

CIARA'S
Complication

CIARA ST. JAMES

Cian's Complication

Covenant of Ascent: O'Sheeran Book 2

Ciara St James

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Blurb:

Cian O'Sheeran was the second oldest O'Sheeran child. His family was the largest Irish mob family in the US. Well, technically, to the world, they were former mobsters gone straight. The world might speculate and say they still were mobsters, but no one outside the family and their closest people knew the truth. After all, it was hard to remove all traces of a hunter from their bloodline.

With Cian's cousin marrying, it only makes him ache to find someone special who he can love and start his own little family with. Despite what a lot of the uber rich do, which is arranging marriages for power and blood ties, he will only settle for a true love match. In his family, nothing less would be acceptable.

Only when he meets his, he's shocked to find she's been around for years and he never knew it. She also happens to be the daughter of one of the men in the world who would love nothing more than to put him and his whole family in prison for the rest of their lives.

Miranda is an ordinary woman living what she considers a boring life. It's not what she wants. She hungers to find a new job and true happiness. She loves her overprotective father, but she's an adult and it's her life to live. When she meets one of the infamous O'Sheerans, she knows what the rumors say about him and his family. Her father has voiced his opinion many times. Only she can't seem to resist.

Cian isn't the only man who wants her. As he works to court her and convince her that he wants more than a fling, he has to worry not only about her father's hate, but that there are two men who want her for themselves, and they might be willing to do just about anything to have her.

So it was time for this O'Sheeran to bring out all the stops to win his soulmate. He'll fight anyone and everyone to do it. The only ones he doesn't need to fight is his family. They know when one of their own has found their happily ever after. All he has to do is resolve Cian's Complication.

Warning

This book is intended for adult readers. It contains foul language, adult situations, discusses events such as stalkers, assault, torture and murder that may trigger some readers. Sexual situations are graphic. There is no cheating, no cliffhangers and it has a HEA.

Dedication

Thank you to all the people who made this possible but especially one group, you the readers. For those you took a chance on the first mafia book, Darragh's Dilemma and decided to continue to read the next one. I knew it was a gamble to break away from writing mainly motorcycle club romances, but I felt I had to write this one. And I have more non-MC ideas in my head so watch out, in the future who knows what you might see from me. Paranormal is definitely there.

Thank you to my wonderful beta readers who read every book and give me valuable feedback. They are the final eyes to check for those pesky typos. Please know we try our absolute best to catch them all and many eyes look, but we are human after all. You may still catch an odd one here and there.

Thank you to my editor, Mary Kern at Ms. K Edits for all her work on every book and Tracie Douglas at DarkWaters Covers. She does all of my covers.

Thank you to Tricia Tancredi, who was kind enough to review my Irish words and verify they were correct. She's my Irish expert. Thank you Tricia, xo.

I hope you enjoy the next peek into the lives of the O'Sheerans and it wets your appetite for more. Aidan's story is next and it will be called Aidan's Ardor. Enjoy! XX Ciara

Covenant of Ascent: O'Sheerans

Darragh w/ Ashlynn

Rian w/ TBD

Rory w/ TBD

Siobhan (Siv) w/ TBD

Declan w/ TBD

Cian w/ Miranda

Cillian w/ TBD

Ciaran w/ TBD

Cara w/ TBD

Fallon w/ TBD

Aidan w/ TBD

Shane w/ TBD

Tiernan w/ TBD

Aisling (Ais) w/ TBD

Cathal w/ TBD

Reading Order

For Dublin Falls Archangel's Warriors MC (DFAW), Hunters Creek Archangel's Warriors MC (HCAW), Iron Punishers MC (IPMC), Dark Patriots (DP), & Pagan Souls of Cherokee MC (PSCMC)

