

Chapter One

She wasn't here.

James Halloran drank his beer and did his damndest not to look like he was searching the dance floor below for someone specific. Just like he hadn't shown up here five nights a week for the last four months, even though he was needed elsewhere. With his old man in the slammer and his little brother causing more problems than he fixed, all of James's attention should have been on getting his people back onto stable ground.

Instead, he couldn't get *her* out of his head.

Carrigan O'Malley.

He didn't know what he would say to her if he *did* see her. Apologize? Considering the last time they'd seen each other, he'd kidnapped her, tied her to his bed, and his father had been a few short hours from killing her... Yeah, there wasn't a fucking Hallmark card that covered that.

He scanned the club again, this time telling himself he was looking for potential enemies. The ruling families of the underground might technically be at peace, but that didn't mean he wanted to come face-to-face with one of the O'Malley men. He understood why they wouldn't hesitate to try to take their pound of flesh out of him, but that didn't mean he was going to play whipping boy. They all had their roles to play—Sheridan, O'Malley, and Halloran. He couldn't have changed things, even if he'd wanted to.

When he let himself think about it, though, he regretted the fuck out of Devlin O'Malley's death.

He reached for his beer, only to realize it was empty.

“Want another?” The short bartender didn’t look old enough to drink, but she was good enough at her job not to give him shit for showing up, having a single drink, and leaving. Over and over again.

“No, thanks.” *She* wasn’t coming tonight, just like she hadn’t come any night since the one where she’d blown his fucking mind in a supply closet. Before he realized exactly whose ear he’d been spilling filthy words into. Before she said her name and everything changed. Before he made the decision that labeled him just as cold a bastard as his old man.

Carrigan O’Malley. The daughter of the enemy. The one woman he sure as hell needed to keep his hands off.

Her absence made sense. If he had sisters, he would have gotten them the hell out of Dodge before shit hit the fan, and he would have kept them somewhere safe while things played out. The power situation wasn’t stable in Boston—not like it had been a year ago—but it was evening out. It *had* to. He was all too aware that war among the three families was the least of their concerns if some outside threat decided to take advantage of the power fluctuation. He knew the Sheridans and O’Malleys—knew how they thought, knew what they wanted, knew how they’d react to a given threat.

Better the devil he knew than the devil he didn’t.

He’d been in talks with Colm Sheridan and his daughter, Callista, about securing peace. She, at least, wasn’t willing to let the past get in the way of the ultimate good. The reluctant admiration he’d first felt when she turned herself over to him, admitting that she’d pulled the trigger that ended his older brother’s life, had bloomed into full-fledged respect. Teague was a lucky son of a bitch—and so was everyone under Sheridan protection. Callista Sheridan was a force to be reckoned with.

Somehow, James didn't think Carrigan would be as willing to let the past go. She was prickly and prideful and had a furious temper—and he knew that after having been around her for less than three days.

Enough of this shit.

He pushed to his feet and headed for the spiral staircase leading down to the main floor. Since it was a Tuesday night, the place was far from packed, but there was still a cluster of dancers sweating and grinding in the middle of the floor, and plenty of people standing around the lower bar, waiting for drinks. He scanned their faces out of habit, not really expecting anything but disappointment.

His gaze landed on familiar green eyes, and he stopped short. He had to be seeing things. It had happened before—he'd been sure it was her, only to approach and realize he'd been projecting her image on some other pretty brunette. But then she shook her head, like she was trying to dispel his image, and he *knew*. James took a step toward her, still having no fucking idea what he was going to say.

She turned tail and bolted.

He was giving chase before making a decision to do so. The voice of reason piped up to point out that running her down wasn't going to do a damn thing to reassure her that he wasn't up to no good, but it wasn't like he had another option at this point. She wasn't going to sit there and let him approach her.

That didn't stop him from hauling ass through the doors and out into the street. He looked left and then caught sight of her further down the block, making impressive time considering the six-inch spike heels on her feet.

But he had the advantage on open ground.

James poured on more speed, closing the distance between them. She cast a panicked look over her shoulder, and it was almost enough to make him stop. Only the knowledge that he wouldn't get another chance like this again kept him moving. That and something inside him that he was reluctant to name. It felt a whole hell of a lot like the conscience he'd thought was dead and gone.

She was less than six feet in front of him. It was now or never. "For fuck's sake, *stop*."

"Leave me alone."

He put on a burst of speed and hooked an arm around her waist just as they reached the corner, jerking her to a stop. "Hold on for a second."

