

# This to keep

*He can't let  
her go.*

**MINK**

# HIS TO KEEP

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MINK



His to Keep

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# CONTENTS

His to Keep

Chapter 1

*Cillian*

Chapter 2

*Cara*

Chapter 3

*Cillian*

Chapter 4

*Cara*

Chapter 5

*Cillian*

Chapter 6

*Cara*

Chapter 7

*Cillian*

Chapter 8

*Cara*

Chapter 9

*Cillian*

Chapter 10

*Cara*

Chapter 11

*Cillian*

Chapter 12

*Cara*

Chapter 13

*Cillian*

Chapter 14

*Cara*

Chapter 15

*Cillian*

Chapter 16

*Cara*

[Chapter 17](#)

*Cillian*

[Chapter 18](#)

*Cara*

[Chapter 19](#)

*Cillian*

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by MINK](#)

[About the Author](#)

## HIS TO KEEP

MINK

A bodyguard's work is never done, especially when you're protecting a girl like Cara. For months she's teased me, showing me glimpses of skin and flaunting her innocence. I'm a hard man, one who has a job to do. Bringing down Cara's father and his crime syndicate is why I'm here.

It should be the *only* reason I'm here.

It's not.

I'm here for Cara, and I've wanted her since the day I was first assigned to her protection detail. Claiming her was never an option, not when my plans always ended with her father's death.

But the more I see of the sheltered girl with the innocent eyes, the more I think she belongs by my side. Even if it goes against my family's plans, I intend to make Cara my bride and my queen.

And if anyone gets in the way of my love for Cara? Well, like I said, I'm a hard man, one who doesn't mind getting blood on his hands for the woman he loves.

“*Y*ou can walk the grounds, but make sure you keep to the path.” I don’t look at her as I give these instructions. Looking at Cara is the quickest way for this conversation to end on a sour note.

“What if I don’t want to walk the grounds alone?” She pouts.

I don’t have to look at her to know her plump bottom lip is jutting out, her bright green eyes focusing on mine. “Take your cat.” I shrug and keep my gaze on the ground.

“I will, but Sasha and I would love some company.” Cara rises and comes toward me, though I remain in the hall outside her room. I never venture inside, never go near her bed with the pink sheets and white canopy, never so much as think of running my fingers along her neat panty drawer or taking a pair every so often. At least, I never do those things when she’s home.

“You’re my guard. Aren’t you supposed to guard me?” She stops right in front of me.

All I see is a long expanse of smooth legs dotted with freckles. An Irish beauty, one that could bring any man to his knees. But I’m not just any man. I’m her guard, her protector. Her father has entrusted her to my care, and I won’t let him down. Even if Cara can sometimes be ... difficult. For example, as I stare down at her shapely legs, I don’t see a hem. I lift my gaze higher and finally find one, a thin white skirt that gives me an

ample view of her lavender panties with the pretty pink blooms along the edges.

“You can’t go outside like that.” I fist my hands.

“Like what? You haven’t even seen my dress.” Her petulant pout has returned. Just the sound of it thickens my cock, and my palm itches to redden her pale ass for every moment of teasing she’s put me through.

“Cillian.” She puts her hands on her hips. “Look at my dress.”

“No. Put on some real clothes.”

“These *are* real clothes.”

“No, some see-through negligee isn’t real clothes, and if your father finds out you’ve been parading half-naked in front of his men, you and I are going to be in some deep fucking trouble.” Not to mention the fact that I never want *anyone* to see so much as an inch of her skin. I get a murderous urge whenever one of the McKibbon soldiers looks her way, much less has the nerve to smile at her.

She’s not to be touched, not to be drooled over by the rank and file. Cara is destined to be gifted to another mafia family, her virginity a sign of her clan’s desire to form an alliance. Kaden McKibbon is a shrewd man, one who handpicked me to safeguard his daughter’s life and virtue.

“I’m going in this.” Her haughty tone finally has me lifting my gaze.

I stop when I see her pink nipples, the tips hard and pushing against the thin white linen. My mouth waters. Desire roars through my veins like fire through a dry forest. I fight the same battle I’ve been fighting for the past six months. This girl has teased me relentlessly, and I’m only a man. A strong one, but not when it comes to her. Still, I have to remember my place here, my purpose.

I finally meet her fiery green eyes. “Cara, get back in your room and put on some real clothes.”

“And if I don’t?” She smirks. “What will you do?”

I step closer to her, far closer than I've ever allowed myself before.

Her nostrils flare, her eyes widening. "Nothing. You'll do nothing." She kicks her chin up in open defiance.

"Cara, I don't have time for your games today."

"I don't have time for your overbearing assbattery today, but here we are all the same," she shoots back.

"Cara." I'm standing on a knife's edge, my need for her fucking with my head. "Go back inside and put on some clothes."

"No." She huffs out a breath. "And you can't make me."

She turns and starts to push past me.

That's it. That's fucking *it*.

I grab her by the elbow and haul her back into her room, slamming the door behind us as I spin her around and pin her to it. Wrists above her head, her body stretched taut against the door as I lean into her, letting her feel every inch of muscle as I stare down into her wide eyes.

"So help me, Cara, if you don't put on some fucking clothes right this minute, I will drag you to that bed, drape you over my knees, yank those panties off, gag you with them, and spank your ass until your mascara runs down to your chin and you beg me to stop. Do you understand?" I'm breathing heavily, my mouth only a whisper from hers, and my voice is so low and gravelly I don't recognize it.

She whimpers, her gaze darting to my lips. "Cillian."

Fuck, the way she says my name. It's like a shot of adrenaline straight to my veins. I did this to scare her, to make her fall into line. But with the way she's looking at me—and with the way my cock is trying to burst free from my goddamn pants—I realize this was a mistake. A big one. What the fuck am I doing?

"Get dressed," I growl and release her, then back away. I point to the closet and bark, "Go!"

She glances down at my cock, and her gaze is like a feather touch. But she obeys this time and scampers past me and into her closet.

I take a breath. A deep one.

I almost went too far. Fuck, who am I kidding? I *did* go too far.

But now it's done. Over. I'm here for a mission, nothing more. I have to do a good job with guarding Cara to gain the McKibbons' trust. Then I'll bring them down from the inside.

At least I've got Cara in line now. She'll be afraid of me, too scared to step out of line now that I've shown her the sort of man I am. Good. She *should* fear me.

I straighten my tie and look up when she prances out of her closet wearing nothing but those goddamn lavender panties and a mischievous smile.

I stare at my bedroom door. I can't believe he locked me in here. I'm not sure how that's even possible. There's a lock on the inside of my door that I hardly ever use. I really don't have a reason to since Cillian is always standing guard outside of it. He must have jammed something into the mechanism before he yelled that he'd let me out once I was dressed. Yet those words aren't the ones that keep running through my mind. It's what he said before that.

The man is impossible. I flop back onto my bed having gotten dressed but not wanting to go out anymore. Sasha curls up next to me and purrs. I pet her head and wonder when Cillian will be back. He'll have to let me out of here sooner or later or people might start asking questions.

A small laugh bubbles from me when I think of how fast he ran from the bedroom when he saw me naked. It's laugh or cry at this point. It had taken everything in me to walk out of the closet like that. I was trying to be bold. To make him see me as a woman. I obviously failed once again. I've never seen Cillian move so fast in my life. His rejection stung more than I thought it would.

"The internet is filled with lies," I tell Sasha. The article I'd read about seducing a man had failed me. I wet my bottom lip and think about how he'd pressed his body into mine.

I squeeze my thighs together and remember the heat I saw in his eyes. He was hard everywhere. I close my eyes, trying to

recall every second of it. His dirty words lit my body on fire. I think I felt his cock press into me. Or it could've been his gun. Was he only trying to scare me or did he mean the things he said?

“Cara.” I sit up when I hear my stepsister Maria call my name. A moment later she breezes into my bedroom. I catch a glimpse of Cillian behind her before the door slams closed. “You’re still in bed?” She rolls her eyes at me. “Get up. We have wedding plans to get on with already.”

That’s the last thing I want to do. Thinking of my fiancé makes my stomach sour. The turned-on feeling I was having thinking about Cillian pressed against me fades away. Dread quickly takes its place.

“Up!” She snaps louder, making Sasha hiss at her.

“Since when do you care about the wedding? I don’t, so neither should you.” I slip off the bed. Sasha sits up and glares at Maria.

When Maria first came to live here I was only eight years old. At the time I thought she was a sweetheart, but that soon changed after she was here for a little bit. It didn’t take long for her true colors to shine through. Sasha isn’t a fan of Maria, which tells me my instincts about my stepsister’s true nature are on point.

Maria’s mother Calida had been on her best behavior also when she’d first married my dad. It was all a show that quickly faded. I do have to admit that Calida is well suited for my father, though. They both have quick tempers and nasty dispositions. I’ve learned to stay out of their way. Calida, medicated or drunk, sticks to her side of the estate for the most part. I would probably do the same if I was married to a man like my father. The thought is a sobering one, because that is the fate that’s been set out for me.

“I care about your wedding because it means you’ll be out of here sooner.” She gives me one of her fake sweet smiles. Too bad she couldn’t have been the one to be married off. I’d like her out of here, too.

No, she doesn't have McKibbon blood in her veins. It's something my father often says when he and Calida fight. He always reminds her that she's a nobody without him and how lucky she is that he took her from the hole he found her in.

Pretty sure the hole was a strip club from the whispers I'd heard. When Calida first arrived here, my father was infatuated with her. That quickly waned. His infatuations always do. His affection and attention withered right along with it.

Maria has been around a lot lately. Usually, she stays in the city where my father has a condo. I'm not sure why the sudden change. She marches back to my door, clearly expecting me to follow her. I do, because if I don't, she'll snitch to my father. That's the last thing I need right now. I've already learned my lesson about speaking out about my upcoming wedding. I'll never make that mistake again.

When the door flies open, my eyes lock on Cillian. He only looks at me for a moment before his eyes go to Maria. She's seven years older than me and as beautiful as her mom used to be. She's tall with long blond hair and bright blue eyes that she plays up with makeup. She's got boobs now, too.

They popped up a few months ago out of nowhere. And I'm guessing that it hadn't been some late bloom of puberty but a really skilled plastic surgeon that had given her those full Ds. I do have to admit they really complete the whole bombshell package she's got going on.

"Cillian," she purrs at him as she walks by. She gives her hips an extra sway. I swear I can feel the rage brewing inside of me. I want to reach out and grab her by her blond shiny hair.

I refuse to look over at him as I pass. I don't want to see him check out her ass. That's what most of the others do as we make our way towards the kitchen where the wedding planner Kelly is waiting for us. I groan inwardly, wishing this wasn't happening to me.

"You want something to drink?" I ask Kelly, heading for the fridge and trying to stall.

“I’ve got it.” Greta comes around the corner with a tea kettle in her hand. I relax some, knowing she is near. She has always been somewhat of a safe haven for me.

“Water for me,” Maria snips and sits down at the table with Kelly, then dismisses Greta after she gets her water.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from snapping at Maria. It would be pointless.

She points at something in one of the binders Kelly has out on the table. “You know how important this is for Kaden, you really think people will be impressed with this?”

Since when did she start calling my dad by his first name? I remember her mom making a big deal about wanting her to call him Dad.

My eyes flick over to Cillian, who’s standing in the doorway to the kitchen. His arms are folded over his chest as he watches Kelly and Maria. He looks pissed. He must feel my gaze on him, because he turns his head, causing his eyes to lock with mine.

“Greta!” Maria shrieks, breaking my attention away from Cillian. “Don’t put that out! She’s already plump enough. We don’t need her fiancé to call everything off because she’s gotten even bigger.” She pushes away the plate of cookies Greta brought from the pantry. It almost falls off the side of the table, but Greta has quick hands and catches it before it does.

Cillian curses under his breath. “Tell me if they leave the kitchen,” he says to one of his other men before turning to leave.

Here I thought if I deflowered myself then my groom wouldn’t want me. Now I find out that all I have to do is eat a bunch of cookies. As lovely as that sounds, I still think I’d rather go with my first plan. It might even work—that is, if Cillian stops running away from me.

“*I*s my daughter behaving?” Kaden asks as he sips his bourbon.

I stand just inside his office door as Conor, his second in command, gives me an appraising scowl.

“She’s with the wedding planner now.” I can’t say she’s behaving, not after what she did to me in her room this morning. But that’s nothing Kaden needs to hear about.

“Good. The sooner she’s out of this house, the better.”

“The alliance will go smoothly once she’s a Sutcliffe. That name will open infinite doors for us.”

“Old English money.” Conor looks like he wants to spit.

“The troubles are over, Conor. This is an infusion of cash and connections, that’s all.”

“You know my opinion.” Conor sighs and crosses his arms over his chest.

Kaden drains his glass, his graying hair glinting white in the sunlight pouring through the high windows behind him.

“You’ve given your opinion. I took it into consideration and made my decision.”

Conor scowls. “The McKibbon name should only mix with others like us. The O’Donnell clan has been angling for an alliance, and you know they’re much more on our level. They’re far more appropriate for—”

“It is *my* bloodline.” Kaden slams his glass down, his Irish accent growing stronger right along with his anger. “And I don’t want the O’Donnells, Conor. I want Lord Sutcliffe. My daughter will be *Lady* Sutcliffe. That is what will bring honor to me, to my name, to our family—not to mention the inroads we can make with the London syndicate.”

Conor seems taken aback at the vehemence in Kaden’s voice.

I’m not. I’ve known all along that Kaden is looking for more than just a strategic alliance that would strengthen his position in our world. He’s looking to move into an entirely different stratosphere. I know plenty about him and his aspirations. What he doesn’t know about me, though, is that *I’m* an O’Donnell.

There’s no way in hell my family is going to let his form an alliance with the Sutcliffes. It’s a foolish aspiration, one that could bring a lot of attention to our corner of the underworld. Kaden is a threat to everything our families built in this country since we first arrived fresh off the boat. He’s reckless, cold, and arrogant. Pride before the fall and all that.

“And you—” Kaden points at me. “I called you in here because I want you to keep my daughter safe and sound. The Sutcliffes are expecting a virgin, and they had better get one.” His brows lower, stormclouds over his beady green eyes. “Keep your dick in your pants, and so help me if you let any man so much as sneeze in her direction, I’ll have your balls in a jar. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” I give him a stern nod.

“Two weeks. We just have to make it two more weeks, and everything will fall into place.” He pours himself another drink.

Conor takes a drag on his cigarette and joins Kaden at the bar cart. They may disagree, but the two of them have been in business together for far too long to let any rancor come between them.

“Join with the O’Donnells?” Kaden shakes his head but pours Conor a drink. “The head on you, Jesus Christ.”

“What are you shiteing on about?” Conor takes his glass. “I’ve given up. Wouldn’t want to stand in the way of having a *Lady Sutcliffe*.”

They chuckle conspiratorially as I back out of the room.

“Don’t forget what I said, Cillian.” Kaden turns that sharp gaze on me. “*Untouched*.”

“Yes, sir.” I nod again and close the door as Maria struts up, her long hair swinging behind her.

“Cillian,” she simpers and walks up to me.

“Can I help you, miss?” I can’t stand her, never could. Every time she says something cutting to Cara—I literally have imagined choking her out multiple times. She thinks she’s hot shit, but she’s nothing compared to Cara.

“I’ve been wondering when you’d spend some time keeping me safe. That’s your job, right? A bodyguard?” She reaches out and runs her fingers down my lapel.

I grab her hand and push it away. “I’m here to do a job. Nothing more.”

Her overly-large lips form a puffy pout. “You don’t want to do a job on me?”

“I’m here to protect Cara. Just Cara.” I step to her.

She looks up, her spidery lashes long as she gives me what must be her “bedroom eyes.” I think about crushing her throat in my palm. “And I protect all of her, Miss Maria. So the next time you decide to mention her weight or her eating habits, I’ll have to do my job.”

She blinks, as if she isn’t sure she heard me correctly. “Um, excuse me?”

“No one hurts Cara. Not on my fucking watch.” I step around her and continue down the hall as she sputters behind me.

Her seduction routine may have trapped Kaden, but I’ve got nothing but disdain for that fake bitch. She’s always been jealous of Cara. How could she not be? Cara is everything

sweet, pure, and luscious in this fucking world. Curves for days, innocence that can't be faked.

Fuck. I run a hand down my face as I take position outside Cara's door. I need to be more careful. Maria's a snake. Taunting her isn't a good idea, but I can't stand the way she treats my girl. Wait, I mean, my *client*. Cara is not my girl, never will be. In fact, I'm here for completely different reasons and—

Cara's scream cuts through my inner musings. I'm through her door before I can blink, and what I find inside wipes all rational thought from my mind. Holy fucking shit.

I scream as my vagina is violated. I was so sure my ass would hurt more. I was shocked it didn't. I close my eyes and grit my teeth in anticipation of the pain I know is about to come again.

“Breathe.”