Terror's Temptress DFAW 1

Savage's Princess DFAW 2

Steel & Hammer's Hellcat DFAW 3

Menace's Siren DFAW 4

Ranger's Enchantress DFAW 5

Ghost's Beauty DFAW 6

Viper's Vixen DFAW 7

Devil Dog's Precious DFAW 8

Blaze's Spitfire DFAW 9

Smoke's Tigress DFAW 10

Hawk's Huntress DFAW 11

Bull's Duchess HCAW 1

Storm's Flame DFAW 12

Rebel's Firecracker HCAW 2

Ajax's Nymph HCAW 3

Razor's Wildcat DFAW 13

Capone's Wild Thing DFAW 14

Falcon's She Devil DFAW 15

Demon's Hellion HCAW 4

Torch's Tornado DFAW 16

Voodoo's Sorceress DFAW 17

Reaper's Banshee IPMC 1

Bear's Beloved HCAW 5

Outlaw's Jewel HVAW 6
Undertaker's Resurrection DP 1
Agony's Medicine Woman PSCMC 1
Ink's Whirlwind IP 2
Payne's Goddess HCAW 7
Maverick's Kitten HCAW 8
Tiger & Thorn's Tempest DFAW 18
Dare's Doll PSC 2
Maniac's Imp IP 3
Tank's Treasure HCAW 9
Blade's Boo DFAW 19
Law's Valkyrie DFAW 20
For Ares Infidels MC
Sin's Enticement AIMC 1
Executioner's Enthrallment AIMC 2
Pitbull's Enslavement AIMC 3
Omen's Entrapment AIMC 4
Cuffs' Enchainment AIMC 5
Rampage's Enchantment AIMC 6
Wrecker's Ensnarement AIMC 7
Trident's Enjoyment AIMC 8
Fang's Enlightenment AIMC 9
Talon's Enamorment AIMC 10
Ares Infidels in NY AIMC 11
Phantom's Emblazonment AIMC 12
For O'Sheerans Mafia
Darragh's Dilemma
Cian's Complication

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Irish Dictionary

Bride= brídeog

Woman= bean

Son of a bitch= mac soith

Sons of a bitches= mac bitches

Leader= ceannaire

Pussy= púicín

Darling= a stór

My Love= mo grá

My Darling= mo stór

My sweetheart= mo leannan

My Heart= mo chroí

My queen= mo banríon

My king= mo rí

Honey= mil

Family= teaghlach

Whore= fraochÚn

Baby= leanbh

Beautiful= álainn

God= Dia

Dad= daid

Mom= mam

Grandson= garmhac

Son= mac

Father= athair

Mother= màthair

Uncle/ uncles= uncail/ uncaili

Aunt/ aunts= aintín/ aintíni
Sister= deirfiúr
Little sister= deirfiúr bheag
Sweetheart= milseán
Brother= deartháir
Siblings= deartháireacha
Elder= sine
Grandmother= seanmháthair
Soulmate= anamchara
Cousin/ cousins= col ceathrar/ col ceathracha
Daughter= iníon
Cock= coileach
Firebrand= branda dóiteáin
Tempest= aimsir
Thank you= go raibh maith agat
Sack of shit=sac cac
Shit head= ceann cac
Cocksucker= sucker coileach
Jesus Christ= Íosa Chíost
Health!= Sláinte (drinking toast)
Thank you, God= Go raibh mait agat Dia
Fiancée= fianna
Little Brother- deartháir beag
Grandson/ My grandson= garmhac/ mo gharmhac
Our family= ár muintir
Goddamn= diabhal
Granny= mamó
I Love You= Is breá liom tú

Love you= mo ghráthu

Fuck= foc

Fucker= fíochmhar

Fuck no= fuck uimh

Hell= ifreann

No= nil

Bastard= bastair

Chief= taoiseach

Head of Clan= ceann fine

Clan chief= ceannaire clan

Leader of the family= ceannaire an teagh laigh

Christ's sake= son Chríost

Italian Dictionary

My Beauty= la mia bellezza

Beautiful Gem= Belle gemme

Beautiful Fiancée= Bella fidanzata

Wine and spirits= vino e liquori

Good evening= Buona serata

Excuse me= mi scusi

Mister= Signore

Hello= ciao

Cian: Prologue

Sitting around with my entire family, I should be happy. This was one of the things I loved the most, spending time with my whole family. That might sound weak or stupid to others, but for us, it was heaven. We were tight, more together than most families, I think. Hell, we all lived in the same compound where our parents still lived in the main house together.

