian still had the lingering desire to knock out some of his teeth.

Pearl watched Harry go for a moment. Her eyes were still bright. A flush had climbed her cheeks and throat, and she looked happy.

“You look beautiful, by the way,” Cian said. The words popped out.

A smile grew on Pearl’s face. “Thank you, Cian.” She paused. “You know, you might try saying something like that to Irene next time you see her. Women like that sort of thing.”

“Not Irene. Somehow she’d twist it all around and the next thing I knew, I’d be apologizing for trampling on the rights of suffragettes everywhere, or something like that.”

Pearl laughed, shook her head, and said, “Of course you would. But that doesn’t mean she wouldn’t like it all the same.” Then she disappeared back down the stairs into the lobby.

Cian looked around for a waiter. He needed another drink. Now.

It seemed that here, at least, the waiters were confined to the tables that lined the edges of the ballroom. Harry had already worked his way into a crowd near the edge of the dance floor, and a pair of women were laughing at something he had said. Cian turned and followed the hall that led to the right. From behind several of the doors came the sounds of laughter, the clink of glasses, and the irregular swell of men’s voices. The sound of men who were pleased with themselves and, more importantly, pleased with their companions. Men, Cian assumed, who had

rented out these larger rooms in the hotel in order to take advantage of the festivities while also having the opportunity for private indiscretions.

A few of the rooms were silent. Cian checked these. Two of the rooms had their gas lamps turned up, with food arranged on sideboards and bottles of champagne cooling in ice, but no sign of their intended guests. One room had the food and the champagne and, in addition, an old, overweight man pinned to his chair by a much younger woman's tongue. Cian shut the door as quickly—and as quietly—as he could, and then wondered if he could find a bit of soap to scrub his eyes.

What he didn't find, though, was any sign of an incipient meeting of the most nefarious men in St. Louis. None of the rooms were draped in black, or guarded by thugs, or marked with a sign proclaiming the nine o'clock auction of a cultic mask.

By the time Cian returned to the main stairs, the clock read half past eight, and he had nothing to show for his search. And, worse, his throat was dry.

He edged towards the ballroom. And the drinks.

Overhead, chandeliers threw elongated diamonds of light across the room, overlapping folds like good tulle brushed by the shadows of the party-goers. The air was warmer here, with the scent of women's perfume and men's perspiration. A round woman with a rounder face swam past Cian, her arms parting the air as though it were water, and she wore an aquamarine waterfall. As she passed Cian, she goosed him, laughed a nickel-bright laugh, and plunged into the tide of bodies.

Cian fixed his sights on the bar. It sat halfway across the rooms. The bottles gleamed. Volstead Act or no, St. Louis's finest were going to enjoy their Christmas Eve the way they always had. He started towards the bar.

And then he stopped. Halfway across the room, engaged in a quiet conversation, was a man Cian remembered quite clearly.

The man had, after all, tried to kill Cian twice. It had left an impression.

He was thin as a rail and looked like the kind of man with a taste for barbed wire and razor blades. Cian had first seen him at Seamus's place. The man had shot Seamus in the head and then tried to put a couple rounds in Cian. The second time, he had shown up at the hospital and tried to kill Cian and Irene both.

Because of that man, Seamus's boys had tried to run Cian down, thinking he had killed their boss.

The thin man broke off his conversation and started towards the hall. Cian spun and saw Harry talking to a pair of generously endowed women who looked like sisters. Rich, young sisters. Cian pushed his way through the crowd towards Harry. Squawks and grumbles followed him, but Cian didn't care. A wave of aquamarine crashed in front of him, and a round, rouged faced crested, but Cian kept going.

He felt another pinch—a rather aggressive pinch—as he dodged the woman.

Thank God Irene wasn't here.

“Cian,” Harry said. “I was just talking to—”

“Later,” Cian said. He grabbed Harry and dragged him towards the hall.

“What is it?” Harry said.

“Him,” Cian said, pointing at the thin man, who had almost reached the hall. “He killed Seamus, and I think he's working with Byrne. Or maybe with the Dane. I don't know. But he's tied up in all of this.”

“Well, let’s find out how what he knows,” Harry said. He brushed the wrinkles from his suit and smiled.

As they followed the thin man into the hall, Pearl came rushing up the stairs, dress clutched in one hand. A few interested eyes followed her, but for the most part, the other party guests were absorbed in their own conversations and, to a greater extent, in their drinks.

“He’s here,” Pearl said when she reached them. “Freddy’s here.”

“Where?” Harry said.

“I don’t know. I was following him through the lobby and I lost him.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harry said. “He’ll show up. He won’t let the mask get away from him again.”

“For now, we need to follow our lead,” Cian said. He nudged them both after the thin man, who had continued down the hall. “Since he’s all we’ve got.”

As they started after the man, though, a knot of revelers burst from the ballroom, and Cian found himself cut off from Harry and Pearl. Swearing and pushing, Cian struggled through the group of party-goers, considering whether a few good punches might not do the world a service, when a hand closed over his shoulder. Then the muzzle of a gun pressed against Cian’s back.

“Don’t move, Shea,” Irving Harper said.

Harry cast a backwards glance, concern in his eyes.

Cian shook his head. *Keep going*, he mouthed.

With a nod, Harry took Pearl by the arm and they hurried down the hall.

“You going to be smart about this, Shea?” Harper said. With the hand on Cian’s shoulder, Harper steered him towards the stairs.

“I haven’t been smart about anything so far. Why start now?”

No response came from Harper. Cian cast a glance back. The cut to the side of Harper’s face was scabbed over, and the man still looked pale, as though he weren’t ready to be back on his feet. When Harper noticed Cian’s look, he gave Cian another shove, and Cian turned his gaze forward to keep from falling.

“Should have killed me, Shea. That was a big mistake. Those boys you killed, they had families. They were just doing their jobs. I’m going to make sure you get what’s coming, though.”

