

Aoife Callaghan is being targeted by a man who wants revenge for his daughter's death. Her old lover, Eoughan O'Saughnessy, a businessman in New York, returns after ten years of silence and swears he is not responsible for their separation. Who kept them apart? Can he resurrect Aoife's love from the ashes of his perceived betrayal? Will the avenger succeed in killing Aoife or will Eoughan discover the family secrets in time to protect her?

The Gallagher

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A photograph of a long, narrow hallway with wooden walls and a dark floor. At the far end of the hallway, a large fire is burning, with bright orange and yellow flames and thick white smoke rising. The fire is framed by two open wooden doors on either side. The ceiling has a rectangular vent. The overall lighting is warm and orange, dominated by the fire.

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First Edition

Chapter One

Aoife, with white envelopes in her hand, walked among the whirling, dancing space warriors, captains, officers and crew, along with characters from the various science fiction films and television series who moved to the rock beat. Many off-world humans plus an unbelievable diversity of aliens had come to the science fiction weekend.

The convention had been her idea. She was the marketing manager of The Gallagher and had courted the organisers with the promise of full cooperation, personal attention, and special rates because they were fellow members of the club.

Every inch of the hotel buzzed, bedrooms were booked out, and the three bars—along with the coffee shop—were packed with chatting, happy people.

Phelim Kelly had laughed when Aoife'd invited him to invent a 'Cosmic' Irish feast. His amazing dinner menu had been available online. The dining room had been fully reserved almost as soon as the menu was posted on the website.

She'd sponsored first prize for the best costume: a weekend for two in their new hotel in Manhattan all expenses paid. Second prize was a weekend in Dublin's Gallagher.

Midnight rang out. The drums rolled. The lights dimmed.

An image of a star ship beamed onto the ceiling as the clash of cymbals announced the prize giving. A hush fell over the ballroom.

"First place goes to...Seven of Nine," the judge, a small middle aged man with glasses, announced.

A tall lady, a shade under six foot, moved gracefully as the crowd parted for her.

Catcalls and shouts echoed around the room.

A man, an inch or so taller than Seven of Nine, won second place. He thanked the judges, took Seven of Nine in his arms, and kissed her.

He slipped away from the foyer, pretending to stumble against the wall. The hair of the science fiction character covered his face. Brown contact lenses disguised his blue eyes. When he reached the end of the passage leading to the downstairs rooms, he turned the corner and straightened up, checked the doors on both sides of the corridor and listened for the lift.

It was clear. He lifted the red fire extinguisher from its casing.

He locked the door and threw the extinguisher into the empty bath. He'd already dismantled the fire alarms and sprinklers. His steady hands pulled the bag from under the bed. He extracted the bomb, put it in the centre of the mattress, set the detonator, and tossed the duvet over it. The bastard's daughter would die in the fire and he'd be avenged.

In the empty hallway, he locked the door and staggered down to the lobby, but the staff were so busy they had no time for people who'd drunk too much. Security? Ha!

In the privacy of his Opel Astra, he removed his costume, cleaned off the make up, extracted the coloured lens from his eyes, and drove out of the Werburg Street car park.

The Gallagher would be unable to survive the scandal of having the alarms switched off. The bastard's name would be mud here and in New York.

Who would invest in a hotel that didn't get basic fire prevention, right? No one would suspect him. The trail was too old, too cold.

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Aoife decided to call it a day. Her last thought was that perhaps she could pencil the Science Fiction Club in for their October convention next year, which could have a Star Wars theme or perhaps The Matrix, or Avatar? Hmmm!

She walked through the foyer and on towards the lift to the family penthouse. From the corner of her eye, she noticed something along the passage leading to the ground floor bedrooms. Was that smoke curling along the ceiling? No it couldn't be. The sprinklers would have kicked in. The fire alarm would be screaming.

Moving swiftly away from the lift she hurried down the corridor. Smoke whispered out beneath the door of room 15.

"Hello! Hello!" she hammered on the door with her fists. The smoke wrapped itself around her ankles. She kicked the door.

"Wake up. Wake up! Let me in! Open the door! For God's sake, wake up and open the goddamn door!"