That was even weirder to people—how my father and both his brothers had married and moved all of their wives into the same house and lived together, raising their families. There had been a few whispers over the years that it was because all the wives were being shared by the brothers. That was laughable. As if any man in our family would share his woman with anyone, even his brothers. It was never going to happen.

Maybe people thought that because they didn't believe in love matches or they thought they weren't possible in a family like ours. They would be wrong. My parents and both of my uncles had made true love matches. My oldest cousin and head of the family, Darragh, had recently made his.

I was so damn happy for him. Ashlynn was an absolute sweetheart, and the whole family adored her. She was exactly the kind of woman Darragh needed. She'd balance out his life perfectly. Being the head of the O'Sheeran family wasn't an easy job. He had so many demands and stressors. Ashlynn would help him carry that load and bring him softness. Not to say the family didn't help, because we did. We tried to get him to give up more of his load, but he had always been one to refuse. However, since meeting Ashlynn, he'd begun to let us help a little more.

Some talked behind our backs, saying that Ashlynn was only marrying Darragh because he was filthy rich. Well, it was true he was filthy rich. All of us were, but that had nothing to do with her marrying him. She had tried to get him to put a prenup in place before the wedding, but he was adamant it wouldn't be needed. We all agreed. We knew her marrying him had absolutely nothing to do with his money.

Thinking about it, maybe my restlessness was in part due to seeing Darragh so happy and wondering if I'd ever be lucky enough to have that for myself. I was the next oldest child after Darragh. At thirty-nine, I should've been married long ago and already had several children. Just ask my *mam*. She'd been bemoaning that fact since I turned twenty-five.

I hadn't been ready at twenty-five to settle down. It would've been a disaster if I had. I had been too wild and into spreading my wild oats, as the saying goes. However, by the time I was thirty-five, that kind of life had gotten old for me. I still went out with women and had fun. After all, I was a healthy man with needs, but it had lost its excitement. Those affairs had become less and less frequent.

There wasn't a single woman I'd met who tempted me even a tiny bit to settle down with her. When I thought of them and me being together for the rest of our lives, I almost broke out in hives. The prospect was terrifying. I saw the marriages of some of our peers that had been arranged as business arrangements or set up by their families as an acceptable person to wed. The couples were miserable, and they weren't faithful to their spouses. I was determined to never marry if those were my only options.

The monotony of things for me had been temporarily broken by the excitement of taking out Ivo Doyle, the head of a smaller Irish mob family, who had threatened ours. However, other than keeping an eye on the rest of his family to ensure they behaved, that was over. In the old days, the whole family would've been wiped out to prevent retaliation. Those days were gone. We'd moved on to a more civilized path. However, that didn't mean that we'd let anyone harm our family or pose a threat without addressing it. No, we responded swiftly and without mercy when that occurred. It just meant we didn't spill blood that might not need to be spilled. Warring with each other was the last thing most of us wanted.

I think it was all the talk about Darragh and Ashlynn's wedding, which would be in two months, that had me feeling even more restless and had me reexamining my life. I could admit that I was envious of my cousin. He had what my

brothers and I, other cousins and sister all wanted. A special someone who was all yours.

Their wedding had been set for the beginning of June. Darragh had been hard pressed to allow it to be pushed out that far. He wanted to be married and produce the first baby of the new generation. I doubted he'd wait to produce that baby until after the wedding. I was willing to bet Ashlynn was either already pregnant or would be soon. He couldn't seem to keep his hands off her and vice versa.

The thought of him having a baby was exciting to all of us. It had been years since there had been one in the family. The last had been my sister, Cara, twenty-four years ago. With fifteen years between us, I'd felt more like a dad to her than her oldest brother. She often complained that she couldn't date because of us. She had five brothers and eight male cousins. She and the other two female cousins, Aisling and Siobhan, all had the same complaint. It wasn't that we didn't want them to date. We didn't want them to be used and hurt by some man. If that happened, the men in question would have to disappear. We tried to explain that by not dating, they were saving lives, but they didn't see the humor in it.