Breathe? Really? I let out another scream, praying this is almost over. I can't believe my stepsister talked me into this.

I should have known better when she suggested it. I bet she's downstairs having a grand old time with my father or flirting with Cillian while I'm up here being tortured.

My bedroom door explodes in before my giver of ultimate pain has the opportunity to strike again. I turn my head to see who the hell is bursting in here. I guess Cillian isn't downstairs flirting with my stepsister after all. The look of rage he's currently donning quickly contorts to one of confusion.

The woman who is holding the wax strip she just pulled off me turns to see what the heck is going on. I'm sure she's about to piss herself when she sees Cillian. Everyone else seems to be intimidated by him except for me. I grab the strip from her hand to hide it. Embarrassing much?

“What the hell is going on in here? Are you okay, Cara?” If I didn't know any better, I would think his concern for me was genuine. But it's not. I'm a job, and if I die or get hurt it's his ass on the line.

I sit up and pull the blanket over myself. My sex is throbbing and not in the way it usually does when Cillian is near me. I watch as he stalks closer to the bed, needing to get a closer look.

“I wax her,” the woman tells him as she takes a step back and bumps into my nightstand. “She’s all done.”

“Get out,” he bellows at her. The woman quickly grabs some of her stuff and runs from the room. Cillian stomps after her but stops when he gets to my bedroom door. He slams it closed before flipping the lock.

He rests his hand on the door, and his head drops forward as his eyes close. He looks as though he’s trying to get himself under control. I love when he gets worked up over me.

This time I didn’t even do it on purpose. I know my actions sometimes make it harder for him to do his job, but it turns me on to see him that way. Knowing that I can get all that control he has to splinter makes me ache between my thighs.

I don’t know how long we sit like this. I wait until his breathing gets more even before I speak to him.

“Are you okay?” I finally ask.

“Am I okay?” he says, taking another deep breath. His eyes open as he turns to face me. “Am I okay?” he repeats. “I thought someone was killing you or fucking...” He trails off, stalking towards me until I open my mouth again, and he freezes in place.

“Taking my virginity?” I finish his sentence for him.

His nostrils flare at my words.

“Two more weeks.” I hold my fingers up and wiggle them. “They’re getting me ready.” I drop my hand and let out a small gasp at the stinging skin between my legs.

Cillian clears the rest of the space between him and my bed. He pulls at the blanket. I grab it before it slips off my lap.

“You walked naked in front of me hours ago.” He all but growls. True.

“Yes, that was before. I’ve decided to stop fighting this.”

His jaw flexes.

I sigh at the impossibility of us. I’ve already been sold to another man. “It’s inevitable. There is no stopping what’s going to happen, so I might as well begin to come to terms with it.” I watch as he fists his hands at his side.

We have a stare off that I lose when I go to move again and wince.

“I need to see.” When he tugs again, I let the blanket go. My legs are closed, but you can see the top of my sex is red. I open my legs more, wanting a look for myself.

Cillian moves faster than I can, spreading my thighs wide. The cool air in my bedroom feels good.

“You’re bare.”

My heart starts to pound as one of his fingers gently trails down the lips of my sex. Not a hair to be found. It stings but also feels ... so good. I want more of his touch.

“She did it everywhere. Even...” I trail off.

“Your asshole?” His finger finds my clit. The throb of pain vanishes as he gently rubs me. I drop back, my thighs opening more for him. “Answer me.”

I groan in protest when his finger stops moving.

“Yes,” I purr.

He goes back to stroking me. My hips start to move back and forth with him. The orgasm is coming too fast, as if my body is scared he might stop. He always stops. He always walks away from me. He’s never come this close to me, much less touched me. Maybe I’m in a post-wax dream, passed out from the pain.

When I lift my hips up, his other hand grips my ass. A moment later, I feel something push against my puckered hole. His thick finger continues to rub against it.

“I don’t think...”

“I think I could fuck you here, and no one would ever know.”  
His words are my undoing.

I cry out his name as I come. Black spots dance in my eyes. The things I’ve done to bring myself pleasure over the years pale in comparison to this moment. I’m already half in love with the man. This is not going to help that.

My eyes slowly open to see him staring at me. His eyes trail across every inch of me. I might feel self-conscious except I can see through his pants how hard he is for me. He lifts his finger from my clit, smelling it before he licks it clean.

“Are you going to do something with that?” My eyes drop to the outline of his cock. His next words make it feel as though a bucket of ice water has been thrown on me.

“Not with you.” He turns and stomps from the room. I grab a pillow because it’s the only thing in reaching distance and throw it, but it only hits my door a second after he closed it.

Which only makes me scream again.

*I* make it to my bedroom, slam the door, then free my cock as I rush to the bathroom. It only takes a few strokes before I come, my seed spurting out all over my hand and the sink before I can take a breath.

The taste of her cunt still lingers in my mouth, and every time I close my eyes I see that sweet little pussy, untouched by anyone.

I blink hard at myself in the mirror. “Fuck, you idiot.” *Cara was* untouched. Until I broke. Until I saw her bare cunt and couldn’t control myself. I fingered her, never even penetrating her wetness, and it was enough. Oh fuck, was it enough. She came so beautifully, her cunt demanding more than just a finger. It needs a cock. *My* cock. The next time it’s red and swollen, it should be because I fucking gave her all I’ve got.

*No.* I can’t think like this. That’s not the reason I’m here. I try to clear the lust fog from my brain as I clean up and adjust my suit and tie.

Everything is the same. Just because I touched her—fuck, I did more than that, but it doesn’t matter. My mission is still the overthrow of Kaden McKibbon. *Cara* isn’t part of that plan, other than the fact that I’ll never let her marry that bastard Sutcliffe. The wedding won’t happen. I’ll take care of Kaden, and then—

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I grab it and groan when I see who’s calling.

With a quick tap, I answer. “You know not to call me on this line.”

“Can it, little brother,” Sean squawks. “You take Kaden out yet?”

“You know that’s not the plan.”

“Should be, but Granddad is just shitting his chance away.” He makes a rude noise. “Sending you over there to be a spy when we should just go in guns blazing and end them all.”

“Is there a reason for this call, Sean?” I want to throttle him, but I keep my voice low. “Because it could get me killed.”

“Oh, calm your bloomers, sheesh. I was just checking in. I heard that big wedding is still happening in a couple weeks, so I assumed you’d lost your nerve. Typical little brother shit.”

“I may be younger, but I can still kick the shit out of you. Don’t call me again.” I hang up and glare at the phone.

When I was chosen for this job, Sean gave me loads of shit about it. But that’s why *I* was chosen instead of him. I’m an O’Donnell, but I don’t go swinging my dick around and making noise. Most didn’t even know I was in the family. That’s what made me the perfect plant in the McKibbon syndicate.

I pocket my phone as my thoughts stray back to Cara. If I fail at this, then what Sean suggested may come to pass. If I can’t stop this wedding and shut down any alliance between Kaden and the Sutcliffes, then my family may well commit a massacre to keep the status quo.

Running a hand down my face, I stride into the hall and back up to the second floor where I take position outside Cara’s room. I can feel her in there, though I don’t know what she’s doing. So much hinges on her. If only Kaden had promised her to my cousin Ian, we wouldn’t be in this fucking mess. Then again, Ian is a motherfucker, one I’d never let touch Cara. She’s too good for him. Too good for me.

I straighten my tie, though it’s already perfect. I’m antsy. In fact, I’m desperate to see her again, to taste her again. But I can’t. It’s not an option. If Kaden catches me, I’m dead. If

anyone catches on to what I'm here for, I'm dead. I just have to wait it out. When my grandfather gives the signal, that's when I take Kaden out. Once he's gone, I can figure out the rest from there. All I have to do is keep it professional with Cara from here on out.

"Cillian?" Her sweet voice knocks me from my thoughts. She's in her doorway, a light pink dress hugging her breasts and flowing out around her hips. I lick my lips.

"What can I do for you, Ms. McKibbon?" I keep my tone level.

Her gaze falls, and it's as if I can feel the hurt rippling through her. "We're back to Ms. McKibbon again? That was ... fast." She blinks as if there are tears welling.

I should stand right where I am. There's no reason for me to talk to her more, much less comfort her.

But I'm a fool. Maybe Sean was right.

Because instead of standing my ground, I push her into her room and close the door behind us.

Her big green eyes swim with tears. "What are you—"

And then I fuck up again. I kiss her. Hard. She's shocked at first, but then she melts against me, her body going slack as I wrap my arms around her. Then she parts her lips, giving me a taste of her.

I groan into her mouth, my tongue plundering her as I back her to the bed. Wanting her for all these months has broken me down, and then what we did earlier—I can't seem to get a grip.

Though it takes all my strength, I pull back from her.

Her eyelashes flutter as she looks up at me again. "Cillian."

"This can't happen again." I force the words from my mouth, but everything in me screams the opposite. I want it to happen again. In fact, I want it right now.

I step back as Sasha jumps up on her bed. "I'm going to protect you, Cara. That's my job, and I promise you I won't let

anyone hurt you.” Including me.

Her eyes turn sad, so deeply sad that it hurts me just to see her like this. “Once I’m married, you can’t help me. Lord Sutcliffe isn’t a kind man.” She swallows hard. “But there’s no way out. There never was.” She scratches Sasha’s cheek. “We’re both pets, you and me. But we can make the most of it until we get collared, can’t we, girl?”

I reach out and catch a tear before it falls, my fingers brushing her cheek. She leans into my touch. It feels real, so much like a dream but real. Her touch, her warmth.

I hear the door opening only a second before Calida, Cara’s stepmother, pokes her head through. I manage to pull my hand away in time.

“Did you get the full wax?” she asks, too drunk to even notice that I’m standing too close to Cara. That I shouldn’t even be in this room, much less so close to Cara and her bed.

Cara stiffens. “I don’t want to talk about—”

“Charles Sutcliffe expects a pristine bride, so that hair better be gone.” Calida slides her gaze to me. “My turf is always nice and smooth, of course, because I’m a *lady*.”

“A stripper, you mean,” Cara says under her breath.

“Is there something I can help you with, Mrs. McKibbon?” I step in front of Cara, lest Calida heard her words.

“Anyway—” Calida sniffs and leans against the doorframe in what must be her sultriest pose. “Cilian. I’m looking for Maria. Have you seen her?”

“Check Dad’s office,” Cara says from behind me. “I hear she’s been in there quite a bit lately.”

I don’t smile. I want to, but I manage to keep it to myself. “She was in that vicinity the last I saw her.” I give a nod.

“Oh.” Calida, blond, oblivious, and high as a kite, smiles. “I’ll go see. You know where my rooms are if you need a break from babysitting duty.” She gives me a slow wink, turns, almost stumbles, then rights herself as she struts down the hallway in heels that are far too high for a casual day at home.

I follow her into the hall and resume my usual stance.

Cara stands in her doorway, her eyes on me. I can't meet her gaze. If I do, I'll break all the way and do filthy things to her. Things that a pure girl like her wouldn't even begin to understand, even if she did enjoy them.

"Cillian?" She calls my name, her sadness gone, and something else twinkling in her eyes. Mischief. The kind I'm used to from her.

"Yes?"

She slowly pulls her dress up until I can see her tender skin, the smooth flesh that I know is the softest thing I've ever felt.

"Is it still red, or would you say it's more of a pink?"

I scrub a hand down my face. Fuck. Me.

Sasha flicks her tail back and forth as we lie out, enjoying the sun. The warm rays feel good on my skin, and it's nice to get out of my bedroom. Not that I get to go far. My father is keeping my leash very short these days.

I wonder if everyone can tell that I'm constantly thinking about running? It's definitely an option. A very risky one but still an option. The one thing that keeps holding me back is Cillian.

The thought of escaping and never seeing him again keeps me from doing it. I also fear the wrath that would come down on Cillian's head if I slipped away.

He would likely be killed for failing to do his job. I'm between a rock and a hard place, having to choose between his life and mine. It's so messed up.

There's no hope of changing my father's mind. Maybe I shouldn't even care about Cillian's life if he's so willing to toss me to the wolves in this arranged farce of a marriage. That's what the selfish part of me tries to reason, but my heart tells me something different.

I guess I could escape after I got married. But that would mean I'd have to spend a few nights in my new husband's bed. My stomach turns at the thought.

What if I get pregnant? What if I couldn't get away when I got there? Could I bring a child into that sort of life? No.

Cillian is still ignoring me. It's been two days since I was waxed. Two days since he touched and kissed me like I was precious to him. But then he went cold. The way he is now.

I reach for my sunglasses and slip them on before anyone can see the tears pooling in my eyes. I try not to think about it, but I can't stop. Time is running out, and sooner rather than later I'm going to have to make a decision.

"Can't you keep her on her schedule?" I hear Maria hiss. I open my eyes to see her coming my way. Lovely. There goes my good mood.

Why can't everyone leave me alone? Okay, maybe not everyone. I enjoy my Sasha and Cillian. I want *us* to be left alone.

"I'm only here to keep her safe. I'm not her personal assistant," Cillian says, sounding so bored. He drops his folded arms. He wouldn't be so bored if he let me put on my bikini. At least I could have given him a little show. Instead, he made me put on a one piece.

He's back to being cold to me again. I didn't even fight him when he told me to go change my swimsuit. I'm too exhausted from the damn whiplash he's been giving me with his mood swings. I have to admit the thought that I could be losing the fight in me scares me. I can't afford that now.

"Get up and put some clothes on. The dresses are here for you to try on." I pull my eyes off Cillian. Not that anyone can tell what I'm looking at behind my sunglasses. I don't miss the looks Maria keeps flicking over at him. She's so desperate for his attention.

It's almost embarrassing. And that's coming from a girl who does outrageous things to ruffle his feathers. I have to admit it gives me great pleasure knowing that he doesn't pay her any attention, which only pisses her off. Everyone always looks off when Maria walks into a room. I have to admit, though, she's been glaring at him more than anything. I wonder if something happened between the two of them?

I grab Sasha before heading to the pool's changing room. Cillian trails behind me the whole way but doesn't follow me in. I want to grab him and pull him in there with me and demand to know what's up with him and Maria, which is *so* freaking stupid.

I'm not his girlfriend. Really I'm not his anything. But I'm so damn jealous. Which is crazy considering that I'm about to try on wedding dresses so I can marry another man. Still I can't help the jealousy. How is Cillian not jealous? Does it not bother him that I'll soon belong to someone else? That there's a possibility of me having another man's child?

The idea of him marrying another woman and making a baby with her would kill me. But the truth of the matter is, for all I know, Cillian could have a child. He never shares anything about his personal life. There isn't a ring on his finger, but not all men wear them. Especially in his line of work. The thought of his heart belonging to another only sours my mood more.

I dress quickly, hurrying to get this over with and get back to my room. All I want is to be away from everyone in this house.

I give Sasha one last pet and kiss on her head before I head out. When I open the door I'm immediately pushed back in by Cillian.

"What are you—" I'm cut off when his mouth comes down on mine. The kiss is hard. He tries to push his tongue into my mouth, but I don't let him.

I do, however, open my mouth but only to take a bite of him. My teeth come down on his bottom lip. It's not too vicious, but I make my point. He jerks back, his eyes almost looking wild.

"You won't kiss me back?"

I lick my lips, enjoying the taste of him. I might be mad at him, but I would be lying to myself if I didn't admit I'm still in love with him. But he can't keep pulling away from me and then turn around and expect me to be open to him.

“No.” It hurts to get that one word past my lips, but I have to do it.

His nostrils flare. He slowly releases me and steps back.

Staring at him, I’m starting to wonder if I’ve been doing this all wrong. Cillian doesn’t like to be ignored.

That makes two of us.

She's driving me crazy. I think that's her intent. Skimpy clothes, precious attitude, and giving me just enough to make me starved for her. Cara will be the death of me.

I lean against the wall outside the downstairs guest suite and listen to the commotion inside. Maria is squawking as usual, and even Calida showed up to watch Cara try on wedding gowns.

Just the thought of her being someone else's bride makes my guts churn. It shouldn't. I keep telling myself that—what happens to Cara is nothing to do with me. I'm here for my family, not for her. But each time I tell myself that litany, I know it's lies. She snared me from the moment I first saw her. I'd be a fool to claim otherwise. A beauty with fire and heart, she's a walking dream.

"No, you look like a slut in that!" Calida slurs loudly from the room within.

"Takes one to know one," I grumble under my breath.

"Mother, she needs to look attractive. The Sutcliffes expect perfection."

"She looks like a low dollar slut." Calida doesn't give in.

"I'll change." Cara sighs, and I can hear her passing through to the attached bedroom where the seamstress waits.

"No?" the woman asks her.

“No, not this one.” Cara’s voice is low, almost detached.

I hate the sound of her giving up, but I can’t blame her. To her, her wedding to that Sutcliffe moron seems inevitable. It’s never going to happen, but I can’t tell her that. So now I’m fucking stuck between my family and comforting her with the good news. Good news, at least, on the marriage front. She might not be too pleased about the O’Donnells taking over, especially when my grandfather is just as heavy-handed as Kaden.