She drove her elbow into his stomach, and then slammed her heel into his toe. Even through his boots, he felt it. "Get off me." Her struggles increased. "Let go!"

He let go, holding his hands up and gritting his teeth against the throbbing in his foot. "I'm sorry, okay? I just wanted to talk."

"You have a funny way of showing it." She glanced over her shoulder, checking to see if he had other men with him, or maybe looking for an escape route. "Goddamn it, I knew better than to come back here."

"I'm not going to hurt you." *I never would have let them hurt you.* But the words wouldn't come. He might have stood back and let her and Callista Sheridan escape that night, but he could have done more. He'd taken the path that resulted in the least risk to him, and something horrible could have happened to either of them as a result.

She laughed, a low, broken sound. "You know, considering our history, I find that hard to believe."

What could he say? She was right. In her position, he would have done more violence than an elbow to the stomach. Hell, he would have drawn a gun and put an end to the threat once and for all. But things with them were different. She damn well knew that he didn't want her hurt, abduction or no. "No one laid a hand on you."

"No, you just threw me in a trunk, and then tied me to a bed and—" She shook her head, drawing his attention to her mass of dark hair. "I don't know why I'm still standing here. Stay the hell away from me."

This was it. She would walk away, and it was entirely likely that he'd never see her again. He'd never see his album again. The last link he had to his mother. It was a stupid sentiment, but he'd never been able to fully pack away the old photo album. To know it had been in her possession for the last four months... It left him feeling edgy and strangely vulnerable. He couldn't tell anyone that she'd taken it without admitting what it meant to him, and that was handing a loaded gun to the O'Malleys. No fucking way was he going there.

That's the reason you're here, dipshit. You're not fawning over some woman, no matter how hot she is. She took something from you and you want it back. "Where is it?"

She stopped, but she didn't turn back. "Where is what?"

"Don't play dumb, lovely. It doesn't suit you." He took a step closer, close enough to see the way her shoulders tightened, as if she could sense his proximity. "That album wasn't yours to take."

She gave him an icy look over her shoulder. "Even if I did take something—which I didn't—I wouldn't have kept it."

She was bluffing. She had to be. He made himself hold perfectly still, all too aware that one wrong move would send her fleeing into the night. "Liar."

“Whatever you have to tell yourself to sleep at night.”

It struck him that maybe she *had* gotten rid of the album. She had no reason to keep it. It was nothing to her—less than nothing. He strove to keep his thoughts off his face, but from the curiosity flaring in her green eyes, he did a piss-poor job of it. “I’ll make you a deal.”

“That’s rich. You have nothing I want.”

Maybe not, but he wasn’t above playing dirty. Not in this. Not in anything anymore. James closed the distance between them in a single step and grasped her chin tightly enough that she couldn’t pull away. “Give back what you stole, and you’ll never have to see me again.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Well, lovely, then I’m going to have to take that as a sign that you still want me as much as you did four months ago. Which means you want to see me again—and again, and again.”

Her eyes went wide. “Are you seriously offering *not* to stalk me if I give back this thing I supposedly stole? What kind of deal is that? It’s bullshit.”

She wasn’t afraid anymore, which was a goddamn relief. Instead there was a spark of anger vibrating through her body, and she was eyeing him like she wouldn’t mind taking a chunk out of his hide. He preferred this Carrigan to the frightened one. As long as she was focusing on where she wanted to hurt him, she wasn’t thinking about the threat he potentially posed. “I said you and I have unfinished business, and I damn well meant it.”

“Wrong.” She snorted. “Finished business is the only kind we have—ancient history. For the last time, get your big paws off me.”

He released her for the second time. “I’m not bluffing.”

“Neither am I.” She turned around and walked away.

This time he let her go. He had no goddamn right to threaten her, but the thought of never seeing the album again—it sure as fuck wasn't the thought of never seeing *her* again—made him twitchy. It wasn't a threat he'd have made six months ago, but he wasn't the same man he'd been then. He'd given up trying to be better than the rest of the Hallorans. That same violence and aggression that ran through their blood ran through his, too.

No matter how much he hated it.

Things had gotten out of control after his older brother's death four months ago. Even now, knowing what he did about the monster Brendan was, his absence was still a weight in James's stomach. He didn't choose his family, and half the time he didn't like them, but they were all he had. The Halloran empire in Southie. All the death and unforgivable shit, and for what? A few square miles of land in the part of Boston no one else wanted?

