

Undercover Action

Bonus Scene



Amber

Five Years Later

They gave me redheads.

Adorable redheads with beautiful ginger curls.

Kirsten was three. When Leo suggested the name I balked because I thought that was the name of their ex in Ireland, but it turns out Kirsten was the name of their mother. She had an attitude as big as Leo's, and thought she was an Irish princess. Patrick was only five months old, named because his original due date was March 17 (although he came three days early). I loved the two of them more than life itself.

Except when we were on airplanes.

I clutched Patrick to my chest as our plane took off. He was

already screaming bloody murder, an ear-piercing sound that made everyone else on the plane flinch. “Shh,” I whispered, bouncing him up and down gently. “Go to sleep, sweet boy.”

He was *not* a sweet boy. Nothing I could do would calm him down. He was always like this on airplanes, just as his sister had been when was a baby. To my right, Connor reached over and smoothed down Patrick’s little tufts of orange hair. That usually helped calm him down, but not today. To my left, Riley gave me a sympathetic grimace.

Across the aisle, Leo sat with Kirsten. She was wearing a blue summer dress and her auburn hair cascaded down her head in beautiful ringlets. She gazed over at her younger brother smugly. She was at the age where her default emotion was jealousy at the attention her little brother received. It pleased her that *she* was being good on the plane, while he was not. She smiled and returned her attention to the tablet in her lap, which was playing her favorite cartoon.

“Calm down, sweet boy,” I softly sang to Patrick. “So these other passengers don’t murder me for being the worst mother in the world.”

Connor barked a laugh. “Don’t say that. Not your fault the lad’s ears won’t pop.”

“Still.”

As soon as the fasten seatbelt light turned off, Riley unbuckled his and jumped up. “I’ve got this,” he said, pulling Patrick into his arms. He held him against his chest and walked up and down the aisle, bouncing the baby gently. Within seconds the crying ceased.

“Every time,” I said with wonder.

“Don’t know how he does it,” Connor agreed. He signed back into his seat, and I did the same. A mother could never relax while one of her children was in pain. But all in all, I *loved* motherhood. I loved it even more than being a police detective. I had taken three months of maternity leave for Patrick, and although it felt good to return to work at the end I still missed the little pudgy ball of baby. It made coming home every night incredibly satisfying.

It helped that Leo could watch them during the day. Now that we had six restaurants, he didn't *need* to cook pizzas. But he still loved to. So he babysat during the day, then handed the kiddos off to us when we got home and went to the restaurant to work the rest of the evening.

Connor and Riley helped too, wherever they could. We made it work with our interesting four-person polyamorous relationship.

I leaned my head on Connor's shoulder. "You nervous?"

Connor grunted. "Oh, I think Leo will do fine. He's got more experience than the other boxer. It'll be grand."

"I meant about everything else. Coming back here."

I raised my head off his shoulder. The expression in his eyes shifted focus as he turned the idea around in his head. I got the impression he had been trying not to think about it, and my question had pushed it to the front of his head.

"Aye," he said. "I'm nervous."

"It'll be fine," I said. "It's been a long time since you two were in Belfast."

"That's what I'm nervous about."

We were flying from London to Belfast. For the first time in almost a decade, Connor and Leo were going home. The Director of Public Prosecutions in the United Kingdom had claimed they would not file charges against Connor and Leo for their crimes years ago, but my two Irish lovers still thought it was a trap. A ruse to get them to fly over, then arrested them when they landed. We had already gone through customs in Heathrow without a problem, but landing in Belfast held a higher sort of fear for Connor and Leo.

Nothing I said would calm him down, so instead I squeezed his hand. Sometimes that's all somebody needed.

The flight was quick, and we were descending into Belfast before we knew it. Riley took his seat and continued bouncing Patrick all the way until the wheels touched down. The baby remained sleeping

the entire time.

“Mommy! Mommy!” Kirsten said as we disembarked the plane. “Did you see how *good* I was?”

“You were so good, sweetie.”

“Not like *Patty*. He’s a brat.”

Leo chuckled and mussed up his daughter’s hair. “You were the same way at his age, love. Screamed like you were dying.”

“I did not!” She whirled to face Connor, who shrugged. “You’re *lying*. I’m good!”

Leo picked her up and carried her off the plane while teasing her.