The seamstress opens the door and hurries out, a bunch of fabric draped over her shoulder. She doesn’t close the door all the way, giving me a view of Cara sitting on the bed, her eyes downcast. She’s wearing nothing but a veil. A tear slides down her cheek and lands on her full breast.

Calida is in the next room talking about how she intends to vacation at the Sutcliffe estate every summer, going on and on about how she’ll be the lady of the manor, not Cara.

I can see Cara growing smaller with each word, her spirit curling up inside her and trying to protect itself. It tears me apart. It’s been torture watching her the past two days, shadowing her steps and doing my best to stick to my mission. I can’t let my family down. But letting her down isn’t an option anymore, either.

Another tear slips down her smooth cheek.

I can’t let her feel like this, not when I can do something to stop it.

Though I know it’s a reckless mistake, I enter her room and close the door silently behind me.

Cara looks up, and I swear when I see her eyes light up, I’m on fire. Desperate for her. Even more so than I was an hour ago by the pool. She spurned me then. I let her. But now? Now I’m not giving up.

“What are you doing in here?” she hisses and glances at the attached sitting room where Calida and Maria are squabbling.

“Helping you.” I waste no time as I drop to my knees in front of her.

She gasps, and I reach up and cover her mouth with my palm as I push her back onto the bed. Using my shoulders, I push between her thighs and get another full view of her bare pussy. It's almost too much to take, the beauty she hides away where only I can see it.

I release my hold on her mouth and splay my fingers against the insides of her thighs. Then, with a long lick, I finally taste her.

She makes a low sound in her throat.

I look up, my lips grazing her. "You'll have to be quiet, angel," I warn and glance at the adjoining room.

"Cillian, you can't—" Her eyes are wide as I grip her wrist and place her own palm against her mouth.

I don't know when the seamstress will return, but I don't need much time. Not when I'm pleasuring my sweet angel. I flick my tongue against her clit. Her body arches beautifully, and I don't fuck around. I focus on that little nub, stroking and licking until Cara starts fucking my face, her hips moving against me as I give her all my attention.

Her body tenses, and her thighs start to shake. When I plunge one finger into her tight, wet cunt, she moans against her hand and comes in a wave. I feel each spasm of her release squeezing my finger as I lick her clit.

When she pulls her palm from her mouth and gasps in a lungful of air, I kiss her pretty pussy then stand and lick my lips. I'm pitching a fucking tent in my slacks as I look down at her wetness, the way her nipples are so hard and bite-able, the way her cheeks are flushed and her eyes glassy.

"Cillian," she breathes.

I back away from her. "Relax, angel. Pick any dress you want. It won't matter."

"It won't?" She sits up, her eyes clearing. "Why not?"

I can't tell her even though I want to so badly. The look she gives me, the green depths of her eyes pleading with me, I'm about to break when the door opens.

The seamstress stumbles in, more fabric draped over her than before.

I dart backwards and press myself to the wall behind the door as she moves past me, oblivious to my presence as she fumbles with the yards and yards of fabric.

In a quick move, I ease out the door and close it. But before I do, I take one more look at Cara.

Fuck, she's beautiful when hope lights up her eyes.

"Cillian." Kaden strides down the hallway toward me.

"Sir?" I play it cool. I have to. It's not as if he's going to know I have his daughter's taste on my tongue.

"We've a change of plans. Charles Sutcliffe is arriving three days earlier than expected. His flight should land in a few hours." He scowls. "Those bloody aristocrats expect us to bow and scrape to their every whim." He stops in front of me, his eyes piercing mine. "Anyway, have Cara ready for dinner on time. No bullshit from her, understand? She needs to make a good showing. The wedding is set in stone, but I don't need those jumped-up assholes to start any shit over her not behaving."

"I understand, sir."

"Good." He claps me on the shoulder, then continues toward his office. "I can always count on you, Cillian."

I nod. But I don't say a word, especially not the words I'm thinking—that Kaden can count on me to put a blade through Charles Sutcliffe's heart before I'll let him lay a finger on my Cara.

“Are you ready for this?” Greta asks as she stops one of the servers with a tray to rearrange a few of the shrimp cocktails.

The server mumbles an apology. I give her a soft smile.

She probably thinks Greta has a stick up her ass. The reality is, she probably just saved her from getting snapped at by my stepmother or stepsister. They love to scream how incompetent people are. Greta just stares at me, and I realize I didn’t answer her question. I’m not really sure how to.

“I don’t know.” I let out a deep breath. I peek over my shoulder to look behind me. Cillian isn’t anywhere in sight, which is odd. I still don’t understand what he meant about picking whatever dress I wanted. He said it didn’t matter. I’ve been running his words through my mind ever since, and I’m still clueless.

There are so many different ways that I could take that statement. Did he mean that my fate was sealed and no dress was going to change that fact? Or maybe he meant that it didn’t matter because I wouldn’t be getting married at all? I try not to get my hopes up for that one, because that could be dangerous to me at this point.

He did also touch me again, and this time he used his wicked mouth. It was mind-blowing, which only adds to my confusion. I always think I can stand firm when it comes to him, but that never works out too well for me. I’m pretty good

at the teasing thing, but as soon as he gets that mouth on me, I'm a goner.

Greta puts her hands on top of mine. "Be careful with that sister. Trust no one."

"Maria?" I always keep my eye out for her. What the hell does that even mean? Greta shakes her head.

"Your fiancé's sister." She looks like she wants to spit.

Oh no. I don't need *another* evil sister. No one should be expected to tolerate more than one in a lifetime.

"Is it true?" I thought that maybe they were just trying to tease me when they told me the absurd rumors. Or that they were trying to scare me when they talked about my soon-to-be husband's family relations. Calida and Maria enjoy getting any negative reaction out of me, really.

"Yes, the rumors are true." This time Greta does spit, though she quickly rubs her shoe over the mark.

I stand there, utterly shocked. "This isn't 'Game of Thrones.' People don't sleep with their sisters! It's 2020, for heaven's sake."

"Most men are pigs. They'll sleep with anyone or anything." She waves her hand. To be honest, I don't give a heck who he sticks his dick inside of. Hopefully, that will mean he keeps it out of me. He can swing that thing around with anyone else he wants. But only when it comes to him. I would never tolerate that from someone I truly love.

My stomach does, however, turn, and a hot rush of anger hits me anytime I think about Cillian being with someone else. I glance behind me again to make sure no guests have arrived to wander into the kitchen or Cillian.

"Do you think Cillian is a pig?" I ask so low I'm not even sure if Greta heard me.

"No." That's all she gives me. Before I can push for more on that topic, Maria strolls in. Her attire doesn't look as though she's going to a formal dinner but more like we're going to a nightclub.

She made me put on a white flowy dress. It's actually really pretty. She's so helpful for this wedding. She wasn't kidding about wanting me to marry this guy so that I'm out of here.

She wants all the attention to be on her. And even though I don't want my father's attention, she still can't stand the fact that he gives me any at all. Without me here, she thinks she'll be able to manipulate him more than she already has. She thinks the more she spreads her legs for him, the more she'll get the upper hand.

I don't know where she got that thought in that pretty little head of hers. We are disposable in this world. My mom is an example of that. At least that's what I believe. I tell myself that. Even though I know it's true, I'm still trying to make one of them love me.

"He's different," Greta says under her breath as she passes me. She plucks the thought right out of my mind. I'm sure everyone thinks the same thing about the person they love, but somehow deep inside, I know Cillian is different from the rest of them.

"Your husband is here." Maria tries to taunt me. I grab a glass of red wine and try to chug it back. I only get it about half down before Greta pulls it from me. I almost protest, but I know she's doing it for my own good. I need to keep a clear head when I'm around these life-sucking vultures.

When I look to where Maria's eyes have drifted, I see the man I've been promised to as he walks into the kitchen with my father.

I refuse to think of Lord Sutcliff as my husband. My gaze only lingers on him for a moment before it's pulled to Cillian. Standing behind Sutcliffe, Cillian's staring directly at me. Most would think it's because he's my protector, but I know it's more than that.

"I'm so glad my groom is here." The words roll off my tongue before I can really think about them. I don't want to think about them. I'm supposed to smile at him, not have the urge to vomit.

I hold my hand out, and he takes it. He's not much taller than me. He brings his mouth down on my hand. I fight myself not to jerk it back.

"Your pictures don't do you justice." I duck my head to pretend like I'm hiding a blush, but really it's so he can't see I'm about to vomit.

When I lift my head, I see Cillian's eyes locked on Sutcliffe. He looks ready to pounce. Surely, he wouldn't... Right? Oh, shit.

"Bathroom!" I jerk my hand back before I turn and dart off. I don't care what my father grumbles.

Now all I can think about is how I'm going to keep Sutcliffe away from me. Cillian was looking at him as though he wanted to rip his head off. If he made any move against the groom, my father would hurt Cillian, maybe even kill him. The only thing I regret about departing so quickly is that I didn't get to enjoy Cillian's jealousy for a moment. But I know this isn't the time. He needs to pull himself together. Maybe my teasing finally pushed him too far. I have to fix it.

It looks like tonight I'm going to have to be Cillian's protector.

Charles Sutcliffe has proper manners.  
I want to kill him.

Charles Sutcliffe smiles when required and turns his nose up at all other times.

I want to kill him.

Charles Sutcliffe leads my Cara into the dining room and pulls her chair out for her.

I will kill him.

Charles Sutcliffe sits beside my Cara and leans in close to whisper in her ear.

I will fucking kill him.

“Rachel,” Kaden calls as Sutcliffe’s sister swans into the room, her white dress clearly a dig at Cara. But she’s nothing compared to my beautiful redhead with the big green eyes. Rachel looks as if a moderate wind might blow her away.

“The flight was an absolute slum. I don’t know why we didn’t take our private jet.” She cuts her eyes at her brother. “Because first class is practically the same as coach. I asked for a champagne, and the stewardess took her time.” She sighs dramatically. “I had her fired of course. So hard to find good help these days.”

Her posh accent is grating. I’m Irish, so I’ve been raised with a full knowledge of what her sort of people have done to my sort

of people for centuries. I'm naturally averse. But this woman is a new level of abhorrent.

"We're just so glad to have you." Kaden pastes on a fake smile and shows her to a chair across the table from Cara and Charles.

"And this is the bride, I take it?" Rachel sits and examines Cara.

"My daughter Cara, yes." Kaden motions into the hall, and Calida walks in. She's wearing an over-the-top red dress that glitters with each of her pained movements. The seams are already at maximum capacity, so I don't know how she's going to eat.

Kaden glowers but doesn't say anything as he shows her to her seat. Her overdone makeup and too-tight dress are going to come back to bite her in the ass once this dinner's over. Kaden will make sure of it. But I don't care about her fate. I only care about one thing: the woman sitting in front of me, the one the hawk-like Rachel is sizing up with a pointed stare.

When Maria walks in, she hurries to the seat beside Rachel. "Sorry I'm late. Just some last-minute wedding planning. You know how these things go."

"Actually, I don't." Rachel doesn't return Maria's smile. "Would you mind being a dear and leaving a chair between us? I'm afraid I'm allergic to your perfume."

Maria looks stricken as she stands and moves a chair over. "I-I'm not wearing any, um ..." Maria's word trail away as Rachel returns her gaze to her brother.

Cara ducks her head, likely trying to hide her amusement at Maria being put in her place.

"Well, let's get started, shall we?" Kaden takes his seat at the head of the table. "I was sorry to learn that your parents weren't coming with you on this impromptu visit."

Rachel feigns sadness. "Oh, Mumsy and Daddy are far too busy, but Charles and I wanted to get to know his bride better before the wedding."

“Of course.” Kaden motions for the servers to come in.

What follows is dry conversation between Charles and Kaden, Rachel barely picking at her food, and Maria trying to impress Rachel with various tidbits about her role as wedding planner. Cara is the only one with any semblance of actual manners—she thanks the servers and enjoys her dinner.

“Everything is going to be perfect for you.” Maria chimes in when the crème brûlées are served. “I’ve been working nonstop on all of the—”

“How lovely.” Rachel gives her a toothy smile. “I imagine an American wedding is a lot like a train wreck, but with more Instagram photos.”

Maria’s mouth drops open.

Cara looks down again, and this time I see her shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

“Kaden’s spared no expense,” Calida slurs through her words.

Rachel doesn’t even look at her, pretending as if she didn’t hear a thing.

Kaden clears his throat. “Charles, would you care to spend some time alone with Cara?”

My spine stiffens. No way in hell I’ll let that sniveling shit spend alone time with her.

“I’d be delighted,” Charles says and rises, then offers his hand to Cara.

She glances back at me. “I don’t think—”

“Of course you want to spend time with him, Cara.” Kaden glowers. “Cillian will accompany the two of you out to the grounds. There’s a particularly nice spot by the pool where the roses are blooming.” Kaden doesn’t give two shits about roses, but he cares deeply about sealing this alliance.

“Cillian, go ahead. I’ll entertain the ladies.” Kaden sits back down and directs his glare at Calida.

“I love roses.” Rachel stands and drapes her napkin on the table.

Kaden opens his mouth, then closes it. He's being directly disobeyed. A vein in his forehead starts to thicken, but he doesn't say no.

"Come, brother." Rachel swans to the doorway, and Charles hurries to follow her, offering her his arm.

"Go," Maria hisses at Cara.

I offer my arm, and she takes it. We follow the brother and sister from the room, then take the lead and show them out to plaza by the pool.

"I hope they aren't having the wedding in this hovel." Rachel leans into Charles and whispers something in his ear.

He laughs as they stroll toward the rose arbor, Cara completely forgotten.

I glance over at her. "You all right?"

She seems anything but sad. "I'm great. Just look at them."

I do. They sit close together under the roses and continue their whispering and laughing. I've heard the rumors and assumed they were just that—rumors. But when Rachel puts her hand on Charles's thigh, I begin to see the truth.

"If he's busy with her, he'll leave me alone," Cara explains.

I guide her away from the house and into the grove of flowering cherry trees along the north lawn. "That's not how it works, Cara. You know that."

"What do you mean?" She looks up at me.

"This union between the families—your father is going to want to seal it with heirs."

She wrinkles her nose as we wander deeper into the grove. "No thanks. Besides, you said I don't have to worry about this wedding. What did you mean by that?"

"I shouldn't have said it." I shrug. I can't tell her the truth, not yet.

"Oh." Her shoulders fall.

She's so beautiful out here in the falling night. Her white dress is perfect for her, highlighting her sweet innocence.

"So I'm stuck with him then." She sighs, then turns to me as we stop beneath a wide oak at the end of the grove. "Cillian." She moves closer, her breasts just touching my chest.

"Yes?" I swallow hard, desire riding me as I stare at her plump lips.

"I don't want to give my virginity to him." She reaches up and presses her palms to my chest. "It's not his to take."

I couldn't agree more. I'd gut him before he could so much as touch her with that limp garbage between his legs.

I grab her waist and press her back until she's against the tree, then lean down and kiss her, tasting that sweetness that only exists for me. I'll steal every kiss from her, take every last bit of sugar from her lips.

She breaks the kiss, her breaths coming faster as I press my knee between her thighs.

"You look like a bride." I run my hands down the white dress, feeling the woman underneath.

"Cillian." She wraps her arms around my neck. "I want you to take my virginity."

My cock threatens to burst through my goddamn pants at her words.

"I want to give it to you so he can never have it."

I press my forehead to hers. "Cara, I want you to give it to me because I'm the only man for you. No other reason."

Her eyes water as she drops a soft kiss on my lips. "Cillian, don't you know you're the only man I'll ever love?"

In that moment, I'm lost. There is no wedding, no families, no nothing except Cara and me. I claim her in a searing kiss as I hike up her dress and pin her to the tree. She's mine, and once I claim her innocence, she'll never want another.

This is crazy. We shouldn't be doing this here. We keep getting lucky as it is. It's only a matter of time before we get caught.

I could get Cillian killed. I was supposed to be protecting him tonight. Making sure the very thing that's happening right now didn't happen at all. I knew Cillian was barely keeping it together. That he was hanging on by a very fine thread that was fraying by the second.

I moved or shifted away from Charles all throughout dinner so that he never actually touched me. I'd gone as far as making sure we talked about the most random things that no one could get pissed over.

When Cillian's mouth leaves mine, I try to catch my breath again. He moves to my neck, nipping and sucking at me there. I had no idea it was so sensitive and erotic to be kissed there. I need to tell him we shouldn't do this right now. He can come to me tonight.

I open my mouth to say it to him, but his fingers slip under my panties. All rational thoughts leave me when he touches me. My dress is still bunched up around my waist.

"Always so wet for me."

I let out a whimper, knowing his words are true. I'm always that way when he's around. "Quiet," he reminds me. "I need you to be a good girl for me. I need something to take the edge off."