He waited until he saw Carrigan climb into the back of a cab before he turned and headed for his car. He wasn't quite thirty yet, and he was so goddamn *tired*. It never ended. The power games, and the unforgivable acts, and the compromises on what he used to think of as his honor. There was nothing left of it anymore, and hell if that didn't send a pang of loss through him.

Not for the first time, he wondered what his mother would think of the men her beloved sons had turned into. He couldn't shake the belief that he was failing her. But she was dead and gone some fifteen years, and his old man was very much among the living. The only link James had to her was the album Carrigan had taken—a shrine to the man he might have been in different circumstances.

That man was dead and gone as surely as his mother was. In reality, he'd never stood a chance. His course in life was set the second he came into this world as a Halloran, and any chance he had to choose a different path had gone up in smoke with Brendan's death.

Now it all fell to James. The responsibility of keeping the Halloran name from disappearing the same way other enemies of the Sheridans had. People still talked about what Colm Sheridan did to the McNamaras, though the details were sketchy now, thirty years later. All anyone knew was that it was horrific enough that no one had challenged him since.

James couldn't let that happen to his people. And they were his, whether he wanted the responsibility or not. The only other option was walking away and letting his idiot of a younger brother take over, which was as good as signing the death warrant of everyone who depended on the Hallorans to keep shit in check in their territory.

Besides, where would he go? This was his life.

His options were sink or swim—and if he sunk, he'd take a hell of a lot of people with him. So he got up every day, and he swam, even though some of the shit he was required to do turned his stomach and made him lose sleep. He did it because there was no other option.

He slid into the driver's seat of his cherry red '70 Chevelle and sighed. His life would be a whole lot less complicated if he could let the specter of his night with Carrigan O'Malley go. She hated his ass, and for good reason. Spending more time chasing her was courting more problems than he had resources to deal with. Life was too tenuous right now to throw something like this into the middle of it—the whole thing could erupt like a bonfire at the first spark of trouble.

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Carrigan huddled in the back of the cab, trying not to shake. James motherfucking Halloran. She should have known better than to risk going back to the same club he'd taken her from, but it had been a test. Avoiding that location meant she was afraid. Carrigan had learned a

long time ago that every time she refused to face her fear, it got more powerful. A fear left unchecked took away her control.

And control was one thing she didn't have nearly enough of as it was.

Why the hell was he there? In the months and months of her frequenting that club, she'd never once seen him there. And she *would* have seen him there. James was the kind of man who stood out, even in a crowd. He exuded danger that even the most oblivious idiot could pick up on—every time she'd seen him, even in the most crowded room, he had a good six inches of empty space around him. People might not realize why they gave him wide berth, but *she* did. Because he was the kind of man who did very bad things without hesitation. A predator.

The fact that he was big and blond and gorgeous in a rough kind of way was only the icing on the cake if a woman was into that kind of thing. She'd been exactly that kind of woman the last time they'd met, and she'd like to say she'd learned from her past mistakes. James Halloran was a man she needed to avoid like the goddamn plague.

She'd bet what little freedom she had left that he'd never been there at the same time she was. As tempting as it was to chalk it up to a coincidence, it was too damn much to believe he'd been there tonight by chance. Which meant he'd been there looking for *her*.

She shivered. Taking the album was a mistake. She'd known the second she opened it and saw its contents that he wouldn't rest until he had it back in his possession.

If she had half a brain in her head, she'd send the thing back to him and good riddance. Even as the thought crossed her mind, she shook her head. As questionable as it was, she wasn't ready to give up that pawn—especially since it was important enough for him to seek her out.

He said he'd been thinking about that night.

He lied.

He *had* to have lied. The sex obviously didn't mean shit to him since he'd thrown her in a trunk less than ten minutes afterward. Not to mention that every remaining member of his shrinking family had been all too happy to threaten to kill her—and worse. They would have done it. She wasn't naive enough to think they wouldn't have.

Hell, her own father did worse than that to people who crossed him. There was no reason to believe James would have suddenly developed a conscience and played white knight to her damsel in distress. Yes, he'd stepped aside and let her and Callie go when they were sneaking out. He might have let them escape, but that didn't mean he wouldn't have stood by and watched her tortured and killed if his father commanded it. Her body burned at the memory of how he'd kissed her, of the look in his eyes when he'd growled that they had unfinished business.

Stop it.

Which was why it was so incredibly unforgivable that her brain kept circling back to him in the intervening months. She could claim Stockholm syndrome until she was blue in the face, but it wasn't the truth.