“I didn’t kill them,” Cian said. “What did you think that big, old nasty lizard was that I left in your lap?”

Cian threw another look back. Harper was paler. He jabbed the muzzle into Cian’s back as though he wished it were a knife. The stains on Harper’s suit and tie had more life in them than Harper did right then.

“I’m telling you,” Cian said. “You’re making a mistake. I didn’t—”

He paused because they had gotten to the stairs. Coming up the steps was a cluster of three massive men in trench coats, wearing hats pulled low over their faces. They looked about as festive as a pile of dog turds, and Cian was fairly sure that they hadn’t come tonight to celebrate the birth of their Lord and Savior.

The golems hadn’t noticed him yet. Once they did, Cian figured that things were going to get more interesting.

“Go on,” Harper said, digging the gun into Cian’s back again. “Say it. Tell me how you didn’t do anything wrong.” They started down the steps. Harper’s breath was hot against Cian’s

ear. The man smelled like canned gravy. “Tell me you didn’t leave Harley Dunn with half a face.”

“It’s half more than that bastard deserved.”

On the next step down, Cian threw himself forward. Harper shouted as Cian pulled free of his grip. Cian fell to the left, crashing into the closest of the golems. It felt like throwing himself against a kiln—hard and hot and not a good idea. The golem shifted a fraction of an inch. Cian bounced off, hit the next step, and rolled.

A drunken woman screeched.

Because Cian held in his hands the golem’s hat. Its slag-heap of a face turned slowly, taking in the people on the steps and landing, studying the room anew.

More screams rose, and men and women raced to get clear of the bare-headed golem. Harper pivoted, gun rising, like a man dipped in molasses. The golem gave him a shove and kept walking.

Harper stumbled back. He fired. The gunshot rang through the crowded hall, an exclamation mark that interrupted the rising sounds of panic. Then Harper hit the banister and fell.

Shit.

Cian threw a glance after the golems and then sprinted down the steps. Harper lay on the stairs like a broken doll, but by the time Cian reached the other man, Harper had lifted his head and was blinking.

“Hey there, Harper,” Cian said, kneeling next to the man. “How you feeling?”

“Shea, God-damn it.”

That was all. Then Harper raised his gun like the American flag at dawn.

“You’re going to be right as rain,” Cian said. He plucked the gun from Harper and said, “I’ll just hold onto this, though, until then.”

Harper gave a confused nod and half-shake of his head.

Above them, screams escalated.

“I think they’ve reached the ballroom,” Cian said.

Harper didn’t seem to think much of the idea. He was staring up at the gold-leaf ceiling and groaning.

“Let’s get you somewhere safe.”

To Cian’s surprise, Harper could stand, and nothing seemed broken. Together, they made their way to a service door in the lobby. Harper shook his head again as Cian lowered him to the floor.

“Why?” he croaked.

Cian shrugged. “You’re just doing your job.” Then he grabbed the handcuffs from Harper’s belt, snapped one end around Harper’s wrist, and fitted the other around an exposed length of pipe. He dug out the key from Harper’s pocket. “You should stay here,” Cian said. “You’ll be safer.”

“Shea, God damn it,” Harper said.

Cian fought a smile. “Glad you approve. I’ll see you soon, Harper. Don’t arrest anyone else until then.”

Cian dropped the Harper’s gun near the door, where Harper could retrieve it—after he’d been released from the cuffs, of course. Then Cian drew the Colt. As he pushed open the door to the lobby, a tremendous crash came from front of the building.

A rain of glass fell across the lobby, sprinkling the tufted imitation snow and spearing the Christmas trees like icicles. The front of the lobby—the wide glass doors and windows—had been blown in. As Cian watched, a pair of lizard-men—sauria, Irene had called them—pulled themselves through the broken windows.

Unlike the golems, the sauria made no pretense at disguise. They were huge, topping Cian by at least a foot, and built like a Mack AB. They came across the lobby in a sinuous race.

The first woman who died was old, with a wobbly double-chin and a puffy white hat. She stood as though hypnotized, watching the sauria race towards her. When the closest sauria reached her, it tore out her sagging throat and kept moving. The puffy white hat floated to the ground like an overweight snowflake.

After that, the slaughter began in earnest, with the sauria tearing through the fleeing people. The escaping party-goers dropped like wheat beneath a thresher. Blood sprayed across the walls. Gold-leaf and terracotta vanished under the dark drops.

Cian watched, a fist around his throat, and remembered the trenches in France.

Somehow, he came back to himself, like a man hearing a bell from a great distance. His legs moved before his brain, and he found himself trotting up the stairs, Colt in hand, with the sounds of the dying a half-step behind. The flood of people from the ballroom continued to press past him, rushing towards the abattoir that had opened in the lobby. Cian fought against the current. When he reached the landing, a surge of gibbering aquamarine passed him, and he felt a swell of cold, trapped pity, like a man listening to a radio broadcast.

Then he continued up the stairs. There was nothing he could do for them.

At the top of the hall, the crush of people dwindled. Through the doors to the ballroom, Cian spotted a few revelers who had taken refuge under the tables. Trampled streamers littered

the floor. A tablecloth had been dragged halfway to the door, spilling broken crystal and red wine across the parquet. At least, Cian hoped it was wine. A gold-lettered banner dangled from its remaining ties, fluttering slightly, as though a divine hand were trying to shake off the words. Peace on earth, the banner read.

Cian bit back a sharp laugh and ran down the hall.

It wasn't hard to spot the room where Harry and Pearl had gone. An entire length of wall had been blasted open, spilling plaster and laths and stone across the carpeted floor. Dust and smoke drifted between the gaslights, taking on a sunset radiance. A gunshot rang out a moment later, and the acrid smell of the powder stung Cian's nose.

"Harry," he called.

"In here," Pearl answered.