Aoife whipped to the fire alarm. Pulled off her shoe and hit the glass with her three-inch spiked heel. The alarm was silent. She turned to pluck the fire extinguisher off the wall, but it was missing. Pulling the intercom from her pocket, she called Pat O'Neill.

"Pat, Aoife here," she coughed, as the smoke went up her nose. "We have a fire in room 15. Set off the alarm and come quickly! I can't get into the room. Come now, bring help fast! Warn everyone."

She put her shoe on, raced to the fire doors, and closed them. That would contain the fire in this section. Banging on the rooms, she moved fast along the corridor shouting, "Fire, come out immediately! Come out, there's a fire!"

Many of the guests were not in their rooms. The few who were had just opened their doors when the sprinklers switched on. The fire alarm klaxon deafened their ears with its warning.

Pat O'Neill, head of security, raced down the corridor followed by two of his staff.

"Here, Pat!" she shouted down the now smoked filled corridor. In seconds he was beside her. He broke the door with a fire axe. Flames leapt up from the bed and licked the ceiling. Aoife flew in and raced into the bathroom immediately inside the door. The fire extinguisher was sitting in the bath. She pulled it out, put the plugs in, and turned on both taps in the sink and bath. Pat was beside her, throwing blankets into the bath and towels into the sink.

Aoife worked the extinguisher, aiming the jet at the centre of the bed. Pat saturated blankets with water and threw them over the burning mattress while his second in command wet the towels and hit the flames at the edge of the fire. Thick black smoke rolled along the ceiling and billowed into the hallway. Security collected people in bathrobes and took them from danger.

"I bet someone fell asleep with a lit cigarette," a man said as he watched. "I'll give you a hand if you like," he offered Pat.

"Thanks, but we have it under control. The smoke should clear in a few minutes."

"Good. I can go back to bed."

More security arrived with extinguishers. People gathered at the fire exit muttered that they'd be happy to get back to sleep.

"I'm sorry," Aoife, her black suit saturated and clinging to her body, said to the gathered people, "but you can't return to your rooms until security has checked that it's safe and secure."

She opened the fire doors and escorted the guests to the foyer where she did a head count once again and made brandy or whiskey available, along with tea or coffee. Leaving them in the capable hands of her staff, she went to the front door to meet the fire chief.

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Pat O'Neill would have to explain why the sprinklers hadn't worked. The alarm should have flashed on the monitors. The special klaxon should have gone off. That fire should never have had time to get a hold on the room. The Gallagher had installed a system to deal with guests who took the batteries out of the smoke alarms and fell asleep with lit cigarettes or cigars.

"Philip," Aoife said, walking quickly to Philip Hogan, the Dublin fire chief. "Pat's got it under control. He still needs you to give him the all clear."

"Good. I'll have my people take a look at it immediately."

"Thanks. It would help if you didn't park the Fire Brigade right outside the front door. I know it's dark, but word travels fast in Dublin and we don't want gossip to rubbish us."

"I'll check the fire scene before making my decision. I'll do my best and that's all I can promise," he replied.

He assessed the level and colour of smoke. The carpet in the bedroom was smouldering, the headboard burst out in spasmodic flames, but the danger was certainly contained.

"Pull the back off that wardrobe," Pat said. "Hurry up."

Security staff were taking the bedroom apart!

"What on earth's going on, Pat? Why are you destroying the furniture?"

For once Pat O'Neill ignored her.

"Look at this," he said to Philip Hogan, and pointed at the bed.

Visions of burnt bodies shot into her mind. The pit of her stomach sank, but settled when she saw a piece of metal sitting in the hole of the blackened mattress.

Philip's face hardened.

"Aoife, this is out of my hands. I'm afraid this is now a matter for the gardai. I'm sorry," he said, as he made the call on his mobile.

“Yes. Yes, I’m quite sure it’s a fire bomb. Yes. I’m at the scene with the security men. Yes. We’re searching to see if any more have been planted.”

They’d been firebombed! How could this be happening?

Unless the weakness in the fire protection system was cleared up immediately, it would affect the standing of The Gallagher. Business people would no longer be able to or willing to recommend it.

“Detectives will be here soon Mr. Callaghan,” Philip said to her father, who’d been awakened by security and informed of the situation. “My people will each take a different floor to search. It shouldn’t take long. Remember, sir, they’re fully trained. Some will have experience in fire bombs.”