I reach for him thinking he needs me to make him come. I want to wrap my hand around him and feel what I do to him. I want to know that I affect him the same way he does me. I palm his hardness through his slacks, wishing I had more time to explore.

He jerks back, taking his cock out of my reach.

“I want to help,” I huff.

“Then be quiet.”

I nod, not saying another word. He smirks at me. It might be night, but the moon fills the sky, and I can see his face.

“Be a good girl.”

I bite my lip so I don't make a sound. My nipples are almost painfully tight. His thumb rubs my sex back and forth. That tingling sensation starts to build as I move my hips in time with him.

He's making sure I can be quiet. My breath hitches, but no sound comes from me.

“Doing so well. Now I'm going to take what belongs to me.”

*Yes!* I silently scream. *Please take everything from me. I don't care.* Losing my virginity against a tree isn't how I thought it would go down, but it doesn't matter as long as it's Cillian who takes it.

He doesn't go for the buckle of his pants. Instead, he drops to his knees and pulls my panties more to the side. His mouth wastes no time. I grip his shoulders, needing to put my hands on something to steady myself. He's got me by the hips with his giant hands keeping me right where he wants me. That sinful mouth of his feasts on me.

My head starts to fall back, but he bites the inside of my thigh, making me jerk.

“I want to see you.”

I lick my lips and nod in understanding, still not making a sound. I keep my focus on him as he leans in again. His warm breath tickles my skin. I wiggle in his hold.

My whole body is throbbing, and I'm ready to explode. Cillian dips his head again, his tongue circling my clit. The man already knows my body. I dig my nails into him as he makes me come. I want to scream out the pleasure, but I don't. I hold it inside like I do everything else.

I let out a small sigh. I've overheard some of the men over the years, and I thought they were supposed to hate doing that. I think Cillian might have put more kisses *there* than on my mouth. Not that I'm going to complain. My body is humming with pleasure.

Suddenly, Cillian releases my panties and lets them slide into place as he jumps to his feet to stand in front of me. I hurriedly fix my dress.

"Well, that's a nice twist." Calida appears from the grove, her eyes on us.

My heart sinks. If she saw. Oh, God, if she *saw*.

"It's not what you think. I was—" I try to move around Cillian, but he puts his arm out stopping me, then makes me scoot back. He proceeds to step partly in front of me.

"What do you want?" He folds his arms over his chest.

"I think I might request you as my own personal guard once she's gone."

That bitch. I lunge for her, but Cillian stops me.

She stumbles back in her heels and almost falls on her ass. As pissed as I am at the woman, I still have to admit that she can rock heels.

"Sorry." I suck in a breath. I shouldn't have done that. People could have come running, but I really think Charles is lost in his sister right now.

"Calm down, hellcat. No one else is getting me." Then he winks at me. Actually winks. I don't know if I want to let out a dreamy sigh and lean into him or smack him. I do, however, have five hundred questions.

Starting with, how is he being so calm? She could ruin our lives. My heart starts to pound. I can't lose him.

“When did you get so feral?” Calida is taken aback at me trying to fight her. She pretends to fix her dress. For a moment I think I might have actually scared her.

Instantly, I feel guilty. I know I shouldn’t. But I know what I’ve heard behind closed doors. I have no doubt my father strikes her. I also have no doubt she grew up in a shitty life that my father plucked her from. Only to give her a different type of shitty. She was probably better off in her old one. In this one, there is no freedom. Unless you’re willing to kill for it.

“What do you want?” Cillian asks again. She purses her lips for a moment then blurts it out so quickly I have to play it on a loop for a second to get it to sink in.

“She’s sleeping with my husband. My own flesh and blood has betrayed me. I want her dead.” I don’t need her to say who. I already know. Hell, the whole operation knows.

“It might be best to do after the wedding,” Cillian says easily with a shrug. It doesn’t seem as if he even gives the idea of taking a life a second thought. He keeps going, making me grind my teeth. “Don’t want anything stalling that.”

Heaven forbid. *Wait*. There isn’t going to be a wedding. He’s lying again. Something I’m starting to see he’s very good at. And if he isn’t, he’s not going to make it to any wedding.

*A*s if I didn't already have enough trouble, Calida has decided to make the tightrope I'm walking even thinner.

I escort Cara back to the house and see that Charles and his sister have vacated their spot under the arbor. Good. Hopefully, they've already gone up to their rooms, which are likely separated by an adjoining door that is currently wide open. Sick fuckers. Leave it to the English to do something against God and nature.

When we enter the main hall, I can hear Kaden speaking to Conor in his office. They're getting heated, but they always do. We're Irish, after all. I don't linger to find out what's got them in a shouting match. Most likely something to do with drug shipments or the impending joining of the Sutcliffe family.

Calida stumbles away toward her wing of the house. She hasn't said another word since her interruption in the Grove. Cara has been likewise silent, perhaps shell shocked by everything that just happened. I can't blame her. But it's my fault. I was reckless. Seeing her with that nitwit Sutcliffe had me boiling, on fire to end the simpering idiot and take Cara for my own. But I have to be smart, to keep in mind that Cara will never be his.

I escort Cara to her room, which is normal procedure, even though my insides are a churning tumult of worry and

planning. This time I walk right through her bedroom door with her and close it behind us.

She spins to me, her eyes wide. “What are we going to do? Calida’s insane. You can’t just kill Maria. I mean...” She shakes her head. “I’m no fan of hers, but she’s my stepsister. Calida’s *daughter*. Oh, God, what are going to do?”

“First, we’re going to stay calm.” I step closer to her and put my palm to her warm, soft cheek. “Calida thinks she has the upper hand because of what she saw. She has nothing. She just doesn’t know it yet.”

“What do you mean?” Cara’s eyes water. “You keep saying these things about ‘don’t worry about the wedding’ or ‘Calida doesn’t know what’s going on,’ but I don’t understand what you mean. I need you to be honest with me, Cillian.”

That’s the problem, isn’t it? I can’t be honest with her, not without putting her in danger. And there is that niggling doubt in the back of my mind. If I tell her what the O’Donnells have planned for the McKibbons, will she sound the alarm? I like to think that there’s more between us than lust, and there certainly is from my end. But what if she decides that blood is thicker than whatever this thing is that’s growing between us? I wrestle with these ideas and the feelings that go along with them as we stand in uncomfortable silence.

She turns from me and walks to her bed, then stops. “If you can’t be honest with me, you should just get out.”

I hate the hurt in her voice, and I hate more than anything that I’m the one that caused it. Especially when it’s my job to protect her, and I don’t mean in the simple bodyguard sense. From the moment I met Cara, I’ve had this deep need to make sure she is safe, well taken care of, and that doesn’t just go for her body. I want her emotions and her heart to be just as safe.

“Everything I do is to protect you. I need you to believe me. More than that, I need you to trust me. Can you do that?”

Sasha jumps onto the bed and stretches, and Cara reaches out to pet her. That cat is a great friend for Cara, and always has been. There have been so many times when I’ve wanted to

comfort Cara, but I couldn't. Sasha has always come through, just like she's doing right now.

"I don't know." Cara's voice falters, and I want her to turn around and see me, the real me, the man who's been staying strong for her, waiting for her. Only her.

"Cara, listen, there are things going on, big things I can't tell you about, but I need you to know that I will always keep you safe." I step closer to her, needing to feel her warmth.

"Why can't you trust me?" she whispers.

I move closer still and catch her sweet scent. "I do."

"No, you don't. I trust you with everything. I was even going to trust you with my virginity. And I've always trusted you with my he—"

A sharp knock sounds at the door.

*Fuck.* I back up to the wall beside the door, hoping for a miracle. If Kaden strides in and finds me in his daughter's bedroom, there's going to be a huge problem. But it's not. Greta strides in.

"Those two are up in their rooms, and if you listen hard enough, you can hear what they're up to." Greta adopts a look of stern condemnation. She doesn't seem to notice or care that I am in Cara's room.

"We'll talk more later." I hate to leave Cara like this, but I have to. It's for her own sake.

Gretta continues talking about Charles Sutcliffe and his sister as I take my post outside her door.

Greta stays in there for a long while, and at one point I can hear Cara crying softly. It tears me apart not to go to her, but I know she's crying because of me. Because of what almost happened outside at the oak tree and because of the secrets I keep buried deep.

But everything is about to be settled. In a few days, my grandfather will give the signal, and the O'Donnell's will take over the McKibbon holdings. When that happens, I will keep

Cara safe, and I will make sure that Charles Sutcliffe never lays a finger on her.

I swore an oath to my family the moment I was old enough to understand what loyalty meant, and though it may be a sin to the O'Donnell bloodline, I don't care. I silently swear that same oath to Cara McKibbon. I will defend her to the death, and no matter what happens, I will keep her safe and make her mine.

I moan as I take another bite of cake. Everything about planning this wedding has sucked. Until now.

Both Maria and Rachel push the cake plates around, not really trying any of them. I go for another. They've given me a bunch of different flavors to choose, and I plan on tasting every single one.

"Charles favors thin girls," Rachel informs me with a look of disgust on her face. That only makes me take a bigger bite. I lick the icing off my fingers for good measure, too. She narrows her cold blue eyes on me. They are chilling. She's awfully judgy for a girl who sleeps with her own brother.

"You should try it. What if your future husband likes curvy girls?"

Her lips thin at the suggestion. I don't know why I'm poking her. I think it has something to do with the looks she keeps shooting at me. She wants me dead as much as Calida wants Maria out of the picture. I'm still trying to wrap my mind around that one.

Calida shocked me with that request. I knew she could be ruthless, but I had no idea how far she'd actually go to keep her status. In some weird way I sympathize with her. Who knows what lengths I would go to keep Cillian?

"Wait. Do you get to pick who you marry?" I ask Rachel. I'm curious to see if the arranged thing only applied to her brother, or if she was promised to someone also. I didn't think her lips

could thin anymore, but they're almost nonexistent at this point.

"Let's focus on this wedding," she says, avoiding my question.

"Then you'll have the honeymoon and baby shower." Maria jumps right in, all too happy to plan my exit from this house. She really is counting down the seconds. I'm really starting to be team Calida. Maybe her idea isn't as horrible as I thought.

"There is no honeymoon. She will be going back to the Sutcliffe estate immediately after the reception. Charles is a busy man, and he doesn't have any more time to waste. This has already taken up too much of it. That's something you need to realize now. That way you can manage your expectations." Little does Rachel know that this news is music to my ears. The less Charles is around, the less time I'll have to spend with him. If there is a wedding.

I won't really have to worry about any of this. I trust that Cillian has a plan and hopefully it includes me not marrying Charles at all. With the way he acted last night, I highly doubt he's going to let anyone take my hand in marriage.

"True, but men are never too busy to knock up their wives." Maria can't take a hint.

Her gaze bounces between Rachel and me. Maybe she's trying to start a fight for her own enjoyment. Maria has, by far, done the meanest crap to me in my life. More than anyone else. Well, except my father. I'm not scared of her. But this Rachel woman—there's something about her. She scares the hell out of me. While I might make small pokes, I'm not jabbing like Maria.

"Are you on birth control to stop such a catastrophe?" Rachel eyes me hard.

These women ruin everything. I was enjoying myself for once. I push the cake in front of me away. My appetite is gone now with all this talk about Charles and babies.

"Of course she isn't," Maria simpers. "Isn't it the point to have kids?"

“Yes.” I answer Maria’s question. That is the point. Nothing is more terrifying than the idea of that. I look over to Rachel again. I don’t seem to be the only one who’s not keen on the idea. “The chocolate one,” I say and push my chair back. “Bathroom,” I tell them before I make an exit from the formal dining room.

I don’t see Cillian as I exit, but it’s not like I’m really going anywhere. It always worries me when he leaves or steps away that he might not come back—that every time I see him might be the last.

I slip into the bathroom, needing a moment to myself. Anytime the idea of me getting pregnant from the man I’m supposed to get married to is mentioned, it makes me want to throw up.

Before the door can fall closed, Rachel is stepping inside the bathroom with me. She has a determined, angry look instead of her usually taciturn expression. She turns, locking the door behind her.

“Listen here.” She turns back to me and points her finger in my face. “I can make your life hell if—”

I grab her finger and squeeze it. All the talk of marriage and babies with a man I can’t stomach has put me in a bad mood. “No, *you* listen.” I take a step closer to her. “I can make your life hell, too.”

She yanks her finger back and tries to slap me, but I catch her wrist. For once, I’m happy my father made me do something. His insistence on me taking defense lessons is finally paying off. He hadn’t done it to protect me, but himself. If I could fight off an attack or a kidnap attempt, that would save him trouble and money in the long run. “I don’t want to fuck your brother.”

“I know. You want the bodyguard.”

I release her wrist when I feel her arm give. I don’t answer her.

She smirks. “I’ve underestimated you.” Her smirk spreads into a full-on smile. “I’ll get you a contraceptive.”

“Wait.” I shake my head. “I know you’re sleeping with your brother. You don’t care that he’s going to try and sleep with me?” I whisper-yell, trying to be as quiet as I can.

Her head drops. “I don’t know what he’ll try to do, to be honest. I’m still shocked he agreed to the wedding.” When she lifts her head again, I see her eyes are filled with tears. The cold demeanor she has slips away, making her more human to me. She’s clearly in love with him. I might not get it—might be totally grossed out by the mere idea of it—but I do get loving someone and the fear of losing them. It would eat me alive if it was Cillian getting married to someone else.

“I’m sorry” is all I can think to say. Is she really that different from me? She’s also stuck in a situation she can’t get out of. With her life at least. “We can’t let this wedding happen.”

“I don’t know how we can stop it.” She rubs her eyes, giving me another glimpse into how this situation is weighing just as heavily on her.

“At least we know we aren’t enemies.” That’s a start.

“I suppose.” She takes a step back. “For now at least.” I watch her put back on her cold exterior before she turns, opening the door to leave. But not before gifting me with her parting words. “By the way, he’s not my brother by blood.”

*M*y grandfather flicks his cigarette butt into the bay as he turns against the wind and gives me a stern glare. “Two days.”

I nod, my gaze always on the wharf behind us and the parking lot beyond. Meeting like this is dangerous, but he insisted on it. Drake O’Donnell is known for his ability to smell a rat. Like a human lie detector test, his eyes miss nothing, and he can discover the truth no matter how hidden it is.

“You steadfast, lad?” He peers at me with eyes so light blue they look almost clear.

“Of course.” I keep my face neutral. “I’ve laid the framework. Two days from now, the Sutcliffes will be staying at Kaden’s estate. We’ll strike at the rehearsal dinner. It’s the only time when we’ll be able to sneak our men in through the catering business. The wedding—”

“That’s something, isn’t it?” he asks as another blustery wind blows past.

“Sir?” I feel like a spider dangling at the end of a string, hanging on tight though another, bigger spider is slowly descending above me.

“That girl of Kaden’s. Cara, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I say quietly.

“She’s a real looker, I’ve heard. And I’ve seen plenty of pictures, as well.” He turns to me, those eyes missing nothing.

“A woman like that could turn any man’s head. Don’t you think so, Cillian?”

At this point, I know he knows. He always knows. There’s a reason he’s been the head of the O’Donnell crime syndicate for his entire life. Drake O’Donnell can read anyone, including me.

He continues, “Not to say that she doesn’t deserve attention and adoration for her good looks, of course. Beautiful women deserve that and more. But I need to know that you are dedicated and committed to this family, not any conquest you may have pursued while you were under Kaden’s roof.” He turns and looks back out at the bay, the water choppy as the wind gets up.

“You have nothing to worry about.”

“Already knew that. But what about you, Cillian? Can you do what needs to be done without worrying about Cara?”

Of course he asked the question that’s been eating away at me for some time now. Cara doesn’t love her father. She was never given a chance to, because Kaden is a hard man and always has been. He’s treated her like an asset, not a daughter. With that said, I don’t think she will be particularly pleased when I take his life. But that plan has never changed. Kaden has to go. And then my grandfather thinks he’s going to take over the McKibben Empire; he’s wrong about that. While he’s been worrying about my feelings for Cara, he hasn’t asked the right questions or looked in the right place to see what my endgame is.

I’m an O’Donnell and will always be an O’Donnell, and with that comes the mantle of always wanting more. My grandfather should understand that better than most. I carry that same desire. Though I’ll be taking over the McKibben syndicate, I won’t be doing it to hand it over to Drake O’Donnell. I’ll be doing it to take it for myself.

“Your brother Sean thinks you won’t be able to deliver.” Drake is clearly playing his favorite game of divide and conquer.

“Sean doesn’t know what the fuck he’s talking about, but if you want to listen to him, go ahead. Every court has to have a jester; he just happens to be yours.”

Drake doesn’t laugh, but the side of his lips turns up in a half smile. That’s as good as a guffaw from a man like him. He reaches out and claps me on the back, then turns away from the bay and strides toward the parking lot.

“Keep me informed,” he calls on the wind.