Cian came up to the edge of the ruined wall and peeked around. On the other side, he saw the remains of what must have once been an impressive sitting room. Sofas and chairs had been overturned to form impromptu barricades, and even a small, upright piano had been put into service as part of one wall.

Near the opening in the destroyed wall, Pearl and Harry crouched behind a sideboard. On top of the sideboard, a crystal decanter of brandy and a pair of tumblers sat undisturbed. As Cian moved to join them, a white-haired man rose from behind the piano and fired a shot. Cian pulled back. Another crack of gunshot came from within the room, and then a shout.

"Would you mind trying that again, Cian?" Harry asked.

Cian peered around the wall.

Harry was grinning.

Cian dove for the sideboard. From the corner of his eye, Cian saw another man rise from behind the sofa. Harry leaned around the edge of the barricade and fired again. The man fell back, cracked his head against the hearth and dropped out of sight.

“What the hell is going on?” Cian asked as he wormed his way up to Harry and Pearl.

“They were taking too long,” Pearl said. “Harry decided to speed things up by knocking out their wall.”

“Who has the mask?” Cian asked.

From across the room, between the hearth and a chaise longue that lay on its side, came a familiar voice.

“Hi, Cian.” Patrick poked his head above the edge of the chaise and then ducked back down. “Kind of a mess, right?”

“You’re kidding,” Cian said to Harry.

Harry shook his head.

“You’re a dead man,” a deeper voice said from behind the piano. “My men are crawling all over this place. They’ll be here in minutes.”

“That’s Byrne,” Harry said. “He’s upset.”

“I can imagine,” Cian said.

“Make sure your buddy doesn’t run off with the mask,” Harry said. “I want to talk to him after this is over.”

“It’s not what you think, Cian,” Patrick said. “Listen, I’m going to come out. We can talk about this, right? Is Irene with you?”

“Shut your mouth, Patrick.”

But Patrick inched up from behind the chaise. As soon as he was clear of the chair, a pair of men rose from behind the piano. Patrick squeaked and dropped.

Cian got up on his knees and fired. The bullet caught an overweight man in the throat. The man's head snapped back, and he dropped behind the piano like a man in a bad vaudeville act.

The other man was tall and broad-shouldered and had long, matted dark hair. He fired at Patrick, and a puff of stuffing from the chaise floated into the air. Then a bullet caught him in the shoulder and knocked him back against the hotel wall.

Harry got to his feet, still holding his revolver on the other man. "That should be all of them."

"The Dane?" Cian asked.

"Over here," Patrick said.

"Watch him," Harry said with a jerk of his head. Then he picked his way through the furniture. The dark-haired man glared at Harry. He stood with one hand pressed over his shoulder. In his other hand, he still held his pistol. He looked like a mick, and not the good kind, if there were such a thing.

"Who were you supposed to meet here?"

"My sweet ma," the man said. "I'm going to take my time killing you, once my men get here. I want to know how you found us. How you knew about all of this."

The sound of a frantic scramble came from behind the chaise. Cian crossed the room, hopped over the chaise, and kicked the pistol out of Patrick's hand.

Patrick yelped and shook his hand. "God, Cian, I—"

"I said, shut up, Patrick."

Patrick swallowed.

Cian could almost hear Pearl's silent disapproval. He put the tip of the Colt at the base of Patrick's neck and motioned for the other man to stand up. Patrick did so. His eyes kept flicking to the long-haired man.

"That's Byrne?" Cian asked.

Patrick nodded.

"You told them?" Byrne said, glaring at Patrick. "I knew I should have just cut your damn throat when I had a chance. Look at you, stupid little mick, thinking you're a big shit. I would have paid you for the damn mask."

"Aren't you a mick?" Harry asked. He threw a quick look at Cian. "Shouldn't he not be using that word like that?"

"There are micks and then there are micks," Cian said with a shrug. He grinned. "Right, Patrick?"

Harry was still looking at Cian when Byrne began to move. The long-haired man's arm came up, pistol moving towards Harry. Cian started to cry out, but everything happened too fast. A crack of gunfire ricocheted through the room.

Byrne slid down the wall. A line of blood from the back of his head stained the paper.

"Damn," Harry said as he lowered his revolver. "Do you really think he has other men here?"

"If he does, they're dead or running," Cian said. "The lobby is filled with sauria, and I saw golems on the stairs. We need to get out of here now."

Pearl spun and stared at the broken wall. At the same time, every hair on Cian's body stood straight up, as though he had crawled inside a thundercloud. His breath caught. Overhead,

the flames in the gas lamps bent sideways. The smell of hot glass mixed with the lingering scent of gunfire.

“Something is coming,” Harry said.

The gas lamps shrank to blue dots, like match tips on the edge of catching. Cian felt a shiver run through Patrick. Then the other man broke like a frightened deer, pushing past Cian and making for the door. Cian brought the Colt across the back of Patrick’s head, and he dropped like a sack of bad potatoes.

But the fear was contagious, riding up Cian’s spine on a white horse.

And then she floated into view, set against a backdrop of blue-white light, like the Virgin Mary in a child’s prayerbook.

“Irene,” Cian breathed.

Chapter 64

Framed by the jagged edges of the ruined wall, Irene hung in the air a foot above the ground. Her short hair was disheveled, her eyes shadowed, as though she had been ill for a long time, and the color washed from her face by the sourceless blue-white light. At the sound of her name, Irene's eyes closed once, but when they opened there was no recognition in them.

"The third party," Harry said. He holstered his revolver and laughed. "Well played, Marie-Thérèse. Very well played. And all this time, I thought you were on the run. Tell me—what did you offer the girl?"

The corners of Irene's mouth twitched into a ghost of a smile. "Very little, as it turns out, Henry. Love, and desperation, makes fools of us all." Her eyes drifted towards Cian, and her smile broadened. "What have you done to Patrick?"

"Nothing permanent, I'm afraid," Harry answered.

"That's a pity. He deserves some sort of punishment for his behavior."