“What're you thinking about over here so intently, *deartháir*,” Ciaran asked from behind me. I hadn't heard him approach.

I turned to look at him. He was intensely studying me. I knew I couldn't lie to him. He'd sniff that out in an instant. So instead, I decided to tell him the truth. He'd understand. He was thirty-five and ready to settle down himself. We'd talked about it in the past.

“I was thinking of how much I envy Darragh for finding someone to spend the rest of his life with. I'm wondering if it'll ever happen to me. I'm fast approaching forty, Ciaran. I want a family of my own. I want a wife I can come home to every day and talk about my day and hers, to debate with, and to make love to whenever the mood strikes us. I want what *Mam* and *Daid* have. What Darragh has. What our *uncaili* have.”

He sighed. “I do too. I’ve been thinking about it more since Darragh met Ashlynn. I’m happy for him, don’t get me wrong, but I’m jealous too. Maybe for us, we’ll all have to hit forty like him before we find the one.”

“Well, that means I only have about a year. You and the others will have to wait longer. I guess I should be on the lookout for her. I don’t want to miss her when she pops up.”

“*Foc*, thanks for depressing me more, *fiochmhar*.”

“You’d better hope *Mam* and the others don’t hear you saying fuck and calling me a fucker. You know how they are. You’ll be getting your mouth washed out with soap,” I warned him with a chuckle.

“Shit, I remember the last time she did that. I swear food tasted like crap for a week. However, I’ll have you know, I’m a grown man and she’s not going to do it again.”

Grinning evilly, I scanned the room for our *mam*. Seeing what I was doing and knowing what I intended, Ciaran grabbed my arm and dragged me out of the room into the butler’s pantry, where he shut the door.

“I swear to *Dia*, if you tell her, I’m murdering you in your sleep and planting your body underneath the manure pile at the stables,” he threatened me.

“Don’t be like that. I’m your oldest brother. You can’t kill me. Maim me a little and pay me back, yes, but not kill. They’ll know it was one of you and will interrogate everyone until you break and confess. Then you’ll have to live the rest of your life with *Mam*’s tears every day. All day. After all, I’m her favorite.”

“Like hell you are! I am. Or maybe Cara, but not you.”

The door came swinging open and in strolled our *mam*. She eyed the two of us.

“Stop swearing and threatening to kill your brother, Ciaran. And I love all of my children equally and would miss any one of you.”

“You were listening at the door!” Ciaran exclaimed.

She shook her head no. “No, I just know you two like the back of my hand. Always with the potty mouth, Ciaran. And Cian likes to threaten to kill you or make you threaten him. He’s been saying for years he’s my favorite and you’ve been denying it. A mother knows these things. Why’re you hiding in here?”

I didn’t want to confess to her what had started our conversation. She’d only tell me that I was looking in the wrong places to meet a good woman. She hated that I went to our nightclub and other nightlife places. The women I met there were only good for sex. She told me that over and over. I was at a loss where she wanted me to go. Whenever I asked, she’d say why not church or somewhere normal. As if that would happen. We were spiritual in our own way, but we didn’t go to church every week. We refused to identify as Catholic or Protestant. We were Christian. However, there were two holidays we did go to church—Christmas and Easter. The rest of the time, we prayed and celebrated alone or as a family.

This was different from the other Irish families we knew. They couldn’t figure us out, which was fine by us. The more unpredictable they found us, the better. We found that helped to keep them at bay. While we were the biggest and most powerful Irish mob family in the States, we could never forget to be on our guard. Just look at Ivo Doyle. His greed had been his downfall.

“We’re not hiding. We just came in here to get some peace and quiet. It’s loud out there. It’s hard to hear yourself talk,” I answered.

“That’s a lie. I know it’s something more than that. Alright, keep your own counsel for now, but when you’re ready, come see me,” she said, as if she knew what we’d been talking about. Then she breezed back out the door.