I turn and stare out at the water and think about the intricate web I’ve been weaving. I’ve been safe from my grandfather all this time, but the war is about to begin. The only question is whether he’ll let me keep the spoils that I take, or if he’ll wrench it all from my hands and take it for himself.

One thing’s for sure: He will never have Cara. I would die to keep her safe and away from my family as well as her own.

I have to get back to Kaden, to work on the long list of instructions and safety measures he and Conor have prepared for the wedding. I intend to break them apart from the inside, but first I have to play along.



I check over the last of the names on the caterer’s manifest. Nothing jumps out; each background check has come through with a greenlight. Of course, plenty of the names are false. The caterer’s business silently changed hands recently, and now an O’Donnell is running the entire outfit, just in time for the wedding. Drake O’Donnell never misses a move.

Cara opens her bedroom door and gasps when she sees me standing outside. “Where have you been?”

“I was attending to some business for your father in the city.” I don’t move toward her, despite how badly I want to touch her. It’s been two days since I’ve seen her. Two days since I spoke to my grandfather by the bay.

Tonight, she will attend the rehearsal dinner with the Sutcliffes and her family. Tonight, my mask finally comes off.

Though my grandfather and I didn't discuss the nitty gritty details, it's going to be a bloodbath. Kaden won't go down without a fight, and he has plenty of men at his command. I won't allow Cara to be collateral damage, so my goal is to keep her safe and away from the fray as much as possible. I have to balance that with taking Kaden out and proving to my grandfather that I am the right O'Donnell to control this part of our business.

She stomps over to me, her bright green eyes livid as she stares up at me. "Two days. You've been gone for two whole days. I haven't seen you, and you are supposed to be my bodyguard? What kind of bodyguard leaves the person they're guarding for two days?"

"I wasn't gone for all of two days. I was only gone for a part of a day, and then your father had me doing additional duties around the house to ensure your safety during the wedding. I've kept an eye on you. Don't worry."

"And that's another thing." She shakes her finger in my face. "You said I wouldn't have to worry about the wedding. In case you haven't noticed, the wedding is set for *tomorrow*."

Her voice is rising, the color in her cheeks turning a brighter pink, and she needs to get herself under control before someone notices this conversation.

"Cara, I need you to trust me. I need you to—"

"No!" She stomps her foot. "I will not trust you. I don't want anything to do with you, because all you do is lie to me then disappear. We were out by the oak tree, and I thought you were going to go—"

"I was, but Calida showed up, and you know what happened with that." I had put Kaden's wife in the back of my mind as I set the coup in motion over the past two days, but Calida has not forgotten about her demand that I kill Maria. In fact, she caught me in the hallway before I arrived at Cara's room and threatened to reveal everything to Kaden if I didn't make good on my promise tonight.

“I chose my cake, I have the dress, I’m going to the rehearsal dinner tonight, and there’s no way to stop this. None at all. There never was, and you were just giving me false hope.” Her eyes water with both sadness and barely restrained anger. When her bottom lip starts to tremble, I break. With a glance left and right to make sure the hallway is clear, I grab her by the waist, lift her up, and pull her to me in a passionate kiss.

I walk her back into her room, and she wraps her legs around my waist as I slam the door behind us. Her body is warm and inviting, ripe for the taking, and fuck I want to take it so badly.

She tastes like peppermint and sweetness, and I can’t stop kissing her. Even if Kaden were to burst through the door behind me, I don’t think I could stop. I lay her on the bed and cover her with my body, then slide a hand up her skirt, feeling her smooth thigh until I get to her hip. My cock strains against my pants, and all the tension that has been ratcheting up in my body over the past two days seems to change into pure need.

I pull back, and she takes a breath, her eyes wide. “Is this ... are you really going to ...”

“I’ve thought about nothing but you for the past two days, and I don’t think I’ll ever stop thinking about you.” I slide my hand into her panties and find that she’s already wet for me. I can’t stifle the groan that rises in my throat.

I kiss her again, then lean back and pull off her panties.

“This is it, Cara. You and me. No going back.” I mean every word. Once I’ve had her, I’ll never let her go. She’s on the verge of her wedding, but I’m about to take everything that her father so carefully safeguarded for all those years.

I stare down at her as I unbutton my shirt. “Now spread those legs and show me that pretty pussy.”

I want to throttle him. I've been going out of my mind with worry. I was too scared to try to ask my father where Cillian had gone. I didn't want to send up any red flags. The fear that he might catch on to my feelings for Cillian and what the consequences would be held me back. Thank God I trusted my gut and kept my mouth shut.

I went through the motions, needing to believe he'd come back to me, and here he is, standing in front of me with a hungry look on his handsome face. That control that he tries to hold on to is once again thrown to the wayside, his need for me evident. I want to stay mad at him, but once again, that mouth of his has disarmed me.

"I gave you an order."

I pull my eyes from the deep V that leads into his slacks and slide my gaze up his solid chest, enjoying every hard line of Cillian's body. This is really happening.

"Spread them." I drop back onto my elbows and stare into his eyes. The need to please him overpowers any shyness I still have. I want this with him. I want him to have all of me.

This could be the only time I have him. I know he said he'll handle this situation, but fear is holding tight to me. Everything is on the line right now, and we only have so much time until the rehearsal dinner tonight. I'm not going to spend that small window fighting with him. He's here right now, and at this moment that's all I care about.

Cillian sucks in a breath as I open my legs for him. I savor the effect I have on him. I've never seen anyone else draw any emotion out of him unless it had to do with me. It makes me feel powerful that this man is putting so much on the line so that he can have me. This can't only be a small fling to him. It has to be so much more. I won't let myself believe anything else.

"You're so fucking wet for me. I want you naked." He reaches for his belt, his gaze never moving from me as I pull the rest of my clothes off, leaving me naked in my bed. His belt hits the floor with a loud thud as he undoes his slacks but doesn't pull them off. "Is there an inch of you that isn't perfect?" His hands wrap around my ankles. "So fucking soft everywhere. A softness I don't deserve."

"Doesn't matter if you deserve it or not. I'm giving it to you. I'm making that choice." That feels freeing. It causes me even more pleasure knowing that I'm defying my father. That for once in my life I get to make a decision based on my feelings. Cillian's grip on my ankles tighten. Not enough to hurt, but enough to let me know I'm not going anywhere.

"Do you think I would let you go even if you asked?"

Before I can answer him, he pulls me until my ass is on the edge of the bed. He drops to his knees and throws my legs over his shoulders as he feasts on me.

My hand flies to his hair, needing something to hold on to. I grip it tight as I watch him devour me. There is nothing else in the whole world I want to hold on to more than Cillian. In the short time I've known him, he's become my everything. I wake up every day with a sense of hope because of him.

"Cillian." I whimper his name as he rolls one orgasm into another. My legs tremble, and I try to close them, but he keeps on licking and sucking me until I beg him to stop. I close my eyes, feeling spent from all the pleasure he gave me. I feel him kiss the inside of each of my thighs before he sets them back down.

His mouth travels up my body until it's on mine. He takes his time kissing me. I wrap myself around him, the kiss so sweet

and tender I never want him to let my mouth go. I had no idea so much could be said without words.

He lifts me, moving us, his mouth never leaving mine. I feel him kick his pants free. His cock now rests against my bare sex with nothing between us.

“There is no going back,” he says with a groan as he shifts his hips back and forth. My body jerks, my clit still sensitive from the orgasms he gave me.

“I would never even consider going back. I want you. I need you, Cillian.”

“I know.” He drops his forehead to mine as his cock finds my opening. It rubs against me, wanting inside. I lift my hips, helping him slip in a little. “A better man would free you. I’m not a better man.” He kisses me, cutting me off again from responding to him.

My mind forgets everything as he thrusts all the way inside of me. I gasp into his mouth, the pleasure and pain all mixing together. My eyes grow wet, and a tear escapes. I’m so overwhelmed with the love I have for this man.

“Baby please. Tell me you’re okay?” His Irish accent is thicker than I’ve ever heard it before.

“I’m more than okay, Cillian.” I wrap myself around him again as he starts to move. All the pain fades away, and all I feel is pleasure as Cillian takes his time at first, moving slowly savoring every moment. His eyes stay locked on mine the whole time.

I fight not to cry more. Not because I’m in pain, but because in this moment I’ve never been closer to another person. Cillian isn’t only my lover, but really he’s my best friend. He’s my everything. He’s been there for me—watching, protecting, and listening without judgment. I’ve leaned on him so much the past few months, more than I even realized.

“You’re too damn tight. I’m not going to last. You kill any control I ever thought I had.”

“Good. I don’t want you to be in control when it’s only you and me.”

“Careful what you wish for,” he growls, picking up speed.

I moan as he shifts his hips, hitting deeper inside of me. Another orgasm begins to build. This one feels different. I shake my head no. It’s too much. I’m not sure I can handle it. I’m not sure I can keep my voice down.

“You wanted it, and now you’re going to give it to me.” He grunts into my ear. “Come on my cock. Lock that tight pussy around me and make me come inside of you. You’re going to accept every drop of me and go to that dinner full of my seed.”

I start to scream his name. My body is doing as he commanded, but his hand comes down over my mouth, muffling the scream as we both come together. I feel his warm release spill inside of me.

I want to say it changes everything, but it doesn’t. I’ve been in love with Cillian from the moment he strolled into my life.

That will never change. No matter what comes next.

“*R*eady?” Only one word from an anonymous number. The question I’d been asking myself all day spelled out in clear letters.

I tap out my one-word response of “yes” then delete the message.

“Who is it?” Cara sits up, her eyes glinting in the low light. A beautiful angel, one I’d just dirtied up with my mouth and my cock. I spilled inside her, and the savage part of my mind wants her to get pregnant, to grow big with my child.

Fuck, I need to focus.

“Listen.” I cup her cheeks with my palms. “Just listen, all right?”

She swallows hard. “Okay.”

“Tonight is going to go bad. Really bad. You know what I’m saying, right?”

She nods. Cara may be young and innocent, but she knows the life she was born into. She knows her father is a violent man who’s surrounded himself with plenty of other violent men.

“I need to know you’re safe. When shit starts happening, run back to this room. Okay? I want you to lock the doors and stay in here until everything settles down. Can you do that for me?”

“Cillian, you’re scaring me.” She grips my wrists. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“I just need you to trust me.” I kiss her forehead. “Do you trust me?” It’s wrong of me to ask it of her, especially when I’ve never told her the truth about who I am. I want to so badly, but at this point, it could put her in danger. O’Donnell soldiers have already infiltrated the house and are stationed all around the estate.

When the fighting starts, I’m counting on myself to protect Cara, but if I fail, Cara needs to be able to continue her life as a McKibbon. If she knows the truth about me about the coming assault, and her father discovered it in the aftermath, he’d kill her. I can’t risk it. So, even though I’m asking too much, I ask her again, “Do you trust me, Cara?”

“Yes.” She nods. “I love you, Cillian.”

“I love you, too.” So easy. Just like that, the truth comes spilling out of both of us. My heart is soaring, but I have to temper my emotions. I have to keep a level head. Even so, I kiss her hard, searing my soul into hers as I pull her close. “You are mine. Mine to protect and mine to love.” I kiss her again, softer this time. “Now, I need you to get ready.” I stand, and just the way she looks at my body sends a thrill of heat down my spine.

“Okay.” She licks her lips, her eyes on my cock.

I groan then sit beside her and reach between her legs, cupping her pussy. “You’re going to clean up your thighs, but you’re going to leave my cum on your cunt. Do you understand?” I lean forward and suck her bottom lip. “I don’t give a fuck if it makes a mess in your panties. Leave me right where I am.”

“That’s so ... filthy.” She runs a finger down my chest. “I love it.”

“Good.” I take her hand and nibble her finger. “I have to go, but I’ll be with you in the dining room. Don’t worry.”

I stand again, but she doesn’t let go of my hand. She looks up, her eyes still that perfect luminous jade. “As long as you’re with me, I won’t worry.”

“I’ll always be with you.” I kiss her hand. “You’re my forever. Always have been.”



“Ready to be rid of the little virgin?” Conor strides down the hall, meeting me halfway to the dining room.

“Sir?”

“Once she’s married off to Sutcliffe, you’ll be free of Cara. Kaden and I have appreciated all the work you’ve put into keeping her safe, pure, and ready for this wedding.” Conor leans closer, his tone conspiratorial. “She’s still pure, isn’t she?”

“Of course.” I give him a curt nod. Lying comes easily, especially when it’s the difference between life and death for Cara and me. “She’s untouched.” Except for my tongue, my fingers, my cock—just thinking about the things I want to do to her makes my cock twitch at this supremely inopportune moment.

“Good.” He grips my shoulder. “Kaden has a new assignment for you. He expects you to handle it as soon as you’re rid of Cara. Once it’s done, you’ll be moving up the chain.”

“Moving up?” I ask.

“We need more pure Irish blood like yours. Your line may have married into the McKibbons, but you’re from good stock. An asset.” He meets my eyes with his cold ones, no fire burning in them, only schemes. “Now, your next assignment is simple. Calida.” He drops her name. That’s all he says. That’s all he needs to say.

I can feel the air shift, the entire gist of our conversation turning darker.

“Make it look like an accident. Fuck knows she has plenty of pills lying around, plus the booze. Use a pillow, smother her, drown her, whatever.”

I must give him an odd look, because then he adds, “This is coming straight from Kaden. He has his eye on a new bride, and he doesn’t want to get into a messy divorce. You know

how these gold-digging bitches can be, son. We can't let her pull that on us, now can we?"

"I'll get it done."

"There's a good lad." He squeezes my shoulder. "Once this wedding is done and the lass is gone, get to work."

Heels clack on the polished wood floor, and Conor backs away as Maria appears from the foyer.

"Gentlemen." She keeps her haughty chin in the air as she passes, her silver dress clearly an effort to steal attention from Cara.

I almost turn away to continue to the dining room when I notice something. Something small. Something that would seem entirely innocent to someone who didn't live in our world.

Conor reached out and just barely touched the small of her back as she passed, then he turned and walked with her. He didn't touch her again as they chatted about the night's menu and how glad Kaden would be to have the wedding over and done. They fade out of earshot and turn into the front sitting room.

How had I missed it? Maria was playing both Kaden *and* Conor. There's no way Kaden has any idea that she's fucking Conor. He wouldn't stand for it. So she's running a game, a dangerous one. She wants to be queen, and she'll fuck her way to that spot from the bottom up. Holy shit.

I'd bet dollars to fucking donuts that she was the one who put in the order on Calida. Sure, Kaden wants Calida gone, too. But why now? They've loathed each other for quite some time, and nothing's stopping him from fucking Maria whenever he feels like it. It doesn't feel right—the idea that Kaden would want to remarry.

I take a deep breath and push the thoughts to the back of my mind. It doesn't matter if Maria is pulling the strings. I'm going to destroy all the puppets in one swipe tonight.

The Sutcliffes are already in the dining room when I enter, their chatter extremely British and twice as noxious. The

parents are even haughtier than the children.

A server brushes past me, drinks on his silver tray. He doesn't look at me, and I only see him in my peripheral vision, but I know it's Sean, my older brother. I'd know that asshole anywhere.

He leans over and offers Rachel a glass of champagne in a far-too-close fashion. Of course Sean's fucking around when he should be serious. That's him, though, laughing while causing chaos. I have no idea why my grandfather hasn't decided to off him yet.

Rachel takes the glass and waves him away.

He comes to me and says an overexaggerated "sirrrrrr."

I have the urge to punch him. Instead, I just shake my head. He winks as he passes back through to the kitchen. Fucking idiot. Despite his foolishness, he seems to have followed my instructions. The men I've seen in the hall and through the doorway to the kitchen are the ones I hand-picked for this job. They have the chops, and most importantly, they're hungry. Like me.

When Cara walks in, she looks like a goddamn fairy queen compared to the thin-lipped, stiff-backed contingent from across the pond. That prick Charles doesn't even acknowledge her. More the fool him. She's radiant, her cheeks highlighted in hues of pink, and her dress hitting her curves just right.

I pull out her chair for her, and as she sits, I ask, "Did you do what I told you?"

She turns, a secret smile on her face. "I can feel you right now, inside me."

Fuck me. I stand up and back away before I do something to throw a wrench in the plan. Cara has always tempted me, but now I don't want to resist any more. I want to claim her in front of everyone, to make her mine.

*Patience.*

Now all I have to do is wait for Kaden. When I give the signal, my team will go into action.

My only real worry in all of this is Cara. Her father has to die. I hope she can forgive me for what I plan to do, and more than that, I hope she'll forgive me for lying to her about who I am. She has to, because I know now that I can't live without her, and in a way, I'm doing this for her as much as for me.

That's what I'm telling myself as Kaden stumbles in, his mouth open wide. The Sutcliffes stop talking as Kaden falls forward onto the table, a knife jutting from his back.

I stare into my father's eyes as all the life drains out of him. I hear the screams and shouts, but I'm unable to pull my eyes away from him. I wait for the pain to come, but I feel nothing. No sadness but no happiness either. If I'm being totally honest, I would admit that I feel a tiny bit of relief.