"Come now, Marie-Thérèse, you can't believe I'll let you have the mask. What do you hope to gain from this display?"

Irene's lips curled up, baring lovely white teeth and turning her smile into a snarl. "Had you faced me before, Henry, we might have been more evenly matched. But now," she gestured down at her body, "like this, I am restored to my former strength. Leave now, Henry, and for old time's sake I will give you a day or two to start running."

Harry crossed his arms and studied Irene—or Marie-Thérèse. Something had changed in Harry's face. Cian's stomach flopped like a sick dog.

“You can’t be serious,” Cian said, his gaze moving from Harry to Marie-Thérèse and then back again. “Look what she’s done to Irene. You have to stop her. You have to help Irene.”

When Harry answered, his voice was low. “Cian, what Irene did—she had to do it willingly. She made a deal with Marie-Thérèse.”

Marie-Thérèse, or Irene, laughed and drifted into the room. Pearl moved backward with calm, careful steps. Her hand dipped into her clutch. Marie-Thérèse ignored her.

“Henry’s right,” Marie-Thérèse said to Cian. “He’s quite well-versed in this type of thing. He knows more than most about the weeping lore. Do you know how much he knows? Have you ever wondered?”

“Enough, Marie-Thérèse,” Harry said.

“Henry, have you been keeping secrets from your friends?” Marie-Thérèse made a tscking noise. “Would you rather that I told them? Henry Witte is—”

Harry threw one hand forward and shouted a word that Cian couldn’t hear. It sounded like a massive wave striking land. An invisible force hit Marie-Thérèse and hurled her back through the ruined wall. She struck the far wall. Plaster crumbled. For a moment, the lights overhead began to warm.

And then Marie-Thérèse laughed. She shrugged her way free of the slabs of plaster. The gaslights dwindled to blue specks. She floated forward, trailing crumbs of dust. The backdrop of blue-white light hardened until it looked like the slabs of ice floating on the Mississippi. At the threshold to the room, Marie-Thérèse paused. A look of confusion trailed across Irene’s features for a moment.

Harry held his hand out. He was speaking, and sweat dripped down his face. Cian's ears felt like they were full of water, as though he'd swum to the bottom of a lake and the pressure was building.

Then, with a pop, the feeling vanished. Marie-Thérèse glided into the room. Cian raised the Colt and then paused.

Because she was still Irene. Somewhere in there was Irene, the girl with dark eyes. The girl who had cut past five years of Cian's self-pity and self-doubt.

Marie-Thérèse flipped one hand out and called out a word. Harry was flung into the air and pinned against the wall. The gas lamps trembled.

And then Harry began to scream.

Pearl pulled her hand from her clutch. She held a small derringer. She aimed it at Irene. There was no hesitation in her face. She might as well have been Annie Oakley and Artemis and Diane rolled into one.

"No," Cian said. His throat was raw, as though he'd been screaming. He stumbled forward, putting himself between Pearl and Marie-Thérèse.

No. That wasn't true.

He put himself between Pearl and Irene. He set his back to Pearl and stared into Irene's dark eyes. Marie-Thérèse didn't acknowledge him. She stared at Harry. Harry's scream had risen to new pitch. The sound scraped Cian's bones like an icepick.

His eyes stung. That seemed stupid. Stupid as shit.

"Move," Pearl said. "Move, Cian!"

Cian shook his head.

“Irene,” Cian said. “I know you can hear me. Irene, you have to stop her. You can’t let her do this.”

Marie-Thérèse’s eyes snapped to Cian. Amusement twisted her features.

Run, Cian’s gut said. Run. Run the way he ran in France. Run, and leave Irene, and leave Harry, and live another day.

Run.

Corinne’s face pressed against the stone.

The wet, split-melon sound of Dunn’s head.

And that night, a wet, French night, his breath fogging Corinne’s window. She had screamed for help and he had run.

And never stopped running.

Right then, the ground was firm under Cian’s feet, as though the earth had stopped spinning. He stared at Irene. Not at Marie-Thérèse. Not at the thing that hid behind Irene’s face. He stared at Irene, all the way at the back, where she hid behind barbed comments and clever jabs. The brave, bold, smart, beautiful woman, with whom he had fallen completely in love.

For a moment, a look of total shock filled Marie-Thérèse’s features. And then Marie-Thérèse was gone, and Cian was looking into Irene’s eyes.

The sound of Pearl’s shot broke the world in half. Half on instinct, Cian moved right. The round struck Cian in the back and knocked him forward. He hit the carpet on his knees and fell forward. The fibers tickled his chin. His back felt like a mule had practiced clogging on it.

Through blurred vision, it took him a moment to realize the blue-white light was gone. The gas lamps spread amber warmth through the room.

And then Irene’s voice.

“Cian, you’re bleeding all over the rug.”

Chapter 65

One moment, Irene had been trapped behind thick glass. The world had shrunk to pinpoint figures. And then, the next moment, Cian's sea-green eyes had stared right at her, and the glass was no thicker than cobwebs.

Irene felt her feet hit the carpet. The gas lamps fluttered overhead. Her head throbbed—not painful, but like a drum skin. The furniture in the room had been overturned. Blood covered the walls. The scent of death was in the air, blood and fear. Harry lay against the far wall, his eyes closed, his breathing ragged. Pearl held a derringer and stared at Irene as though seeing a ghost.

Cian lay on the floor. A bullet hole marked the back of his jacket. Red stained his shirt. Irene's heart climbed into her mouth.

In what was perhaps not her finest moment, she said the first thing that came to mind.

"Cian, you're bleeding all over the rug."

She dropped to her knees. Cian groaned, and Irene lifted his head. His eyes were bright with pain. Pain and relief and a transparent vulnerability that dragged Irene out to sea. She didn't care. She didn't care at all.

"What in the world do you care about the damn rug?" he said. "I've been shot and all you can think about is the rug?"