Standing around in baggage claim was tense. Connor gazed around the room nervously, waiting to be ambushed. The sting never came. We collected our bags—seven of them, because having children apparently meant carrying wagonloads of toys and clothes everywhere you went—and then took two cabs from the airport to our hotel.

Belfast was similar to the other European cities I had visited, with old stone and brick buildings lining streets that were *much* too small for the cars on them. Leo and Connor had told me how beautiful Ireland was, but today held a gloomy overcast sky that hinted at rain. Our hotel was twenty minutes from the airport, on a street that was supposed to be a two-way road but had cars double-parked on both sides, limiting traffic to just one way. The two cabs stopped in the street to let us out, causing other cars to honk and shout at us.

“The people here are *fussy*,” Kirsten whispered. “Like Patrick.”

Leo roared with laughter at that while we carried our bags inside. We had adjoining rooms connected by a door, and waiting on the dresser of one was a gift basket and a hand-written letter. Connor tore it open and read it to himself, emerald eyes scanned the words rapidly.

“It’s a note from the mayor,” he said with surprise. “Welcoming us to the city again, this time as friends rather than men on opposite

side of the law.”

Leo grunted. “That’s fishy, it is.”

“I think it’s sweet,” I said.

Two years ago, once the D’Avrillion family was in prison, the Witness Protection Agency had reassessed Connor’s and Leo’s situation and decided they no longer needed protection. Although the secrecy was lifted, we all continued to live in Raleigh as if nothing had changed. Riley and I went to work at our separate police stations, while Connor and Leo continued their pizza business. A small article in the newspaper about the Irish former-gangsters increased traffic to the restaurants for a few weeks, but then the novelty of it died off and things returned to normal.

No longer being in witness protection meant they could travel again. Even still, it took them two years before they felt comfortable flying back home for a week-long trip.

Leo clapped his hands together in the hotel room. “Well then. Better head down to the gym to get a session in before tomorrow, yeah?”

“Let’s do it.”

Connor and Riley took the kids while Leo and I visited his old boxing gym. It was in a dodgy part of town, but with Leo walking by my side I never felt unsafe. The gym owner was a shriveled old man who reminded me of Popeye before eating a can of spinach. He hugged Leo, then embraced me just as fiercely.

I watched Leo spar with another boxer for an hour. Nothing serious—just trying to shed jetlag and get blood flowing to his muscles. I kept quiet while his old coach commented on things that had changed in his style. Leo laughed and teased him right back. I could tell this was more of a social visit than a training one.

Leo wasn’t as fast as he used to be. He was in his thirties, after all. But he made up for that with experience, and had as good an eye as any boxer I had ever seen. You didn’t need to be as quick if you could recognize a punch coming from a mile away.

We ate dinner and toured the city that night. It was beautiful all lit up at night, and the breeze coming off the bay was surprisingly warm. The kids were exhausted by seven-thirty, and we used that as an excuse to go back to the hotel and get some early sleep, since all of us were still adjusting to the time change.

Leo's fight the next day was held at three in the afternoon, a fact which shocked me. All the fights in Boston were at night. Riley stayed home with the kids while Connor and I accompanied Leo to the fight location, which was a basement underneath a bar in the bad part of town. The spectators in the crowd were civil, but they were *loud*. Much louder than any place back in Boston. Bare-knuckle boxing clearly had a deeper history here.

"Most of them have heard of Leo," Connor explained to me. "He's something of a legend here. Everyone wants to see the spectacle."

"Hope he lives up to the hype."

Leo seemed evenly matched for the beginning of the first round, but quickly figured out his opponent. Soon he was pummeling him with jabs, alternating punches and ducks to avoid the massive counter-blows the opponent sent at him. When the second round began Leo marched forward and swung a right hook so powerful it knocked the opponent to the mat, and he couldn't get back up before the referee called the fight.

The crowd *roared* with ecstasy at seeing Leo win by knockout. The lanky Irishman strutted around the ring like he was king of Ireland, and grinned down at Connor and me.

In the car ride back to the hotel, I asked Leo what he wanted to do to celebrate. "Bottle of *White Castle*?" I asked with a grin.

"Nah. Rather spend it with the kids."

"We can do both," I pointed out.

He smiled and kissed me on the cheek. "Kirsten and Patrick get me drunker than any whiskey."