“People want to sleep,” Aoife said. “It’s going to be difficult to keep them out of their rooms.”

“Most will be happy to have experts check out the entire building.”

“Philip, do you have to tear the rooms apart?” She asked, mentally counting the cost of redecorating.

“No. My staff will explore only those places where firebombs would be easy to plant, not behind sealed surfaces unless the seal has been broken or damaged,” Philip reassured her.

She went to reception to help. The horror of being in a hotel where a fire had started would be too much for many people. Still, she’d do her best to reassure them, to get them to stay for the remainder of the night. She walked through the press of people amazed at the laughter. Men and women who had been turned out of their beds in the middle of the night were chattering away in white bathrobes. There was no hysteria, no angry recriminations, and no panic.

The noise from the ballroom showed that news of the fire hadn’t reached the outer limits of their cosmos.

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The gardai investigated the incident. They examined the room looking for clues and checked out the people who'd attended the convention. They took the metal device to the army bomb experts, seeking to find out who would have set the fire bomb. Dissident Republican parties were questioned and cleared. Detectives visited anyone who had complained of the service in The Gallagher. They could find nobody. It was a mystery. After several months, they could no longer warrant the manpower necessary to do further investigation on the case and it was filed away.

The Gallagher returned to normal.

Chapter Two

The headache from the nightmare throbbed as Aoife walked through the foyer checking that the chairs were immaculate and in their exact spots, the carpet was spotless, and the occasional tables glistened without a smudge. The large floral display was perfectly positioned on the glass table in front of the mirror at the end of the passage leading to the ground floor rooms. Those headaches usually responded to one tablet. This one had hovered all morning. Perhaps a strong coffee would shift it.

It was just after lunch and the coffee shop had the usual crowd sitting and chatting. A group of tourists were having an afternoon drink in the bar. Two guests at reception were asking Angela for maps of local interests, but otherwise everything was quietly ticking over.

A man occupied the armchair on this side of the front door and her eyes registered his Armani suit. His ankles were crossed and he appeared to be perfectly at ease.

The glass of the revolving doors shone in the afternoon sunshine, keeping the traffic noise at a minimum level. It was not intrusive.

There was something about that man.

A frown appeared between her green eyes as she had a quick glance. She'd taken three steps beyond him when she stopped. Her body was paralysed while she absorbed the shock.

"Eoughan!" she exclaimed.

"Aoife," he replied, looking up at her but not moving.

Unwelcome memories flew, remembering the touch of his hands, the taste of his skin, the feel of his lips. She blocked it

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out but continued to gaze at the man sitting in the chair. He was still gorgeous, still sexy, but more dangerous.

That laughing, playful student who had stolen her heart then discarded it, when he had no further use for it, had turned into a poised, confident man.

Oh Lord, his absence vanished in the blink of an eye. Her breath left her lips on a sigh. Too much had happened during the long years they'd been apart, but still she liked to look at him.

"It's been a long time," he commented.

Nine years, eleven months, three weeks, and four days.

"Are you staying in Dublin for long?"

"That depends," he replied. His bright sapphire blue eyes held hers.

"Oh?"

"If you're free tonight, we could have dinner."

It took a few moments for Aoife to appreciate exactly what he'd said.

He turned up after years of silence, expecting her to accommodate him. Dinner indeed! She knew how businessmen behaved when they were away from home. Years of learning how to disguise her emotions, along with keeping her blazing temper under iron control, stood to her.

"I don't think so, Eoughan," she said, dripping a touch of false regret into her voice.

"You don't think what?" His voice had the timbre of silk slipping off of silk. "That you're not free tonight, or you don't want dinner, or you don't want to talk?"

"All of the above."

How like him to try and trip her up. He had retained his lilting Cork accent that had charmed her girlish heart. She found it as attractive as ever. In fact, Eoughan O'Shaughnessy was

everything a woman could want in a man as long as she didn't require commitment.

He pulled his legs in.

"Aoife, surely you could talk to me for a few minutes. Perhaps we could have a cup of coffee? It's been a long time," he coaxed.

"Eoughan, we have nothing to say to each other."

"Then we could sit in silence while we have a cup of coffee. How long would it take? Five minutes? Ten minutes? For old times' sake?"