"It's not that bad," Irene said, inspecting the wound. "It's the fatty part of the shoulder. I think I can see it—"

"Not that bad?" Cian said. "What do you—"

Irene hooked her nail around the bullet.

Cian roared and tried to pull away.

“God, woman, leave it be!”

With a sniff of disapproval, Irene wiped her hands on Cian’s ruined jacket. And then, all at once, she started crying.

Cian struggled to get up, cradling his right arm. Through her tears, Irene tried to help him. Cian mumbled something, patting her arm, and then the sobs tore through Irene with full force. She let herself fall against his shoulder—the uninjured one.

She was a suffragette. She was an independent woman. She most certainly did not need a man to comfort her.

But right then, Cian’s muscular arm around her felt very nice.

After a few minutes, she pulled back, wiped her eyes, and dug through her clutch for a handkerchief. She blew her nose and said, “Cian, are you all right?”

“What do you mean am I all right? Are you all right?”

She dropped the handkerchief back in the clutch, stepped back, and said, “Of course I’m all right. Don’t be silly.” She paused and studied him. “That jacket is hopeless, you know.”

The confusion in his eyes, as he got to his feet, was worth almost everything.

Irene’s amusement faded, though, when she turned around. Pearl knelt by Harry, who still lay at the base of the wall, his face slack and his eyes closed. The discarded derringer sat on the carpet, its single shot expended. When Pearl looked up, her eyes were red.

“I’m so sorry, Cian.”

He shook his head.

Pearl nodded and turned her attention back to Harry.

“Will he be all right?” Irene asked. “I didn’t—Pearl, I couldn’t have known.”

Pearl didn't answer.

"I swear, Marie-Thérèse didn't tell me," Irene said. If I—"

Cian's hand closed over hers. Irene swallowed the rest of the words. She felt like she'd spent the day chewing poison oak.

"Pearl?" Cian said. "We need to go."

"Yes," Pearl said. She nodded and stood. "You won't be able to carry him, of course. Not like that. Let me think. A sled, perhaps. Even a blanket. We'll have to drag him."

They set to work, digging through the ruined furniture. Irene found a thick quilt in an attached bedroom, which she carried back to Pearl. When she returned, Cian held a familiar box under his arm. He had flipped over the coffee table and now, with a few well-placed kicks, snapped off the legs. When Pearl lifted one of Harry's arms, though, he gave a groan and his eyes slid open.

"Good God," Harry said. "What did she hit me with? An elephant?"

Pearl looked a like a woman lost at sea who had sighted land. Her smile, disbelieving at first, grew and grew. Irene wiped at her eyes and slapped Cian's arm when she saw him grinning at her.

"Harry, we need to leave," Pearl said. "We have the mask, but we have to go now."

With a lopsided smile, Harry stroked the edge of Pearl's face. Then he pushed himself to his feet. Then he swore.

Irene turned to see a man standing in the opening that had been knocked in the wall. He was tall and handsome in a patrician sort of way: a high forehead, dark, swept-back hair, and cheekbones to cut glass. He looked just short of middle-age, and his face might have come off the statue of some forgotten Roman emperor. Cold, hard, and dead.

He smiled, and Irene's skin crawled.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Bullshit," Cian said. He held the Colt awkwardly in his left hand.

The man raised an eyebrow, and his smile widened. "We haven't been introduced. My name is Evander Lisle. That box belongs to me."

"Bullshit," Cian repeated.

Irene rolled her eyes.

"Your father was supposed to deliver it to me," Evander said to Irene. "We had a deal. I carried out my part. Your father failed to fulfill his end."

"My father—" Irene began.

"The box," Evander said. "Now."

"Go to hell," Harry said.

Evander stepped into the room. He carried a sleek black walking stick, which he lifted and pointed in their direction. "I'd heard better about you, Harry Witte. Look at you—beaten by a dead woman, barely able to stand, and fumbling in the dark with things beyond your comprehension. Let me assure you, Harry, you're no match for me."

"Too many people have been telling me that lately," Harry said. "Shoot him, Cian."

"Gladly." Cian raised the gun and fired.

Instead of striking Evander, though, the bullet struck an invisible barrier. With a flash of light, the shell spun off to the side and buried itself in the wall. A deep note, like a rung bell, lingered in the air.

"Before you try that again," Evander said, "let me offer you a reason to be more prudent." He grinned and stepped to one side, like a performer revealing the main act.

The dust in the hall had settled, and the gas lamps burned brightly now, and the only sound was a set of shuffling steps. Irene rubbed her arms, wishing she had her coat and her revolver, feeling chills from head to toe. A moment later, a man rounded the corner of the hall and came into view.

Sam.

The boy's sandy hair was mussed, and his face was drained of color. His eyes were wide. The eyes of a trapped animal. Each step seemed labored as he dragged his feet across the rug. In one shaking hand, he held a knife to his own throat.

"What did you do to this one, Harry?" Evander asked. "You left him cracked like an egg. All I had to do was pull—" Evander made a motion with one hand, and Sam went up onto his toes. A muffled scream came from between clenched teeth. "—and he was mine. A poor choice for a rear guard, Harry. A very poor choice."

Irene looked from Sam to Harry. Harry was pale but composed. Cian flicked a glance at Harry, though, and on Cian's face, Irene saw something that dug iron claws into her stomach. Cian knew something.

He knew Evander was telling the truth. Harry had done something to Sam.

"Now," Evander said. "The box."

Cian took a step forward.

"No," Harry said. His voice cracked. "No. Cian, don't give it to him."

"Harry, he's got Sam."

"Who the fuck cares about Sam?" Harry's voice rose. "You give him that mask and he'll drag Dagon from the sea kicking and screaming."

Evander's eyes widened, and then he threw back his head and started laughing. He laughed for almost a full minute, one hand over his stomach, and when he stopped he pressed his fingers to his lips.