“I swear, she’s a witch like *Aintín* Maeve. Everyone talks about her and her remedies, but I’m convinced *Mam* and even *Aintín* Cyndi are ones, too. They know things they shouldn’t. No wonder we have such a hard time getting away with anything. It’s better as adults, but still,” Ciaran groused.

I had to agree with him. “Yeah, I think you’re right. Remember when you snuck out when you were sixteen to meet that girl and when you came sneaking back in, she was waiting in your room for you?”

He moaned and put his hand on his ass. “*Dia*, do I remember? I think my left ass cheek is smaller than the right to this day from the way she whipped the hell out of it. She couldn’t land her smacks evenly. She had to concentrate it all on the one cheek. It hurt to sit for a week. She was yelling about how I’d scared her to death. She thought someone had kidnapped me. *Daid* just stood in the doorway and let her have at me.”

“Yeah, but it would’ve been worse if he’d done it. He acted like he wasn’t concerned like her, but he was. They raised the whole house when they discovered you were missing. I thought they were going to murder the guards for letting you get taken. I tried to tell them it was a blessing to be rid of you, but they wouldn’t listen,” I added with a grin.

This was the start of a verbal sparring that lasted for a good half hour. When we were done, I was feeling a tad better. At least I wasn’t thinking my chances of finding a true love match were zero. It was now up to a ten percent chance. I’d hang on to that.

Miranda:

I was thrilled to see noon come. It meant that I was free. I had the rest of today and tomorrow before I had to come back here. As I grabbed my things, clocked out, and walked to my car, I thought of my unhappiness. I should be grateful that I had a job. Some people weren't that lucky. I had a car and an apartment. I had enough to eat and I was healthy. All things to be grateful for, but it wasn't enough. I needed, no, I wanted more.

One thing I wanted was to find another job. Working at the bank as a teller was mind-numbingly boring for me. I pasted on a smile, no matter how foul the customer was. I counted out cash and input data into the computer. It was repetitive and nothing exciting ever happened. I wanted to find a job where I was challenged once in a while. Where I could use my brain and creativity. Despite people thinking that as a blonde I was stupid, I wasn't. I had a good head on my shoulders and I wanted to use it.

When I graduated from college three years ago, I'd given in to my dad's insistence that I work at the bank. He said it was a good job and after twenty years or so, I would have a nice retirement. It seemed in our town, this bank still offered a retirement package. I think it was more that the owner of the bank was a friend of his. My dad thought it was a respectable job, and those were few and far between in his book.

I'd gotten a bachelor's degree in business. I hadn't specialized further, not knowing what exact business I wanted to work in. I knew I wanted to be able to have my ideas made into reality. To design a whole new campaign or something from start to finish. I was good with concepts and had great organization skills, as well as being good at coming up with ideas. That was what led me to get a business degree. It was broad enough that I could go just about anywhere with it.

I'd hoped I might be able to use those skills somehow in this job. I'd started with hope. Three years later, I knew it was never going to happen, and I was miserable. The only

good thing about my job is it allowed me to finally move out of my family home and into my own place.

When that happened two years ago, I thought my dad was going to lose his mind. He had this archaic idea that I would stay with him until I married. As if that was even a possibility, when he ran off every single man who ever asked me out. He'd been the same when I was in high school. The only time I got a little freedom was when I went away to college. I'd been able to convince him I'd be fine two hours away, but it was too far to drive back and forth every day. He gave in because that school had been willing to give me a full scholarship. It saved him from having to pay for it.

Although, even when I was there, he'd made it a habit to pop over to see me without notice. Despite that, I'd been able to go out on some dates. Unfortunately, none of the guys had really tripped my trigger, and they'd all ended in us either staying friends or never speaking to each other again. Some of them had gone away mad when I didn't fall into bed with them. They wanted easy women, and I wasn't one of those. Many of them, by the third date, had expressed their dislike that I hadn't slept with them yet. When I explained I had to know them better and had to feel something in order to sleep with them, they never called me again.