His finger held no wedding band. Maybe he wasn't married, but even so, he could have a partner. Still, ten minutes with an old lover wasn't much to give.

"Oh all right, ten minutes," she relented. "I'm a busy woman these days," she added, as she turned towards the café.

He rose to join her.

Aoife was stunned by the immediate response from her body at the casual touch of his hand. Her senses remembered the pleasure, the intense joy of sex with Eoughan. Her heart beat a rapid, excited throb.

"Ah, not here! This is where you work. We could be interrupted at any moment," he said, leading her to the front door.

"I can't walk out without putting someone in charge," she protested, gaining a semblance of control.

"Okay," he said, and walked to the desk.

She stared in disbelief.

"Angela, Ms. Callaghan is going off for ten minutes. Would you please take over?"

"Certainly, Mr. O'Shaughnessy. Take as long as you like, Ms. Callaghan. I'll ring your mobile if you're needed." Angela was happy to oblige.

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“Do you always take charge?” Aoife asked, annoyed, yet at the same time intrigued by the air of authority he displayed.

“It saves time and effort,” Eoughan smiled down at her.

Her breath caught as she adjusted to the power of his attraction.

“I like to make my own arrangements,” she replied, moving out through the door and into the intersection where busy streets crossed and the constant traffic hummed.

“Are you annoyed with me?” he inquired, pressing the button on the pedestrian crossing.

“You have no right to walk into my work place and tell my receptionist to take over.” Her eyes flashed then faded. She could have countered his request to Angela with one simple sentence. The fact that she hadn’t, told her how much she’d reacted to Eoughan O’Shaughnessy.

She’d give him ten minutes, only ten minutes.

The air was mild on their faces as they passed Christ Church Cathedral and went down the hill towards Temple Bar. He turned in at the Irish Film Centre. By unspoken mutual consent, they mounted the stairs.

“Is it still the same? Cappuccino no sugar?” he asked, his foot on the bottom step.

She nodded her head and continued to their table.

It was as if the years had rolled backwards to when they were young students with little or no money. The centre was still showing French, Spanish, and New Zealand films with Russian or Asian thrown in. The place was full of excited chatter. She loved it.

But Eoughan was overdressed for the IFC.

Aoife watched as the waitress behind the coffee bar did a double take when she looked up at him. That smile, which he so casually threw around, charmed both men and women. She

recognised that he was not only aware of it, but that he also used it outrageously to get his own way. She watched him come towards her and realised what he was doing. In those few moments, talking about old times, she'd allowed her guard to drop, and he'd zoomed in.

The coffee was good and she enjoyed his company, but as they chatted, she used her considerable business skills to keep the conversation neutral.

"The ten minutes are long gone, Eoughan," she said, looking at her watch. "I'm sorry, but I'm on duty."

They strolled back like work colleagues.

"Aoife, will you reconsider having dinner tonight?" he asked, using every bit of his masculine charm.

She felt his power and gave him full marks for trying, but then he was an honours student, wasn't he? Well so was she. She was not a puppet he could manipulate on a string.

"Sorry, I'm on duty. I work very unsocial hours. Thanks for the coffee. It was nice to go over old times." She offered her hand in goodbye.

He took it with strong fingers, brought it to his lips, and kissed every knuckle. Her fingers curled involuntary and she saw that he was aware that the touch of his lips affected her.

"See you," he said, using their old familiar goodbye that wasn't really goodbye but more of a "we'll meet again later" type of farewell.

How had he done it? How had he turned a complete negative, a totally polite refusal, into a maybe? Wow, he was skilful. She would have to deny him, but she was out of practice. She'd never had to use denial before, as no man had ever caused her body such joy at the mere sight of him. Betrayal should have been an excellent barrier. It appeared that it wasn't.

"I'll take over now, Angela," she smiled at the receptionist. "Thank you."

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“That’s all right, Ms. Callaghan. Any time.”

Angela had two small children. She’d been 18 when she’d started working for Mr. Callaghan. Six years ago she’d married Phelim Kelly. They both loved their jobs and were happy working in The Gallagher.

Aoife stopped at the office door.

He’d walked up the stairs.

He hadn’t left the hotel. He’d strolled up the few steps to the lift as if he’d owned the place.

She whipped back to reception.