"God's blood, Harry," Evander said with another chuckle. "You don't think I'm mad, do you? Let Dagon and the rest of the *endormie* stay where they are, dead and dreaming. If that's all you care about, set your mind at ease. I will not raise Dagon."

"You don't want to wake him?" Irene asked. "Then what has this all been about? What do you care about the mask?"

Evander smiled again. "The mask is for my own use. It is, after all, still an object of power. But all this," he paused and gestured at the corpses littering the room, "your father and the Dane and Seamus. All this is about exactly what you'd expect from thugs and gangsters."

"And what is that?"

"Why, alcohol, of course. The mask was merely payment for services I had promised." Evander straightened his suit and lifted the walking stick again. "I'm afraid I'm out of time. It has been most interesting to meet you. A bit of a disappointment. I had expected more of the man who brought down von der Ehmke." He pointed the walking stick at Cian, and the tip began to glow like a coal plucked from the fire. "Pity you tossed him aside."

"You are mistaken," a familiar voice said from the hallway. A firm voice with the clipped, precise tones of a Hun accent. Freddy stepped into view. A gash marked his cheek, and blood stained his beard. He leaned on his silver-handled cane like a man of eighty years.

"He did not defeat me," Freddy said. "And no one tosses me aside."

Evander swung around to face Freddy, bringing the walking stick to bear on the old Hun. Freddy didn't move. He didn't raise a hand or shake his cane. He spoke two words. To Irene,

they sounded like stone snapping under a terrible weight, or perhaps like lightning felling an ancient oak. Evander stumbled back. The light at the end of his walking stick died. He wavered on his feet for a moment, like a man who had received a swift kick between the legs.

Freddy's face had lost its remaining color.

And then a shot rang out. The bullet struck Evander's belly, and a tiny red circle spread across his white shirt. Confusion and rage mixed on Evander's face. Darkness folded over him like raven's wings, and when the air cleared, Evander was gone.

Irene turned to stare at Pearl. She held a second derringer in a steady hand, but her voice was trembling when she met Irene's eyes.

"I like to be prepared," Pearl said.

Harry started to laugh.

Chapter 66

Christmas Day was quiet. Irene spent most of the day sleeping. Whatever Marie-Thérèse had done to Irene, it had left her wrung out like a newborn kitten. When she woke that afternoon, the smell of roast turkey and rising dough met her, and Irene made her way to the kitchen to find Pearl and Cian at work. Cian was turning out a bowlful of dough onto the floured table. He wore a baby-blue apron stitched with daisies, and he had a smile on his face that was somewhere between embarrassed and content. It was the kind of smile that warmed Irene from top to toes. The kind of smile that made her want to spend the rest of her life in this kitchen, with Cian, and with that apron.

“Merry Christmas,” he said.

“Merry Christmas. You look better.”

“Pearl dug the bullet out. It wasn’t as bad as I’d thought.”

“It was bad enough,” Pearl said. She gave Irene a hug and then went back to a steaming pan of yams. “He should be resting but he insisted.”

“He insisted on making bread?” Irene said.

“Rolls,” Cian said. “How are you?”

“I feel fine. No after-effects, if that’s what you mean. I suppose my deal with Marie-Thérèse is over.”

From the stove, Pearl threw them a worried look, and Irene tried for a smile. It felt like hauling a bag of sand.

“Sam?” Irene asked.

“He’s fine,” Pearl said. “A bit shook up, but fine.”

“More than fine,” Cian said. “He’d pick the bird clean if I let him. I had to throw him out of here.”

“And Harry? Freddy?”

This time, the silence was longer. “They’re fine,” Pearl said. “Harry didn’t sleep. He hasn’t let the mask out of his sight. He and Freddy spoke for a long time. They’ve patched things up, I supposed, but it will take time.”

“It always does,” Irene said, staring at Cian in his flowered apron.

He began to blush, tried to meet her gaze, and then turned his attention to the dough.

Yes, Irene thought. He looked just fine in that apron.

As they cooked, they began to piece together the story of the last few weeks. Patrick’s role in bringing in cultic artifacts had made him an ideal agent for Marie-Thérèse, but it also shed light on the connection between the smuggled artifacts and the bootlegging.

“The artifacts weren’t an afterthought,” Pearl said. “They were the payment. Somehow, Evander had a hold over the head of the Prohibition agents here. In return for keeping the booze flowing, Evander wanted artifacts. Seamus and the Dane and even the Children began to pay. The mask was supposed to give Seamus a monopoly on the city’s liquor. When the Dane heard, he wanted to get the mask first. After all, Evander didn’t care who got the mask for him, and a stranglehold on the city’s booze would have made either Seamus or the Dane a rich man. But then your father realized what the box contained and the Children wanted the mask for themselves.”

“Booze,” Irene said. “It’s hard to believe.”

“It won’t be an issue for long.” Pearl pointed to the morning newspaper, which sat on a chair.

Irene picked it up and glanced at it. The front story was about the gang warfare that had claimed dozens of lives at the Louisiana Grand the night before. Listed among the dead was the head of the local Prohibition enforcement agency. A small picture accompanied the story.

“Recognize him?” Cian said.

“He tried to kill us at the hospital,” Irene said.

“And he killed Seamus because Seamus was starting to crack,” Cian said. “Seamus had gotten too deep into those cultic relics. He was pretty much gone by the time I met him. It doesn’t matter, I suppose. They’ve already named a new head for the area. Some hotshot from back east. I imagine it’s going to be a bit harder to get a drink over the next few months.”

Irene folded the newspaper and kept it in her lap. “And Evander?”

Pearl shrugged. “We’ll have to start looking for him. He’s powerful and dangerous and now he has a reason to want to be rid of us. Between Freddy and Harry, they should be able to throw off the worst of anything Evander can work up.”