Conor and Maria rush into the room, then freeze at the scene. But Conor's hand edges toward his jacket.

"Nobody move!" I jerk my head up at the bellow of Cillian's voice. It's then I notice almost everyone has a gun in their hands pointed at other people. Even a few of the servers. Their trays lay on the floor, and there are broken glasses everywhere.

"That was easier than I thought it would be, brother." One of the men dressed as a server says, looking at Cillian. He winks at him. "How'd you manage it?"

Brother? The server is his brother? Is that something one friend says to another, or is he really his brother? My eyes bounce between them, and I catch some small similarities. Cillian has both of his arms out, a gun in each hand. One is pointed right over my head.

"What is going on here?" Charles starts to rise from his chair, adjusting his tie like this is a meeting that has gotten heated.

It's then I see that Rachel, who is sitting next to him, has a small gun pointed right at me. Now I realize who Cillian was pointing one of his guns at. Why she would be targeting me is beyond me; I'm the least threatening thing in this room.

The man who called Cillian brother swings his gun hand toward Charles. Rachel tries to pull Charles back down into his seat as she keeps me in her sights. Damn, I was starting to like her.

“Hush,” Rachel hisses.

“Put the gun down, Rachel.” Cillian orders her. I plead with her with my eyes.

She reads the room, probably can see she’s vastly outnumbered, and she slowly lowers the gun, setting it onto the table.

“Do something.” Maria tries to hang on to Conor’s arms. He shakes her off, and she almost falls to the floor because of her heels.

“Put them in a room.” Cillian nods towards Maria and Conor. One of the other servers moves, following Cillian’s orders. Everything seems to be happening in slow motion. My mind spins as I wonder who Cillian really is.

“Is someone going to get me a new drink?” Calida comes stumbling into the room. Her eyes go to her dead husband on the table. The martini glass in her hand drops before her screams fill the air. All hell breaks loose at that point.

Cillian jerks me out of my chair and shoves me to the ground. I crawl under the table as shots start to ring out. I see a few more bodies hit the floor. I look up from under the table when something wet hits my face. I reach up and touch it, seeing blood on my fingers. More blood drips through the table, and I know it’s my father’s.

Cillian’s words ring in my ears. *Get out.* I have to get to my bedroom. A hand wraps around my ankle and tries to pull me out from under the table. I scream and kick, breaking free and scrambling to the other side of the table where Rachel is with Charles.

“Get out of here. Both of you,” Cillian orders and points toward the glass doors that lead out of the back of the house. I could go around and back inside. All the glass is shattered out of them.

I start to move that way but stop short when Rachel takes a swing at me. I roll away and quickly realize it wasn't me she was swinging at but the man coming up behind me under the table. The same man that tried to grab me by the ankle earlier.

He tries to make another grab for me, but this time it's him that's grabbed by the ankle and pulled out. Rachel and I take off together out the back door. I hear someone shout to let us go. When I dare look back, I see Charles blocking the shattered doors that Rachel and I made our escape through. For a brief moment I see Charles in a different light, knowing he is trying to protect Rachel so she can escape.

I try and circle back, but Rachel grabs my hand and pulls me in another direction. "I have to go back." I try to pull on her arm.

"Are you nuts? Your boyfriend just had your father killed." I jerk my hand from hers.

"You don't know that. Someone else could've done it!" The need to defend Cillian is strong. There's no way he would kill my father. Is there?

"Do you care who killed him?"

Do I? "You were pointing a gun at me!" I remind her.

"Because your man is off the rails, and you're his weakness." She grabs me again and starts pulling me. I let her for a moment. There's so much going on in my mind that I don't know what's up or down anymore.

"I can't go with you," I say, but my feet keep moving. For months now I've been trying to figure out how to free myself from the Sutcliffes, and now I'm letting one drag me off with them.

"Where else are you going to go?" she asks when we finally reach the giant stone wall that surrounds my family's estate.

I pull back, but again I don't go anywhere. "I can't drag you over the wall, but I can offer you freedom. We can leave here. Just go and don't look back. Make your own choices. I don't really care what you do, I just don't want you marrying Charles."

“You might kill me.” In the blink of an eye she pulls out a blade and presses it to my neck. I feel the cold blade against my throat.

“I could,” she agrees before she releases the blade a fraction off my skin. In a move Cillian taught me one day when we were messing around in the gym, I steal the blade from her. She doesn’t try to stop me. “But I don’t want to.”

“I’m keeping it.”

She nods as she reaches for one of the stones and starts to climb.

“On the other side of this wall is freedom.” She pulls herself up. “I can give you that. A new life. A new name.” Not long ago that deal sounded like everything I ever could have wanted. To get away from this kind of life. But now the only thing I can think about is Cillian.

I look back at the house and hear the ongoing chaos. Leaving is the smart choice, but everything I love is back the other way. I look back at Rachel, who is already on top of the wall and holding her hand down for me.

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t be stupid. Cillian is a cold-blooded killer who, for all you know, is using you to take over your family’s assets.”

I don’t think she needs me to tell her love makes you do stupid things. If I know anything, it’s that I’m madly in love with Cillian. Or at least the Cillian I think I know.

“I won’t be marrying Charles, but I can’t leave Cillian.” I ignore her exasperated groan as I turn and dart back toward the house.

I have to know if what I feel for Cillian is real or if I’ve been fooled. Either way, I must know. And the only way to find out is to walk right back into the shitstorm happening in my family’s estate.

“*Y*ou whore! You did this!” Calida is screaming as she throws a glass at Maria.

Maria charges one of my men and tries to wrestle his gun from him. Psycho bitch.

More gunshots rip through the room, and what should’ve been a surgical operation with a few shots and bodies turns into a melee.

I drop back into the kitchen and spare a glance out the window. Charles is high-tailing it through the grove, and Cara is gone. Good. She’ll be safe while I clean up.

“Motherfucker!” Maria screeches and wrenches the gun away from Billy as she knees him hard in the nuts. He falls onto the table, jarring Kaden’s body off it and smashing even more of the crystal.

My men are the only ones left standing, Kaden’s soldiers having fled or lying dead on the floor. Sean disarmed Conor and keeps his pistol trained at the older man’s head. Instead of worrying about his impending death, Conor can’t seem to stop staring at Kaden’s body.

We need to fortify our position. Defending this place won’t be easy, especially now that my plan is all shot to hell. It won’t be long before more of Kaden’s men show up. The gunshots will draw them like flies to shit.

Maria turns the gun on her mother. “He never even wanted you. You’re done! This is all mine now!”

Calida laughs and holds up her glass. “He’s dead. I get everything. *Everything*, you stupid little bitch.”

“You killed him, didn’t you?” Maria sounds almost heartbroken, her eyes watering.

I need to end this fucking soap opera. “Ladies, let’s calm—”

“Shut up!” they both snap at me in unison.

I could drop Maria right now, end her life and then Calida’s. But I don’t. I want them to tear each other apart, the same way they clawed and tore at my beautiful Cara. So, instead of moving on them, I motion for my men to back off.

“I didn’t kill him.” Calida shrugs and sits down again, glass crushing in the seat beneath her, though she takes no notice of it. “You showed up right after he walked in with a knife in his back. That’s your M.O., you ungrateful little cunt,” she snarls. “A knife right in the fucking back.”

“I didn’t kill Kaden.” Maria moves closer, her aim never wavering from her mother. “I loved him.”

“You *loved* him? He was using you, you idiot.” Calida cackles. “You think he wanted you for anything other than the thrill of drilling his stepdaughter? No. That was all you were to him. A cheap thrill. You think you were his only one? He has a fucking brothel in the city he visits at least once a week.”

A tear leaks down Maria’s cheek. “That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is.” Conor finally speaks, his face ashen as he finally turns to Maria. “You said you loved me. *Me*, not him. You said you were only sleeping with him until I could make my move and take over the whole thing. That’s what you told me.”

I’ve never liked Conor. He’s cruel and cold, but the pain in his voice is real. I’ve felt it before, every single day I had to lie to Cara about who I really was. That sort of pain is bone-deep.

“This isn’t about you, Conor.” Maria keeps moving closer to her mother, the gun steady in her hand.

“It is, though.” Conor kneels down slowly.

Sean gives me a questioning look, but I just nod, letting it play out.

Conor touches Kaden's shoulder, then moves his hand to the knife. "I killed him for us, Maria. For you and me."

"You?" Maria turns the gun on him. "You killed him?"

"I did it for you. I love you."

Calida cackles as Maria stares, aghast, at Conor. "You ruined everything."

"You ruined *me*." He yanks the knife free and lunges for Maria.

I fire one shot. It hits him in the side of the head, and he falls, but not before he throws the knife. He misses Maria, but Calida squawks and looks down, the dagger embedded in her chest.

"Mom!" Maria rushes to her, then turns and looks at Conor lying dead on the floor.

She turns her gaze to me. "You. You did all this!" She raises the gun.

A shot rings out, and Maria falls on top of her mother, both of them dead when they fall onto the floor beside Conor and Kaden.

I take my finger off the trigger and look up.

"Cillian!" Cara drops the gun and runs for me. I catch her in my arms and hold her tight.

"Cill?" Sean asks and scratches his head with the barrel of his gun.

"She's mine." I jerk my chin toward the front of the house. "They'll come through the front. Get the men in covered positions and tell them to shoot anyone that tries to enter my house."

"Your house. Gramps isn't going to like—"

"I don't give a shit!" I cradle Cara in my arms. "This is my house, my family, my future. Do you want to be a part of it or

not, Sean?”

He blinks and glances at Cara. “Her?”

“She killed for me, Sean. She is mine, heart and soul. My bride, if she’ll have me.” I kiss her hard, and she returns it and twines her arms around my neck.

“Okay, cool. Sure. I’m team Cillian over team Drake. More perks that way, right?”

I ignore him and kiss my woman, my warrior goddess who is warm in my arms.

“I’ll just go, um ...” Sean hurries out to the foyer and starts barking orders.

“You came back.” I finally pull away from her and meet her eyes. “You came back, and you shouldn’t have.”

“I couldn’t leave you. I never could.” Her eyes well with tears. “I killed Maria.”

“She had it coming.” I kiss her again, savoring her as gunshots start fresh in the front of the estate. “Come on.” I scoop her fully into my arms and carry her up the back stairs to her bedroom. “You’ll be safe here.”

“Did you mean it?” she asks as I hide her in the back corner of her room. Sasha jumps out of the closet and runs over to hide in Cara’s skirt.

I yank the dresser from the wall and put it in front of Cara like a shield. “Mean what?”

“That you want to marry me?”

I grin and drop to my knee right in front of her. “I may not have a ring, but I promise I’ll let you pick whichever one you want, my beautiful angel. Will you marry me?”

Two tears drop onto her soft cheeks, and I wipe them away. “You’re so much more than I deserve, but I’ll take you for myself, if you’ll have me.”

“Of course I’ll marry you!” She cries as a full-blow war sounds like it’s starting downstairs.

I kiss her again, my blood heating as I feel her clinging to me. She shed blood for me. She is more than I could've ever asked for.

I stand and back away. "I'm going to go kill as many men as I have to. Then I'm going to come back up here and fuck you raw."

She bites her lip, her green eyes glinting with that beautiful mischief of hers. "Promise?"

I poke my head out of my bedroom door to look down the long hallway. My plan was stupid. I was trying to be traditional and not see the groom before the wedding, but that's coming back to bite me in the butt. I'm going into withdrawal at this point. I need to see Cillian. I hate being away from him.

Sasha darts out the partly opened door and takes off down the hallway. I chase after the little brat. She's gotten a taste of freedom and thinks she owns the whole place now. Before, I kept her locked away in my room because I was scared something would happen to her. That my evil stepmother and sister would do something to her because they knew how much she meant to me. But now that they're gone, I don't have to worry about that anymore, and Sasha gets to come and go as she pleases.

I know no one is going to mess with her. Unless they wanted to deal with Cillian's wrath. I smile thinking about how protective he is over me. It blows my mind how much has changed over these past few days. My gut was right when it told me to trust Cillian as he'd asked. He had kept his word to me. More than anything, he picked me over everything else. Even over his own family's orders.

This giant weight has been lifted off my shoulders, and for the first time in my life, I'm looking forward to the future. One that includes Cillian and expanding our family. For all we know, we already have. My hand goes to my stomach as I think about having our baby inside me. One that is made out of

the love we have for each other and not because we were forced to have one.

“What are you doing?”

I let out a small squeal of surprise when an arm wraps around my waist, lifting me off my feet. I know instantly it’s Cillian. That sexy growl of his turns me on quicker than anything else.

“I was looking for you.” I wiggle, trying to break free of his hold so that I can turn around and face him.

“I thought I wasn’t allowed to see you.” He doesn’t let me go, but he does turn me in his arms. He’s already in a suit, looking as handsome as ever. And he’s all mine, forever. He’s giving me the happily ever after that dreams are made of.

“I know you snuck in my bed last night.”

He doesn’t deny it. Instead he kisses me until I’m breathless and forget about everything else. The same way I do every time that mouth of his is on me.

“Are you trying to get someone killed walking about in only a robe?” he asks, lifting me off my feet again. I wrap my legs around him. My body instinctively wants to be as close to him as possible.

“I think we’ve had enough death around here for a while. Don’t you?”

The smile on Cillian’s face slips for a moment. I know he worries about what went down. He thought that maybe it would somehow change the way I felt for him. But I reassured him that nothing could do that. That he was more family to me than anyone else had ever been.

Of course, finding out he wasn’t who I thought he was did put a kink in my heart at first. But the more I learned about how dangerous a position he’d taken—choosing me over his very powerful grandfather—the more I forgave him. Maybe he was a spy all along, but he never double-crossed me, and I know he never will.

As if reading my thoughts, he asks, “Are you still doing okay with everything?”

Surprisingly I am. I killed someone. Not just anyone either, but my own stepsister. I'd like to say that I feel terrible about it, but I don't. I'm sad that I extinguished a life, but it was survival of the fittest at that point. I know I did what I had to keep myself and Cillian safe.

Besides, Maria was the vindictive type. There was no way we could have let her live without worrying about her trying to get back at us all in some way or another. It was safer this way. I will always do whatever is necessary to protect this family Cillian and I are making together.

"I've never been happier. You did what you had to all while still keeping me safe and close to you." He carries me into his office and kicks the door closed behind him.

The office that used to belong to my father. I was never allowed inside. Now I can come and go as I please. Cillian will even drag me in here sometimes while he's working, wanting me to lie on the sofa and read. He wants me to be around him as much as possible.

He sits me down on the desk. My silk robe falls off one shoulder. He places a kiss there.

"I don't like people seeing you like this." He kisses my shoulder again, but this time he sinks his teeth into me. I moan out his name, my fingers grasping his short hair. It's terrible, but every time Cillian's jealousy shows it turns me on. The man loves me so much he wants me all to himself. I get that, because I want him all to myself too.

"Only a few more hours, and I'll belong to you."

He lifts his head. "I already belong to you."

"I like it." I dig my fingers more into his hair, giving a small pull.

"There has only been you since the moment I laid eyes on you. Why would I ever want another when I have you? Nothing would ever compare."

I know that. He told me when he demanded I marry him. I'd made it clear I don't want the kind of marriage a lot of people

have in this lifestyle. And that if he couldn't give me that, then he should set me free.

My sex clenches thinking back to that night when I told him my needs while we lay in bed together. He took me hard and rough, no longer hiding his desire for me. All his control shattered at just the thought of setting me free.

He pushes my robe the rest of the way off of me before falling to his knees. "All of you is mine." He buries his face between my thighs, proving his point. He doesn't stop until I'm begging him to, unable to take much more. I still need to walk down the aisle and say 'I do.'

"Get the fuck out of my way," I hear bellowed from outside the office door. Cillian curses under his breath as he puts my robe back on me before pulling me off the desk and sitting me in his chair.

"It's fine." He reassures me by kissing the top of my head.

I eye the door. Someone better not be ruining my wedding day.

"Let him in." Cillian shouts. A second later the double doors swing open, revealing Cillian's brother and an older man I've never seen. The look in his eyes is deadly. I know the look. It's the same one Cillian has.

Damn. I'm going to be very upset if I have to kill someone on my wedding day.

“Get her out of here.” My grandfather waves a dismissive hand at Cara. “This is business.”

“She stays.” I make sure to station myself in front of her, blocking any possible attack.

My grandfather scowls. “Pussy has fucked your mind, boy.”

I draw up to my full height. “If you have business here, please get to it.”

He pulls out one of the chairs across from me and sits down. Sean copies him, sitting on the other chair, though his expression is nowhere near as thunderous. If anything, the fucker is highly amused by all this.

“You are giving me the shits, boy. You know that? I sent you here to do a job, and now you think you can take what’s mine? Is that what family means to you?” He leans back in his chair, his shrewd eyes on me. “I took care of you and your brother since your parents died—God rest their souls—since you two were whelps, for Chrissakes!” His voice rises with each word. “And this is how you repay me?”