I knew my stance was old-fashioned. I admitted it. I wasn't sure why I was like this. All my girlfriends, growing up and in college, hadn't been like me. They freely slept with any guy who caught their fancy. They told me I was missing out and should loosen up. I couldn't. That was why, at the ripe age of twenty-five, I'd only ever been with one guy. I thought at the time we'd end up married. I was so wrong.

He'd only stuck it out to win a bet that had been going around campus. A lot of guys had gotten in on it and the prize was a hefty one. He and I had dated for six months before I slept with him. Once I did, he ghosted me not long afterward. It was a week later before I heard what was being said and I learned the awful truth.

I could've cried and slunk off with my tail between my legs in mortification or hidden in my dorm room. I could have

run home and changed schools. I did none of those things. Instead, I tracked him down one night at a frat party. In front of all his friends and many of the others who had been in on the bet, I confronted him, then left him writhing on the ground after I punched him in the face and kicked him in the crotch. From that day onward, I became the one to steer clear of. I hadn't minded.

Since coming home from college, I've tried to date. If it wasn't my dad running them off, it was me not being able to get into them. I was convinced I was going to end up that old cat lady who lived in the creepy house on the corner and scared all the children in the neighborhood. It might have been an okay fate if I had nieces and nephews to smother with motherly love, but I was an only child.

My dad was only forty-seven and had been single since my mom died when I was eight. He could still remarry and have more kids, but I didn't see that happening. He never went on dates. I knew he had to see women, if only for sex, but I had no idea who, and I didn't want to know. Thinking of my dad having sex kind of made me feel weird. I knew it happened, but I didn't need to have it confirmed.

Pushing those thoughts to the back of my mind and before getting on with my errands that I had planned for the day, I stopped at my apartment to change my clothes. I couldn't wait to shed the boring top and skirt I had on. I wore office casual outfits to work. They had a specific dress code we had to adhere to. It was kind of old-fashioned, too.

The men wore dress shirts, ties, and dress pants as you'd expect. The women were only allowed to wear tops which showed no cleavage and skirts that were to the knee or longer. Pantyhose had to be worn, no bare legs. God, pantyhose in Florida in the summer were hell. Only a man could've come up with that asinine rule. I'd like to see them wear these uncomfortable torture devices.

We couldn't wear slacks, which was a shame. Flats or heels no higher than two inches were the only acceptable footwear. Minimal to no jewelry was allowed. Nothing flashy or showy. It was boring and too nineteen fifties for me. They

needed to get with the times. Other banks weren't like this in town. My dad argued it was proper and how good Christian women should dress. He needed to go back to the nineteen fifties and stay there along with my boss.

Shedding my hated outfit, I got dressed in my comfortable yoga pants and a short-sleeved tunic top. My feet sighed in relief as I slid them into my favorite pair of sandals. I quickly brushed out the updo my hair had been in and put it in a ponytail. That was another thing at the bank. If you had long hair, you had to wear it up, but not in a ponytail. At the end of the day, my scalp hurt from being up in those hairpins for hours.

Feeling like myself again, I set out for the grocery store first. I needed to get my shopping done for next week. I rarely had the energy to do it after work. Not because I was tired from working hard, but because I was tired from being bored.

Pulling into the parking lot of the grocery store, I wasn't surprised to see it was busy. Afternoon on a Saturday wasn't the time to shop. Gearing myself up to face the crowd, screaming bratty kids that people couldn't seem to control, and the grumpy people who always seemed to be in here, I hurried inside. I had my list, and I knew where everything was. I'd get in and out as fast as I could.

Zooming around the store as quickly as the crowd allowed, I held onto my temper as people stood in the aisle, blocking both directions. They would park their cart on one side, then stand in the middle of the other, staring at the shelves. I wanted to scream and tell them to move their damn asses. Wouldn't they be shocked? Numerous people greeted me and I had to smile and say hello back.

Many people in town knew me because of my father. I didn't know all of them, but I was cordial anyway. I didn't want to damage his reputation. Although, in Florida, the chief of police was appointed by the mayor, not elected like they were in some states.