Before Irene could ask about Marie-Thérèse, or the rest of the Children, or her father—any of the dozen questions that floated around in her head—Sam came in and tried to pinch some of the bread dough, while Cian tried to brain the young man with a rolling pin. Pearl passed a large wooden spoon to Irene as she tried to intervene.

And, just like that, Irene found herself in charge of the potatoes.

Dinner started off quiet. It wasn’t like any Christmas dinner Irene had eaten before. It was a gathering of wounded soldiers, finding an unexpected respite in the midst of a war. They ate in silence at first. By degrees, though, the good food warmed them, along with several bottles of red wine that Harry had produced, and the quiet began to crack like Mississippi ice. At some point

during the meal, Irene discovered that Cian was holding her hand under the table. She also discovered that she didn't mind.

When the plates had been cleared—and washed by Sam—Harry carried a familiar looking wooden box to the table. He might as well have brought a bomb to the dinner. When he set the box down, Irene realized she was gripping Cian's hand and that she didn't want to let go. Everyone fell silent.

"Would you like to open it?" Harry said to Cian. "You were the one who had it first."

Cian disentangled his hand from Irene's. He nodded, stood, and fumbled with the edges of the box. A piece of the frame slid away, and one of the side panels opened. Cian dragged a velvet pad out of the box and laid it on the table.

On top of the velvet lay a mask. It was worked in clay, the edges rough, the surface of the mask dimpled. An amateur's work. The handicraft of some ancient, mad cultist. There was nothing beautiful about the piece, and certainly nothing to suggest its power, but Irene's breath had turned to a stream of ice as she stared at the mask.

"Doesn't look like much," Sam said.

"It looks old," Cian said. "Like its ready to crumble."

Harry smiled and caught Irene's gaze. "Let's help it along the way." He held out a hammer.

Irene took it. It was heavy. The handle smooth. She adjusted her grip until the balance felt right.

Before her lay the mask. The mask that so many people had died for. The mask that her father had been willing to sacrifice everything—his daughter included—to have. The mask she

could use to wring a confession from her father, to force him to tell the truth, to admit that she was right.

To make him see her, really see her, for the first time in her life.

She brought the hammer down, slightly off-center, below one of the eye-holes. The mask cracked with the sound of a broken dinner plate. She lifted the hammer again. Her heart felt like it was made of the same clay. Heavy and wet and aching. The next blow crushed the center of the mask, splitting the clay in two.

Irene lowered the hammer again and again until Cian caught her wrist. He pulled her next to him, but not too close, not smothering her, and he let the hammer fall to the floor. Irene wiped tears from her eyes. Her hand and wrist ached. Everything ached, an ache that had run too deep for too long.

On the table, the mask had been reduced to reddish-brown dust.

“Remind me not to make her angry,” Sam muttered.

Pearl threw him a glance, and Sam flushed.

Without a word, Harry picked up the piece of velvet by the corners, careful not to lose any of the dust, and carried it to the fireplace. He folded the velvet over once and tossed it into the flames. There was a slight puff of air as the cloth caught, and then the fire swallowed velvet and dust together.

“Done,” Harry said. He let out a breath. Relief was visible in his eyes. “Done.”

The solemn moment passed. Irene lifted her wineglass, but her hand was shaking so that she could barely set the glass to her lips. Cian took the glass and returned it to the table.

“Would you like to go back to your rooms?” he asked.

Irene nodded. She gathered her coat and clutch. She kissed Pearl goodbye, and then she kissed Harry and Sam goodbye, because it felt like she was getting ready to leave on a long voyage, and she wasn't sure when she'd see them again. Cian shook the men's hands. Pearl stretched up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek, and she whispered something that made his face turn as red as his hair.

Wild hair. Hair that desperately needed a comb.

Inside, Irene felt some of the ache easing.

They took a cab to the Majestic and, miracle of miracles, somehow Cian pulled out a crisp bill and paid for the ride. At Irene's curious look, he shrugged, looking like a boy with his hand in the cookie jar, and said, "Harry slipped me a bit of cash. Just in case."

"In case of what?" Irene asked.

Cian just grinned and helped her out of the cab.

They made their way to Irene's room. After the chaos and bloodshed in the Louisiana Grand, the lobby of the Majestic—with its pristine marble and gold-leaf, with its enormous Christmas tree glittering in the light of a chandelier, with the smell of pine and leather hanging in the air like dollar signs—no longer felt as safe as it had. Before, Irene had envisioned this world of money and wealth and privilege, the world where she had been raised, as somehow separate. Disconnected from the madness and terror and pain of the new world she had uncovered.

All of that had been a lie, though. The two worlds overran each other all the time. It didn't end well.

Cian was silent as he helped her up the stairs. He was silent as they followed the hall to Irene's room. He was silent as she unlocked the door.

Silent the way a mule is silent. Stubborn and none too bright.

Irene shrugged off her coat and stood in the doorway, wondering if she would have to knock him over the head before he got the idea.

At her look, Cian gave a start, as though coming out of deep thought. He stepped closer. This time, Irene didn't move back. She held her ground, although a shiver had started in her legs and she was half-afraid she'd fall. One of Cian's hands found her cheek, tilted her head up. He was smiling. His face was open, vulnerable, and Irene thought he looked a bit like a bride on her wedding night, although she doubted Cian would appreciate the comparison.

And he was taking too damn long, so she raised up and kissed him.

This time, there was no shock, no hesitation. He kissed her back. A strong, warm kiss that curled Irene's toes and might have curled her hair. When he pulled back, Irene tested her footing. The ground was gone. She was sky-high and walking on clouds.

Cian's other hand found her waist and slipped up, until the heel of his hand brushed the side of her breast, his fingers tight against her back. Passion fluttered like a candle in a strong wind. Memory struck Irene.

The grass tickling the back of her neck. Her skirt forced up. Francis's fingers—hard and painful—on her breasts.

Irene stepped away from Cian. Her breath was a tangled, tortured thing. She blinked, gasping for air, and knocked his hands away.