“I’m repaying you by taking over the McKibbon operation without any more bloodshed than is necessary.”

“Pah.” He laughs and reaches for his pocket.

I tense, and Cara shifts almost imperceptibly behind me, her hand going for the drawer to my right.

Grandfather pulls out a cigarette. “Sean,” he barks.

My brother lights it for him, then sits back in his chair. “This was supposed to be my play, Cillian. Not yours.” He’s just acting the part as my grandfather expects, but Sean is onboard with my plan. Otherwise, I would’ve cunt-punted him already, locked his ass in the basement and thrown away the key.

I shake my head at him. “You’re not interested in running the business. All you care about is chasing skirts and gambling.”

Sean scoffs half-heartedly. “I win more than I lose.”

“You lost Friday’s Sun, the fastest horse in the fucking entire northeast, because you lost a bet, so don’t give me that shit.” I watch as Cara slowly pulls a pistol from the drawer.

“Shut the fuck up, Cill. I’m going to get a better horse. That was just—”

“Shut up the both of you!” Grandfather bellows. “I didn’t come here to listen to this shite! I came here to clean up your mess.” He points a finger at me and takes a pull on his cigarette, then blows it out slowly as if it’s calming him down. It’s not. “Now, Cillian, you will leave the premise and put these notions to bed. Sean is next in line, so he will take over here. Then—”

“No.”

I close my eyes at the sound of Cara’s voice. Shiiiiit.

“Do my ears deceive me or did I just hear a cunny talk?” My grandfather’s derisive tone raises my hackles.

“Don’t call her th—”

“It’s fine.” Cara stands at my side, her right hand behind my back. I can feel the cold steel of the pistol, and something tells me it’s loaded. “Say what you want, but I’m the McKibbon heir. This syndicate is *mine*.”

“Oh aye, and what if I kill you, lass? What if I wring your pretty neck and take it all?” He blows out another puff of smoke.

“You aren’t going to touch her.” I growl and slam my hand on the desk. “This is my bride, Grandfather. My time is now. With her at my side, we’ll grow this operation tenfold. You’ll see.”

He snorts. "I didn't come here to join families. That time has passed. I came here to take it all. Your father thought he was too good to marry you to the O'Donnells, and now, from his fiery spot sucking devil's cock, he knows he was *mistaken*. Too high and mighty for us? Pah! I'll wipe out the whole lot of you." He narrows his eyes at me. "Starting with my traitorous grandson."

She whips out the pistol and points it right at his face.

He doesn't react.

Sean barks out a laugh. "Fucking hell, this is finally getting good."

"What you gonna do with that, lass? Shoot me? I've got an army of men outside who'll rush in here and tear you apart." He settles further back into his chair and finishes his cigarette, then tosses it to the floor.

Cara solidifies her stance. "Here's exactly what I'm going to do. I'm going to shoot you in the face. After that, you won't care what happens. You'll be right down there with my father, gargling Satan's balls."

That *does* get a reaction. At first, my grandfather's face turns red, and then he lets out a loud guffaw. Sean jumps in his chair, and I take a deep breath and try to plot a way out of this situation.

"Jesus, the mouth on you." My grandfather sputters with laughter. "Gargling Satan's balls. Goddamn, lass."

"That's nothing." She keeps the gun steady. "I already killed my bitch of a stepsister, so offing you won't hurt me any."

"Damn." He scratches his cheek, then returns his gaze to me. "Perhaps I've misjudged you, lad." He gives her an appreciative glance. "She's certainly got some fire in her."

"She does." I wrap my arm around her waist, ready to take the gun from her and blast our way out of here if shit goes south. "That's what makes her a perfect asset to our family. I marry Cara, and the McKibbon foot-soldiers will fall in line. No more squabbling or infighting between the families. And

you'll get what you wanted all along—our families joined by blood.”

“It's the smart move, Mr. O'Donnell,” she adds.

He scratches his chin. “I do believe anyone who's pointing a gun at my face can call me Drake, lass.”

“All right then, Drake. I suggest you accept our terms.” She smiles, and that's when I know she's charmed him completely. No one can resist Cara's smile, not even my hard-as-fuck grandfather.

Even so, he sits for a long while just contemplating. I can feel the blood rushing in my ears, the fucking weight of the world resting on my shoulders as I wait for him to decide. To Cara's credit, she doesn't waver, doesn't drop the gun. She's deadly. I fucking love her.

“Fine.” He throws up his hands, and I can finally breathe again. “You two get married and pop out some babies with my good looks, and I'll consider this matter closed. But if you two can't make it work or if the McKibbons refuse to accept her as the heir, then I'll bring my soldiers and raze this place to the ground. Every last bit of it.” He gives her a pointed look. “Even you, pretty lass.”

I'll never let that happen, but Cara already knows that. I turn to her, her green eyes gleaming with pride. “Think you can handle that, beautiful?”

She nods. “I can.”

“Then drop the gun.” Sean sighs. “And where's the liquor?”

Grandfather slaps him on the back of the head. “Reprobate!”

They stand, and the temperature in the room returns to tolerable.

“Can I expect you at the wedding, then?” I ask as my grandfather shuffles toward the door.

“I'll be there with bells on.” He turns and gives Cara another look as she lowers the gun. “And if you can't do right by her on the wedding night, I'll be more than happy to give it a try.”

“Ew,” she whispers.

Sean smirks, and Drake is too old to hear it as he strides out. “Get this place ready for a fucking party, lads! I want to drown in beer once the fucking vows are done!” Grandfather calls as he and Sean leave.

The door slams, and I turn to Cara and pick her up, hugging her so tightly she squirms.

“Holy shit.” It’s all I can say. “Holy shit. Holyyyyyy shit.”

She laughs and pulls back so she can look into my eyes. “I would’ve killed him for you. You know that?”

“Goddamn, that gets my blood up.” I can’t keep my hands off her. Can’t think except of her, only her.

She leans forward and bites my lip. Hard.

I groan as my cock roars to life.

“I’d do anything for you, Cillian. I’d kill them all if I had to. Did you know that?”

“I do.” I sit her on the desk, then reach down and free my cock. “That gets me so goddamn hard, Cara. So fucking ready to be inside my little killer.”

She moans as I notch my cock at her entrance and thrust inside. “Cillian!” She grips my shoulders as I fuck her hard, making her mine again and again, and leaving no doubt that she’s my one, my only. The queen of my heart, this family, and the entire fucking world if she wills it so.

## EPILOGUE

CARA

*Ten years later*

“You’re distracting me,” I hiss at my husband. He pulls me down into his lap, his hand slipping under my dress. It knocks the ridiculously oversized hat right off my head. My second favorite thing about coming to the horse races.

“Your fault,” he growls into my ear. He’s right. I know the second his hand gets to my sex he’ll notice I’m not wearing panties. It doesn’t help that our children were underfoot all afternoon, knowing we were going out that night. My husband didn’t get to take the edge off before we left.

Even he couldn’t stop a horse race. Okay, he could, but I might have had a small hissy fit about it. I’m touchy when it comes to the races. I’m not sure what I enjoy more, to be honest: winning or winning so often it drives my brother-in-law insane. Both really.

He spins me in his lap, and his mouth goes to my breasts that are almost spilling out of the top of my dress. It’s fun to get all dolled up and spend the night out. To drive my husband a little crazy. It’s good for him. He used to do the same to me that first year. He’d probably disagree with me on that. Saying that I was the one that would tease him and provoke him in the early days.

“Take me out. I want inside of you.”

I whimper when he bites my breast, the sensation going straight to my clit. I tug at his shirt before I go for his belt. I

barely get his cock out before he's lifting me and dropping me down onto him. I let out a moan as I take every inch of him in one thrust.

He stands, pinning me against the wall. My nails dig into his shoulders as he takes me hard. He lets me moan loudly twice more. Enough for everyone in the next booth or out in the hallway to know what's going on before his jealousy gets the best of him and his hand comes down to cover my mouth. If I wasn't in the middle of an orgasm, I would smile, but I can't concentrate on anything besides the wave of pleasure I'm riding right now.

He doesn't stop until I forget where we are. Before I know it, I'm sprawled out on the sofa and half asleep. Hell, for all I know, I was fully asleep. When I come to, he's holding me close and wearing a smug look on his face. I have a feeling he just knocked me up again.

"Did I win?"

He gives me a look.

"So we both won then." I smirk, sitting up to try and fix my dress. It's destroyed. Now it's his turn to smirk. It takes ten minutes for my husband to get me a new dress. One fit for church the next time we go.

"I want to stop and get my money," I remind him.

"I know." He tucks me close to him. It doesn't matter that we've been married over ten years now. He never wants me far from him. That works for me, since I never want to be away from him either. He's not only my husband and lover; the man is my everything.

"Go easy on him," Cillian says against my mouth before we enter the house. Go easy on him? No way. Sean has it coming, but when I enter I already see my girls Aida and Cristina giving him a hard time. I try to listen to what's going on as we walk into the kitchen.

"I'll give you my two hundred when I pass go!" Sean is trying to reason with my oldest daughter Aida. She taps her finger against her lips as she thinks his offer over.

“With interest,” she reminds him. I turn my head to muffle my laughter into my husband’s side.

“He has a nice watch,” my son Hunter says before biting into an apple. He’s sitting on the counter swinging his legs back and forth. At nine he’s clearly too cool to be playing Monopoly but not too old to make sure he’s watching out for his little sisters.

“The fuck.”

“Sean,” I warn through laughter.

“Can’t say fuck in front of us when Mom’s around,” Cristina chimes in. I shake my head at all of them. Sean glares at my purse. I set it down on the counter to do my rounds of kisses on all the kids. I never miss an opportunity to show them how much I love them. Affection wasn’t something I was afforded growing up, and I make sure to shower my kids in it.

“You won. This is bullshit.” He jumps up, stomping over to the fridge to get a beer. “This is why I wanted to go.”

“Bullcrap,” Cristina whispers loudly. I wink at her.

“There wasn’t enough room.” Cillian kisses the tops of the girls’ heads, whispering something between them, making them do evil giggles before he goes to lean up on the counter next to our son. Cillian drops a kiss on his head too.

“You have your own suite.” Sean pouts. We did, but we needed our own suite or there would be no more horse races because Cillian would burn the place down if anyone witnessed him fucking me. He may let them hear me a little, but he would never be okay with anyone seeing me.

“We need our alone time.” All the kids groan, including Sean. I settle back into my husband’s side.

“So the watch.” The twinkle in Aida’s eyes is so much like her father’s when he knows he’s about to catch the mouse he’s been toying with. Sean stares at the girls, not understanding how they’re murdering him at Monopoly.

“Deal.” He takes off the watch and drops it in the center of the board.

“Fathers’ Day is coming up.” Aida picks the watch up and begins spinning it around two fingers.

“Kind of flashy for my taste,” Cillian says dryly.

“We’ll sell it to one of the footmen. Get something else with the cash.” Hunter shrugs, taking another bite of his apple.

“Bingo,” Cristina sing-songs as she rolls the dice. I rest my hand on Cillian as the game goes on, loving every minute of it. I love it when we can all spend time together. That includes my brother-in-law, who can drive me crazy at times, but is as loyal as they come.

I might have gotten a shitty family at birth, but everything I went through was worth it. It gave me the family I have now, and I love them all so much more than I ever dreamed possible.



More MINK is on the way!

*She runs a shop that caters to kitties. He’s a heavy hitter in the underworld. When their paths cross, will he be able to tame his kitten?*

**His Clever Kitten** is coming soon

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## ALSO BY MINK

### 119 Kitty Lane

*MINK takes a trip to Cherry Falls in this sweet romance.*

Starting my new life in Rosewood Ranch is easily the best decision I've ever made.

New friends, new job, new everything. But by far the very best part of it all is meeting Amethyst. She puts the Cherry in Cherry Falls, and I don't think I'll ever be able to get her out of my mind ... or heart.

She's too young for me. Too pure. She doesn't know about my past. But even though I can throw reason after reason out there for why we can't be together, I can't stop myself from claiming her as mine. She's not meant for a rough man like me, but that won't stop me.

I'll protect her from this world, allow her to grow and flourish the way she deserves. That's my plan. Until she's taken from me. Until I find out her father's plans for her ... But I'll always find my sweet Amethyst, always keep her safe.

And heaven help anyone, including her own father, who tries to steal her from me.

### Santa Material

Am I obsessed with my neighbor? Yes. Mac is a huge bear of a man, one with bright eyes and big hands—a man that you can't help but drool over. He's so kind, always asking me if I want help with my projects around the house. Maybe I'll spend this Christmas in his arms, cuddled by a fire.

At least, that would've happened if I didn't ... *accidentally* ... kill Santa Claus.

Look, I know how it sounds. But it was an accident! Now, it's up to me to save Christmas, and I have to find the right person to take the Big Guy's place. A man with a kind heart, a giving soul, and a laugh that can warm even the chilliest of grinchers. A man like ... Mac. But can I give up the only man I've ever loved to save Christmas, or will I keep him to myself no matter the cost?

### Taming His Bride

I've been chasing stories from the first moment I could ask questions. When I started my own investigative blog, I pulled stories straight from the headlines and dove deeper to discover the truth behind the circumstances. None more so than in the case of the missing mafia prince, the very first investigation I undertook from the warmth and safety of my teenage bedroom.

Then I grew up and got mixed up in a whole lot more than musings on missing kingpins. I followed the story of a maligned pop princess and wound up at the lodge—a hidden safe house for bad men with dark pasts. When I met the growly Tiernan, I knew I'd be in for the story of my life. The more I get to know him, the more I realize how much I've been missing one aspect of my own story—romance. He brings it and so much more, his gruff ways and soft touches melting me until I'm hopeless for him.

But when some of the people I've exposed on my blog come calling, I'll have to rely on more than his soft side if I want to survive.

### Stealing His Bride

I can take care of myself. I always have. For that matter, I've also taken care of my best friends Aurora and Clover. Keeping them safe has landed me with a concussion after our car accident thanks to a wayward lynx.

On top of that, I seem to have landed in a handsome man's bed. Not just any man, Barrow attends to all my needs and never wants to leave my side. He's big, brawny, and possessive, and I find myself falling for him more by the minute. The lodge is a safe haven that I'm quickly wanting to call home. But my self doubt creeps in, and I start to think maybe I'm imagining Barrow's attraction to me. After all, Aurora's the star of our group, not me.

But the more he dotes on me, compliments me, and gives me those heated looks I feel down to my toes, the more I realize he's genuine and that we could have a real future together.

When I get a job offer that's hard to turn down, will I choose love or life outside the lodge?

### Claiming His Bride

Performing onstage in front of tens of thousands of fans is a rush, without a doubt.

But one look from Diego sends an even hotter thrill of excitement through my veins. He's huge, a man of few words and hungry eyes. No matter how much I try to get him to open up to me, he won't. So, I have to change my tactics.

This mountain lodge is full of mysterious men, and Diego is the one I'm desperate to solve. He's madly protective, but he won't get close. Pushing him over the edge has become my main goal. I tempt him with skimpy outfits and my signature chocolate cake.

My plan is going perfectly until my biggest fear comes true. I thought I would be safe out here in the snowy wilderness with Diego. Was I wrong?

### Knocking Up His Bride

It came out of nowhere. A huge cat in the middle of the road. We swerved to avoid it and crashed into a snowy tree, ending our road trip early and stranding us far from the local town, in the middle of a snowstorm with another on the way. How can a pop star, her assistant, and her best friend survive in a snowy wilderness? Short answer is: they can't.

But then \*he\* came out of nowhere. The big guy with the gruff voice and the sharp eyes. The eyes that are always on me. I have to trust him, to accept his rescue of my friends and me, but the more I get to know Charles, the more I realize I need him. Maybe we landed at the lodge with these mysterious mountain men by accident, but Charles makes me believe it was good luck that brought us here.

Even though he's vague about his past, his kisses are certain, and his gentle touches becomes addictive. His love is all-consuming.

But when an old threat follows us to the lodge, Charles reveals his particular set of skills, deadly ones. Can I accept the man who treats me so sweetly but can kill without a thought?

### Under His Spell

I live in a haunted house. Well, at least that's what the bloggers and ghost hunters think. The legends about the house on Raven Ridge aren't true. But when I find Sienna in a chat room and read her words of interest in my house, I take an interest.

And once I learn more about her, I know I need to get her here by any means necessary. So, sure, I play into the "haunted" rumors.

Once Sienna arrives, she's even better than my imaginings. Smart, sweet, and utterly adorable—she's tracking a ghost and won't be denied. Good thing I can do my part in making the house seem haunted.

Until strange things start happening... Sounds, feelings, and creepiness that grows by the day. I always thought the stories about the ghost of Raven Ridge were made up nonsense, but this October, I'm learning the past is alive, and I'm in a race against the clock to keep Sienna alive, too.