"Besides, we have someplace to be," Connor reminded him.

“Oh, right.”

“Where?” I asked. We hadn’t discussed this.

“It’s a surprise,” Connor said.

“A surprise for Leo?”

“No, for *you*, love,” Leo said.

“Me?”

We picked up Riley and the kids at the hotel. Kirsten made fun of Leo’s face for being all bloody. Leo told her that her face would swell up too if she didn’t eat her vegetables. Kirsten’s eyes—which were as blue as her father’s—widened until they were as round as saucers.

We drove up the coast to an area called Carrickfergus, which made Kirsten giggle. We parked at the edge of a driveway, where in the distance a large pile of stones had once been a building. We walked along a path that hugged the sea cliff, nearing the ruins of the building. There was a green meadow, strangely peaceful next to the angry sea.

When I got up close I saw that the building had once been a church. “What is this place?” I asked. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Not here,” Connor said, pointing. “There.”

We walked around the church into the meadow. But it wasn’t a meadow at all. Soon I saw stones poking up through the green grass and wildflowers, with words chiseled into the stone.

A graveyard.

Leo stopped in front of two rectangular stones sticking out of the ground like crooked teeth. Connor stepped next to him and put a hand around him, then looked back at us. *Give us some space*, his look said. Riley, me, and the kids hung back while the two Irish brothers knelt in the grass next to two identical gravestones.

“Hi, mum,” Leo said softly. “Hi, dad.”

Kirsten and Patrick seemed to understand this was a special moment. They remained silent while the two Irish brothers lay in the

grass and chatted softly. I could sense the emotion from my two lovers. It was sad and beautiful at the same time. Sometimes life was like that.

Sometime later, Connor kissed his fingertips and touched one of the gravestones. Then he waved us over. The two stones said Thomas Murphy and Kirsten Murphy.

My daughter wasn't old enough to read, but she was at the age where she could recognize her own name. She frowned at the grave, the little wheels in her head grinding away.

Leo took her by the hand and knelt. "This was your grandfather and grandmother."

"You were named after her," Connor explained. "Kirsten was such a beautiful name, we couldn't let it go to waste."

She grinned at the compliment. That was all she had heard. "Was she pretty too?"

"So pretty," Leo said with tears in his eyes. Happy tears. "You've got her eyes. Blue as the Irish sky."

She scowled in a way that only a three year old could. "I thought I got my eyes from *you*."

"Aye, but where do ya think I got mine?" Leo replied. He reached into his pocket. "I've got sometime for you to give your mum. Go on, give it to her."

My daughter made an excited noise as she examined whatever Leo had given her, then she turned around and held it up to me. A beam of light reflected in the diamond ring, sending prismatic sparkles across Kirsten's face and her summer dress.

"What..." I said, confused. "What is this?"

"It's a *ring!*" Kirsten said excitedly. "Haven't you ever seen a ring before?"

Leo rose and grinned at me. "Been together long enough now, we have. About time we made it official, don't you think?"

My heart twisted and soared and filled with joy. I glanced at

Connor and Riley. “But what about...”

While holding Patrick in one arm, Connor pulled another ring out of his pocket. He pushed it into Patrick’s pudgy fingers. “Can you give this to your mum, Patrick?”

Patrick let out a happy baby squeal, then hurled the ring toward the sea cliff.

“NO!” three of us shouted at once.

Riley scrambled to the edge of the cliff, where a picket fence protected anyone from falling over the side. The ring had come to a stop against the wood, just two inches from rolling through a gap in the slats. Riley handed it back to Connor and then wiped sweat from his forehead.

“Let’s try this again, shall we?” Connor handed the ring to me. “What Leo said goes for me as well. We’ve been together too long not to make it official.”

Then it was Riley’s turn to procure a ring. “We don’t care about paperwork, marriage licenses, or last names. We just want to be with you. If you’ll have us.”

By then I was crying. I couldn’t form words, so I bobbed my head up and down.

“Don’t just *stand* there,” Kirsten chirped. “Put the rings on!”

With her help I did just that. The three rings were matching wedding bands, and they interlocked together perfectly on my finger. I held out my hand and let the sunlight glisten in the accent diamonds on each band.

“Now we’re truly together,” Leo said.

“*Proper* together,” I said with a smile.

We all laughed and cried together there in the Irish meadow by the sea.