Cian didn't move. He didn't even seem to register her behavior. He took deep breaths. His hands fell to his sides. He might have been a portrait: *Irishman. Irritatingly patient. 1925.*

"I'm sorry," Irene said.

With a shake of his head, Cian said, "You have no reason."

“No, truly, Cian. I’m just—give me just a moment, I promise. I—” She could do this. She had to do this. He would expect it, after how she’d led him on.

She’d take him inside. She’d undress. She’d lie on the bed.

Maybe she’d close her eyes.

He’d be more gentle than Francis, wouldn’t he?

Cian interrupted her with a soft, quick kiss on the cheek, and then he pulled back. “Irene Lovell, I have not been a gentleman about a single thing since we’ve met. Let me be a gentleman about this.” Then his lips quirked up into a small smile. “I’ll come see you in the morning. Breakfast?”

She tried for a smile and found it there, warm and waiting and curled up. “Breakfast sounds lovely.”

“Goodnight, Irene.”

“Goodnight, Cian.”

And then she stepped inside, shut the door, and wondered if she could have acted like a greater fool.

Chapter 67

Cian made his way down the main stairs of the Majestic with a new spring in his step. There was, to be certain, a part of him that was disappointed by the way the night had ended. Disappointed, in fact, might have been a mild term. Frustrated to the point of agony.

But that point began somewhere around the equator. The rest of him felt—well, warm. And happy. And at ease, for the first time in what felt like a hundred years.

Or, to be more precise, since that rainy night in France.

At the bottom of the steps, Cian gave the boy at the front desk a mock-salute and a cheery whistle. The boy frowned, looking twenty years older than he was, and Cian fought back a grin.

It was a good night. A very good night.

Outside, the air was cold, but the sky was clear and bright. A good night for walking. And thinking.

“Got a smoke, buddy?”

Cian turned around, a *no* already on his lips, and froze.

Irving Harper stood there. He wore the same stained suit. He had the same bulldog face, the same heavy jowls. He had the same hat that looked like it been trampled by every horse west of the Mississippi. But his eyes were different. The settled, almost contented look that Harper had worn before was gone. Now he had the look of a man face to face with a wolf. The revolver in his hand trembled slightly.

The kind of tremor that could end up with Cian getting shot.

Cian put his hands up slowly. “I’m not going to cause you any trouble, Harper.”

Harper licked his lips. The canned gravy smell was stronger, as though he'd been indulging himself in a special treat to soothe his nerves. The revolver didn't steady, though. He tossed Cian a pair of cuffs.

"Put those on. Behind your back."

Cian did as Harper said. From behind the glass of the Majestic's doors, a bellhop stared out at them. Cian gave the boy a glare, and the boy dropped out of sight.

"There," Cian said, displaying his bound hands. "You can lower the revolver, Harper. Don't do something stupid."

Harper hesitated and then holstered the gun. He grabbed Cian's arm and walked him down the block. A battered, converted Ford truck sat there, with a scuffed Army seal on the door.

As they walked, Cian said, "I'm glad you were ok, Harper. Back at the hotel, I mean."

Harper jerked like a man who'd been shot. After a moment, he pushed Cian forward.

"I . . . saw," Harper said. "I saw those things." He paused again. An icy wind swept over both of them. Cian risked a glance back. Harper's eyes were wide, and he was chewing an unlit cigarette. He pulled the cigarette free and continued, "I got out of the cuffs. I saw them. Huge. Snakes. Lizards. I don't know what. Shit." He chewed on the cigarette again. His eyes were wider than the moon. "Shea, listen. I'd—"

Cian shook his head. It was ok, now. Things were ok.

He'd stopped running.

"Don't worry about it, Harper. I won't say I'm sorry about what I did to Dunn. But I'm ready to face up to it." He paused and felt a sharp pang of disappointment. "I don't suppose you'd let me stick around long enough to have breakfast tomorrow?"

Harper blew out a stream of white breath. He dropped the mangled cigarette. It lay on the snow like a broken flower. “You saved my life. I know you did. And I know Dunn was a bastard. We’d had a dozen complaints and we ought to have done something about it.” He took a deep breath. “If it were just Dunn, I’d turn around, Shea.”

Ice punctured Cian’s skin. “What do you mean?”

“I’d let you go, Shea. If it had only been Dunn.”

“What do you mean if it had only been Dunn?”

Harper shook his head. “I don’t get it.” He gave Cian another shove and then helped him up into the back of the converted Ford. “You save an old piece of shit like me. The things you did to that girl, though.” He shivered. “There wasn’t even enough left to bury. Why do a thing like that? She was just a girl.”

And then he slammed the door.

The needles of ice had worked their way down to Cian’s lungs. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t move. All he could think about was that last night, outside her window, and the look in her eyes.

Corinne.

Chapter 68

The knock came after midnight, after Irene's bath, after she'd wrapped her hair in a towel and slipped into a warm, puffy, white bathrobe.

It was Cian, of course.

The tremor in her heart was anticipation and fear.

He'd thought about it. He had wanted to see her tonight. He was going to persuade her, woo her.

She was ready now. She'd just needed time. Time to push out all the thoughts of Francis, time to bury the feel of his hands on her, time to escape the feel of him inside her.

The memories were like a cold, wet rag around her neck, but that would get better in time. In time, she might even feel normal.

But tonight, she would make herself be ready, for Cian's sake.

When she opened the door, though, it was Harry who stood there. Not Cian. Harry looked different. A sheen of water covered his face. Not individual drops, as though he'd come in from the rain, but a perfect sheet. As though Harry had just broken the surface of a deep pond and the water still clung to him.

He smiled. Harry Witte's perfect smile.

And then Irene realized what she was seeing on his face.

It was a mask.

Irene tried to pull back and shut the door. She was too slow.

Harry grabbed her by the throat and slammed her into the door frame.

The world went dark.

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