### **Beauty Tempts the Beast**

Revenge is my life's work. I'm an artist in the subject. And there's one masterpiece I've had my eye on for quite some time. Helen. She seems innocent and sweet, but she comes from a family that left me scarred and broken. Taking her will be the pinnacle of my vengeance. So I do. But once I have her ... I can't seem to continue with my plan.

This has never happened. I've killed without remorse, taken revenge again and again on any who wronged me. But when it comes to Helen, I can't bear to see her so much as break a nail, which happens with frightening frequency given her adorable clumsiness. So I keep her. And I protect her. And before I know it ... I love her.

But her family isn't the sort to let anything or anyone go. I'll have to fight to keep her, but will my beauty decide to stay with her beast, or leave and break my heart?

### **Loan Shark's Obsession**

I know a priceless object when I see it. Always have. It's a gift, or perhaps a curse. The moment I get a glimpse of Laura, I get the same feeling as when I see a stolen work of art from a master. It's real. Authentic. And it makes everything inside me hunger to possess her. But Laura can't be bought, and she's turned me down every time I've approached her for nothing more than a date.

Giving up isn't an option, not when I've found a woman so rare, so I call in all of her brother's loans. She'll offer herself to save him, and I'm just the sort of man to take advantage. And I do. I take it all. But I also want to give her something I've never offered to anyone else. When she finds out who I really am, will she accept my heart or leave me empty handed?

### **His Stolen Bride**

*Santino*

I meet my new bride while her husband's blood is still cooling on my hands. Bella, the Carrera daughter with the sharp tongue and the bright eyes. She thinks she's nothing compared to her younger sister, but she's wrong. Bella is everything, and I'm going to prove to her that I'm worthy to be her husband. Once I've exacted my vengeance on all who seek to take what I've fought and killed for, I'll have my beauty on her back, panting my name, and thanking the Virgin I claimed her as mine.

*Bella*

My first husband found me plain and unappealing. But now he's dead, and I have to look out for my sister as well as my own neck. But Santino isn't the mafia king I expect. He's ruthless, hard, and violent, but not to me. To me, he shows kindness, consideration, and above all, an attraction that I can't explain. I want him, but my duty to my sister is always at the forefront of my mind. Falling for Santino wasn't part of my plan, but his irresistible assault may be the only thing that can change me from a Carrera to a Baldoni, but at what cost?

### **His Stolen Princess**

*Apollonia*

I never wanted to come back here, never wanted to see any of these faces. Old friends and enemies—sometimes one-in-the-same. But I had to come. One last time. It's hard enough as it is, but then I see him. The reason I'm here, the man who took my brother away from me. He may be the most powerful man in Italy, but right now, I don't care. Right now, I want him to hurt the way I do.

*Cato*

She comes to a funeral with pain and beauty. Lashing out, she aims for me. I take her fury, her sorrow, and finally, her. I can't let her walk out of my life, not when I've found her again. The last time I saw her, she was a child and I wasn't much more than one. This time, though, this time, I won't let our bond break. I'll do everything I can to convince her that her life is here with me, not on the run from a past she can't escape. But I soon discover I'm not the only one with my sights on her, and old enemies never truly die.

### **Stalking Her Sweetly**

*Silas*

Am I stalking my neighbor Jamie? Yes. Is that necessarily a bad thing? Surely not. Look, I realize it sounds bad, okay? But I take care of Jamie's problems whenever they arise. Just look at her ex-boyfriend, for example. He was trouble. Now he's not around anymore. See? I solve problems. Whenever Jamie needs help, I'll be there for her. It's just who I am. Besides, if you aren't obsessed with the one you love, are you even in love?

*Jamie*

Someone is stalking me. I can't figure out who it is, but I know they're out there. And the worst part is, now they're after my sweet neighbor Silas. I've accidentally dragged him into my dark web of true crime and sleuthing, and now he's in danger. It's a good thing I can keep him close. And not because of his gorgeous eyes and hard body. No, it's because I want to keep him alive. After all, I have a stalker, and I can't let Silas be their next victim.

### **Hitman's Heart**

I'm good at my job. Taking people out doesn't give me any heartburn, especially when it means my bank account grows fatter after each assignment. So what if I drink away the days between missions, and maybe I try to forget all the things I've done—I'm not soft. Not for anyone... Except her. Margaret. My little ray of sunshine, the only bright spot in this world of darkness. She's the only thing I have to look forward to, and when she's threatened, I can't sit idly by. Not even when I'm ordered to take her life or lose my own. I'll keep her hidden and safe, but how will I protect her from myself?

### **His Secret Treasure**

Gaines Braeburn stole my box. He's a no-good treasure hunter, and I will reclaim what's mine. First, I have to attend a gala to get his attention. Then, when I do, it'll be simple enough to seduce him... Nevermind that I've never done it before. I'm sure I can wing it. Then, once I have him in a heated stupor, I will retrieve my destiny and disappear. He'll never know what hit him. Everything is going according to plan until I fall. Until he catches me. Until he starts to charm me. Maybe I'm not the one doing the seducing after all, because the closer I get to Gaines, the more I forget about why I'm here in the first place. But my claim won't be denied, and if it's a choice between my destiny and the man I'm falling for—what do I do?

## My Hero's Secret Baby

*Lane*

It's not in my nature to save people, especially when there's no advantage in it for me. But that changes the moment I see her, my sweetness, being attacked. For once in my life, I step in. Saving her was the best decision I've ever made, and I soon realize fate drew me to the right place and the right time to meet Pepper. She's too innocent for a man like me, but I can't let her go. And I don't. I dote on her and love her. Until she's taken from me. Her life snuffed out by my enemies. Now, I live to make them pay, and I won't stop until everyone who had a hand in Pepper's death is bleeding at my feet.

*Pepper*

Lane saved me. This man with the intense eyes and powerful way about him. He's my hero, and I can't believe I'm falling in love. Everything's perfect until I stray too far one night and find out exactly what sort of man won my heart. Cruelty and violence—he's capable of both, though I know in my heart he'd never harm me. Even so, when I see the chance to escape, I take it. But I'm not alone when I leave him, and my heart is forever drawn back to him, to the man who loves me fully and without reservation. Though he may be a nightmare for those who cross him, he'll always be my hero.

## His Tiger Queen

I'm a princess in a tower. Well, sort of. I live on an estate with high walls and plentiful guards. My father is an important man, though I've never learned why. But I have learned to obey him or suffer the consequences. Even so, I have a life I understand and can bear as long as my tiger is here with me. She's my best friend, my only friend. At least, she was until I met the strange man through the garden wall. Ronan. He isn't afraid of my father. Isn't afraid of my tiger. And the more we talk, the less afraid I am of him. I begin to hope he's the prince who can save me from this tower ... Until I learn I'm betrothed to another. But if there's anything at all I've learned about Ronan, it's that he doesn't give up easily. But will I be able to escape my father's plans or end up married to another man after all?

## His Virgin Heiress

Sometimes I have sticky fingers. Funny how pricey things tend to get glued to them. An item here, a handful of diamonds there. I take them, and then I keep them. Like a dragon with her hoard that no man can touch. Except ... that isn't completely true. *One* man can. My captor, my jailor, the one person who I can't stop fantasizing about even though he keeps me locked away. He took everything from me. So, I'm taking it back from him piece by piece. But when he reveals the twisted path to my freedom, will I walk down it alone or accept that my obsession isn't wealth at all, it's him?

## Cuffed Love

**Sheriff Chrissy Darling**

There's a new sheriff in town. Okay, yeah. It's me. I never intended to become the chief law enforcement officer for the small town of Newberry, but here I am with a badge and a job. I also have a few deputies and some small-town troubles, but nothing I can't handle. At least that was the case until a tall, handsome, be-suited man shows up and things begin to fall apart. Stolen chickens, broken glass, and retired mercenaries are just a few of the problems Declan Smith's brought with him.

But the biggest problem of all? My attraction to him, the man who's the number one suspect in all the strange goings on in my town.

### **Declan Smith**

I've come to Newberry to do my job, and I'm damn good at it. Disrupting governments and multi-billion dollar corporations has long been my specialty, but I decided to take a job in a tiny town for a little slice of the quiet life. I assumed the local sheriff wouldn't care for me, but when I get a look at Chrissy Darling, I realize that taking this small job will have huge consequences. Not only is she on my case, she's on my mind. Constantly. But when she realizes I'm the root of all her town's troubles, will she send me packing or cuff me to her for life?

### **Stuffed**

#### *Kent*

She set me up. This cute little woman with the big eyes and the sweet words framed me. Now I'm serving a jail sentence thanks to her tricks. But I'm no fool. Layla is clearly a highly trained operator who decided to take me out of the equation. My contract to eliminate Graham Tucker—owner of the Fill-A-Friend stuffed animal chain—hangs by a thread, and I have to get this kill before Layla steals it out from under me. The day I'm released is the day I'll take my vengeance on that cunning assassin with the innocent eyes. And then I'll take out Graham Tucker and close my contract with the Brotherhood.

#### *Layla*

Pandacorns are my bestsellers. Seriously. I can make a pandacorn, post it on Etsy, and it's gone within an hour. Working at Fill-A-Friend pays the bills so I can work on my real passion—one-of-a-kind stuffies that have my own personal flair. But Fill-A-Friend can be demanding and sometimes intense, especially since I'm accident prone (one time I left the cotton stuffing machine on. Whoops.) Or like that time when I got rid of a bunch of ugly stuffed dogs and some random guy stole them and went to jail over it. Yikes. Anyway, things are going okay until Kent shows up in my life. And then they get so much better. He's kind, caring, and supportive of my stuffie-making. The only issue is that he says weird stuff about "our line of work" when we don't even do the same thing, but he's handsome and amazing, so I don't mind. In fact, I think I'm falling for him.

My stuffie business and my personal life are headed in the right direction ... Until Mr. Tucker comes to inspect the store and things go terribly, horribly wrong.

### **His Sweetest Sin**

God has led me to a life of service. I never thought being a priest would be a career path for me, but here I am giving Mass and leading a flock toward salvation. My way is clear until a red-headed distraction begins to visit my services. Eyes wide and giving off innocence like a burst of effervescence, Lily is a temptation that I must overcome. But the more trust she gives me, the more confessions she reveals, I soon realize that the Lord brought her to me. I'm the only one who can ease the deep ache inside her and lead her into the light.

When I see Father Niall standing on the steps of his church, his open smile and welcoming arms are just what I need. Even though I'm not a Catholic, I attend his services and soak in the sound of his voice, the warmth in his eyes. I don't think he notices me. Until one day, he does. And then I confess to him about the ache I feel every time I see him. Father Niall is merciful and helps me in every way I ask. But

when he learns who I really am, his own dangerous past comes to light. Father Niall isn't what he seems ... but then again, neither am I.

### Read Now

#### Locking Her Down

Did I break into an animal shelter? Yes. Should it be a crime? Absolutely not. After all, I'm just trying to save these darling kittens from being sent to a lab for experiments. They deserve a loving home, and I intend to give them one. Well, that was the plan, but then I ran into some complications. Several of them. And they all have badges, guns, and handcuffs. So, off to jail I go, but I make my one phone call to the only man who can help me. Benton. I just hope he doesn't tell my father what I've been up to.

Penelope is in trouble, and I'm the only one who can help her. I make it to the jail almost before she does and save her from a night in the drunk tank. But once I get her to my house, I have a hard time letting her leave. After all, she's been on my mind since the first moment I met her. And this little run-in with the law is just what I need to convince her that I can be her everything. House arrest has never seemed so appealing. My plan is so close to working out, but Penelope always brings something extra—could be stolen kittens, could be dangerous family ties.

With my Penny, life is always a surprise.

### Read Now

#### Marco's Girl

Going to high school as the heir to a mafia family isn't as easy it seems. The prep school lifestyle leaves me cold, and I don't want to be a part of the lacrosse crowd or make time with the silly girls who think being with me is taking a walk on the wild side. I'm fine in my bubble until I see the new girl through the window. Shy, smart, and with curves that make my mouth water, Evangeline is an unexpected good girl in my bad boy world. Her innocence should make me back off, but I don't. After all, I'm a Davinci. When I see something I want, I take it.

A chance at going to college is all I need, and this new prep school is the way to do it. Grams took a maid job at a local estate just so I could attend prestigious Brightwood Prep, and I won't let her down. I'm focused and determined ... until I meet Marco. He's got bad boy written all over him as he sits at the back of the classroom, his eyes eating me up. And that's only the beginning. Marco isn't just bad, he's determined to make me his no matter the cost.

### Read Now

#### Pop-up Love

#### **Sam**

A quiet life as a clock tinker. That's what I need. And that's what I have ... until her—the woman in the pop-up shop across the street. The shop that's invaded my tranquil life and turned my town into a movie set. I want nothing to do with any of it. But then I hear her voice. And I can't think about cogs and tick tocks. All I can think about is her. And I when I find her? I'm never letting her go.

#### **Fawn**

A pop-up shop is the perfect idea to publicize our Kitty Cat Valentine premiere. I may not be the star of the movie, but I can certainly be the MVP of the shop. But when my friend tells the long line of people that I'm giving away a kiss to one lucky shopper, I don't know if I can do it. Until he walks in. Sam. The stoic man

who's built like a freight train and kisses like he means it. I want to be his Valentine, but when his dangerous past finds him, will we be able to give love a chance?

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### **Beauty and the Boss**

Liam Baxter is my new boss, and he's not so bad. I mean, he does require that I knock before I walk into his office. And he doesn't want me to bring my cat to work. Then he tells me if I don't follow his rules, there will be discipline. On top of that, others say he's cold and calculating. Hmm, maybe my boss is a little bit bad? But the more I work for him, the more things change. He shows me his true self in delicious glimpses. Perhaps underneath the stern, handsome boss, there's a man who needs love even more than he needs an assistant.

Georgia Lavine is a means to an end for me. Her father's business is one I intend to destroy. What better way to strike at a man than to take his daughter? That's just what I did, hiring Georgia as my assistant to spite him and also to gain more leverage. But this acquisition isn't without its pitfalls. Georgia is too sunny, too beautiful, too fun, too naïve, too everything-I'm-not. She treats everyone so kindly. So much so that I begin to find that I'm the only one who should get her smiles, her attention, and everything else she has to offer. After all, I'm her boss. And though the assistant position is temporary, I have a much more permanent one in mind.

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### **His Virgin Queen**

I knew I was going to be sold by my father. A bride offered to forge an alliance or seal a deal. Even so, I still held onto the hope of living free of the families. But when I'm given to Antonio Tuscani, I realize my thin dreams of escaping this life were just that—dreams. Giving up, I accept my fate ... Until a fierce-eyed boss, Nick DaVinci, shows up on my wedding day to exact lethal vengeance.

I came for Tuscani blood, and I took it. The doe-eyed bride in her white dress and veil of innocence doesn't bat an eyelash when I do what I was born to do. I'm the head of the most powerful mafia family in the city, and I didn't get here by sparing enemies. But Sophia's demeanor intrigues me, and soon I realize she is far more than a mafia princess. She is a queen, and I will stop at nothing to keep her by my side.

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### **His Deadly Darling**

Luke Knight thinks he can own me, can hurry me into a wedding and then into his bed. He seems to know everything about me. But he's missed the most important point—I'm *dastardly*. He thinks he's my one and only? Not a chance. But I like his estate and all his money, so I'll bide my time. I don't obsess over his good looks and the way he makes me feel. Not a bit. Once he's dead, I'll be more than happy to be the grieving widow ... on a yacht ... in the Seychelles ... drenched in diamonds.

Cassandra truly believes I'm the bad guy in her world. She's wrong. I can show her how much she means to me. It will take time and coaxing, but I'll prove to her our love is deep and true. If she tries to knife me a few times along the way, what of it? After all, a spirited woman is exactly what I need, and Cassandra Carlisle was made for me.

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### **Hitman's Prey**

He's up to something. I know it. No man can be that handsome and mysterious. He's probably a spy. I can't say for sure, but I'm going to find out. Watching Heath is easy, but wanting him is the part that's going to get me into trouble.

Lena peeks from her windows and tries to catch me doing something, though I'm not sure what she thinks she'll see. What sort of an assassin would I be if my sweet neighbor figured me out so easily? Besides, I'm here to watch over her. The only problem is that she's irresistible and far more alluring than my work. Choosing between them may be the death of me, but Lena is more than worth it.

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### **Snow Angel**

My house may be small, but its Christmas lights are the best on the street. Perfectly coordinated each year, my holiday display can't be beat. I reign supreme. At least I did. Until he moved in across the street. Brendan. Who does he think he is? Just because he's handsome and makes my parts tingly doesn't mean I'll let him beat me. This Christmas, he's going down.

Ariadne waits for the clock to tick over to December 1. She's poised over there, ready to spring into action with her curvy body and Christmas spirit. She goes all out for the holidays. This Christmas, I intend to go all out for her.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MINK writes sweet and salty romances that always satisfy with a happily ever after.

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