The cab pulled up in front of her family's home, saving her from following that train of thought any further down the rabbit hole. James Halloran was the enemy, and she'd be every bit the stupid bimbo her father thought she was if she forgot that.

Carrigan paid the driver and climbed out of the cab. She made it all of three steps when she realized what she'd done—she'd come home wearing her clubbing clothes when she was supposed to have been at church, praying for her father's immortal soul. *Goddamn it.*

“Rough night?”

She startled, nearly tipping over her heels, and spun to face the male voice. It took all of a second to recognize who it belonged to. “Cillian? What the hell are you doing lurking out here?”

The middle child of seven—and third boy—Cillian had lived as much a charmed life as possible under their circumstances. He'd always been kind of an idiot, but he'd never had to face the same things she and her sisters had. Or even that Teague and Aiden had. There had been no one requiring him to grow up, and so he'd happily played at being a Lost Boy.

Until Devlin died.

It seemed like so much of their lives centered on that one tragedy. Things had been a certain way. Before Victor Halloran lost his mind and declared war. Before things escalated to the point of no return. Before a bullet from a Halloran man snuffed out the life of the best and brightest of their family. Now life was divided into Before Devlin and After Devlin. She rubbed a hand over her chest, wondering how much time it would take to dull the edge of pain that thinking about him brought.

As Cillian moved closer, the toll the last few months had taken on him was written all over his face. Even in the shadows, his eyes were haunted. He glanced at the intimidating front door to the town house, the trees lining the street making the darkness feel more absolute despite the lights peppered between them. "I wasn't ready to go in."

To face their reality.

Was there anyone in their family who didn't want to run as far and fast as they could to get away from the hell they lived in? Carrigan didn't think so. Six months ago, she would have put Cillian on that short list. Maybe even Devlin, too. Now? Now Devlin was gone and everything was different.

Devlin was the one who had still maintained an aura of innocence despite everything. The one who might have escaped the net their father was so intent on tangling them in. The net

called *family*. She almost laughed. Who was she kidding? No one escaped. Not Devlin. Not Cillian. Sure as hell not her.

And what would you do if you did escape?

There was no point in thinking about it. This was her reality, and she had to make the best of it that she could. Carrigan looped her arm through his. “I’m not ready, either. Want to go for a walk?”

He glanced down the street. The same direction he’d been coming from—the direction of the pub where her brothers had all been walking back from the night everything went to hell. “It’s not safe.”

She could argue that it was as safe as it ever was, that they were supposed to be back to peacetime relations with the Hallorans, and that Teague marrying the heir to the Sheridans had made sure that they’d be fine on that end as well. But the memory of James waiting for her in that club was still too fresh. It wasn’t safe. It might never be safe again. “The Commons?” It was cold enough that she was already starting to shiver, the faint wind cutting through the thin fabric of her dress.

He hesitated, and she thought he might refuse. “You still have that Taser that Aiden gave you?”

“I don’t leave the house without it anymore.” It wouldn’t have made a difference that night when James threw her in the trunk because she hadn’t had her purse, but she didn’t go anywhere without it now. What had started as almost a joke was now a reassurance that she had a way to defend herself.

“Good.” Cillian shrugged out of his coat and draped it over her shoulders. “You know, it *is* December. There’s even snow on the ground.”

“I didn’t want to have to check a coat.” She clutched the fabric more firmly around her. He was hardly underdressed in a three-piece suit, but it wouldn’t be long before he started to feel the cold.

They made their way down the block, her heels clicking in the darkness. With the snow covering the grass and decorating the trees, it looked like something out of a fairy tale. Like if she just walked a little farther, she might find a stray street lamp that would signify she’d stepped into a different world.

Except that kind of thing only happened in storybooks.

She slipped her arm through her brother’s. There was so much to say, and nothing at all. What could she say that would make anything okay? It wasn’t okay.

“I thought you were at Our Lady of Victories.”

It wasn’t really a question, but she answered anyway. “Sometimes I need a break.” A break that no church could give her, despite what her father believed. She’d tried when she was still in high school. They spent every single Sunday morning at Mass, and she’d thought that maybe the salvation she was looking for could be found inside those four walls. So she’d spent hours on end there, praying with every ounce of will her sixteen-year-old heart could muster up. Praying for someone to save her.

Silence had been her only reply.

So she’d gone looking for salvation in other places.

In all the years since, the closest she’d come to salvation was what she felt that night in James’s arms.