“Angela, has Mr. O’Shaughnessy booked a room?”

“Yes, Ms. Callaghan. Is something wrong?”

Aoife turned the monitor. She scanned the registration details and there was no E. O’Shaughnessy booked in.

“I don’t see his name.”

“No, Ms. Callaghan, it’s under the company. There you are, Business Consultants Inc.”

He’d taken their experimental family suite for six months. She could meet him on the stairs, in the lift, in the foyer, or the dining room. What a sly, self-serving, selfish individual he’d turned out to be. Well he could make a reservation somewhere else in Dublin. Oh Lord, if she threw him out, he’d know she was hopping mad. She’d have to set her spies to tell her of his movements. Please, God. She hoped she’d be able to keep her temper in check and stay cool.

Joan, a waitress from the café, brought the pot of calming tea she’d ordered from the kitchen. The Dublin Summer Festival marketing kept her busy at her desk until Angela called to tell her it was time to dine.

In order to attract more dining clients, Phelim Kelly had introduced an early bird dinner. Today was Aoife’s day to eat from that menu. Nearly all the tables were occupied. The hum and quiet laughter filled the room as she walked past a group of

five middle aged women all trying to talk at once, adding to the general noise. She sat at the small staff table near the serving doors and waited until one of the waiters was free to bring her a menu.

Above the general buzz, she heard something she'd never heard before. Controlled male laughter came from Phelim's kitchen. The swinging doors opened to Eoughan O'Shaughnessy, who, with his back to her, was talking with Phelim as if they'd known each other all their lives.

"Aoife!" he exclaimed when he turned. "I was just having a word with Phelim about dinner. You don't mind if I sit here?" He pulled out a chair and sat opposite her at the worst table in the room.

"Not at all," she lied, hiding her frustration behind a false social mask, convinced he'd engineered this. How on earth had he managed to get into Phelim's kitchen? No one was allowed in there at mealtime, absolutely no one.

She couldn't refuse to have dinner with him without causing a scene. He was well aware she'd said no to him because she didn't want to deal with him either in person or with business. But he'd turned her refusal upside down, showing her he was determined to be part of her life again, irrespective of how little time he had in Dublin. As it was, a number of people in the room stopped talking and turned to stare at them.

Aoife was aware of their interest and smiled. She kept the image of being friendly and allowed a sense of duty to overcome her distain for a person who had broken a vow. Still, it was brilliant for the clients to see him dressed in his expensive business suit, eating a cheaper version of the Table d'hôte with the manager. But her duty to eat from the early bird menu went astray when Eoughan ordered for them from the *a la carte* selection.

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Against her will, he held her interest, talking about the Smithsonian Museum in Washington. It was there that she'd seen a red diamond for the first time. She hadn't known there was such a thing as a red diamond until she'd seen it behind strengthened glass, sparkling under the spotlight.

At the beginning of June, in the summer of her third year at Trinity, she'd gone with Orla and a group of fellow students to work in Boston. Towards the end of the holiday, Orla suggested a trip to Washington D.C. and Aoife was delighted. She longed to see the space capsule along with the rest of NASA history. When they were there, Orla had suggested they also view the precious gems. Until then, she'd never had much interest in jewelry except for sapphires, which brought painful memories. So she'd decided to learn more about all the precious stones, especially those strange diamonds. Now, of course, she knew rare diamonds ranged from blood red to emerald. Her small collection was good and she loved them for their beauty, but also for their monetary value.

She refused an after-dinner drink, saying she'd had enough with the wine and champagne he'd ordered to celebrate their meeting again. She'd clenched her teeth when he'd touched his glass to hers.

He sipped a Hennessy while she spooned the cream off her cappuccino.

She understood, when he said goodbye outside her office and kissed each of her fingers, that he was giving her silent notice of his intent. Neither of them were fools. They knew each other irrespective of what games they played.

Aoife Callaghan is being targeted by a man who wants revenge for his daughter's death. Her old lover, Eoughan O'Saughnessy, a businessman in New York, returns after ten years of silence and swears he is not responsible for their separation. Who kept them apart? Can he resurrect Aoife's love from the ashes of his perceived betrayal? Will the avenger succeed in killing Aoife or will Eoughan discover the family secrets in time to protect her?

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