After being tortured for over half an hour, I was happy to see that I was almost home free. All I had to do was get

what I wanted from the meat counter and I could check out and get out of here. The screaming of a child not getting his way was increasing. I had to get out of here before I marched over to the mom and told her that spanking your child when they didn't listen was okay. Her method of ignoring him or giving him whatever he wanted wasn't going to do anything but raise him to be another entitled asshole. We had enough of those in the world. I hated to say it, but a lot of my generation was filled with them.

I gave the young girl behind the counter my order. As I waited, I became conscious of being stared at by the way my skin tingled at the back of my neck. I turned around slowly to see who it was. Standing not five feet away was Keaton Hill. I wanted to groan out loud. Why, of all people, did he have to be here at the same time as me? I gave him a polite and brief head nod, then turned back around.

Keaton was a man I'd been trying to avoid for the past five months, ever since he'd asked me out on a date, one day at the bank. He'd been coming in every week for months before that and he always made sure to end up in my line. He stared at me while I took care of his banking needs. He wouldn't say a word other than to tell me what he wanted done.

That is, he hadn't said more than those few words until five months ago, when out of the blue, he asked me to go on a date with him. I'd been shocked and didn't know what to say. He stood there staring at me intently when he asked. I'd finally blurted out the first thing to come to my mind. I told him that I was a lesbian, but I thanked him for the offer.

It was stupid, I admit. He had to know it was a lie, but he hadn't called me out on it. All he did was leave the bank. I thought that would be the end of it. Only it wasn't. He came back the next week like always. He never asked me out again, but his staring made me very uneasy. If I got the chance to see him coming before he saw me, I'd have one of the other ladies take over my window. They were nice about doing it because they knew why. They thought he was a weirdo, too.

It was less easy to avoid him when he'd pop up somewhere out in town, which seemed to happen more frequently. I'd wondered once or twice if he was following me, but I never could prove it. I tended to stay alert when I was going anywhere—the result of my dad drilling that into my head all my life.

Thankfully, the deli counter girl was quick about getting my order. As she handed it to me, I took it and gave her a hasty thank you, then moved off. I tried not to make it obvious I was looking, but I checked behind me. He was still staring at me. I practically ran to the registers. As I checked out, I thought more about Keaton.

I could tell my dad that he was making me feel funny, but why do that? There wasn't anything he could do about it and my dad would use it as an excuse to try and renew his insistence that I move back home. He had more than once commented that the house was too big for just him and it was ridiculous that I squandered my money on rent when he had all that space going to waste.

Putting my things in the car, I got in and started it. As I passed the front door of the store, I caught a glimpse of Keaton. He was standing there watching me leave. He didn't have a single thing in his hands. God, he was an absolute weirdo. Fighting to put him out of my thoughts, I headed home to put away my groceries so I could go to my next task. Tomorrow will be better. I could spend the day doing absolutely nothing or only what made me happy. Or I could after I went to brunch with my dad. He insisted I have brunch with him on Sundays and I had no good reason to say no. Plus, I did like to catch up with him. I loved him. I just didn't want him running my life.

Miranda: Chapter 1

It was midweek in another boring week at the bank. Like all the weeks before, it was the same thing over and over. I fought hard not to scream just to see someone have a change in their expression or conversations.

My coworkers, for the most part, were okay people. I talked with them, but we didn't really have anything in common. The guys were stuffy and full of themselves. The women were mainly older women who were married with families. All they wanted to talk about was their kids and how much money their husbands made at work. They acted like their spouses' success was their identity, not their husbands. Often, I wanted to ask them, didn't they have aspirations of their own? I knew if I did that, they'd stare at me, wondering what I meant.

I was so caught up in those thoughts that I didn't notice until he was almost to my window that Keaton had entered the bank. When I saw him, I wanted to kick myself for being so unalert. It was too late to hide or have someone else take over my window. I'd have to wait on him. Hopefully, it would be a quick in-and-out visit. I steeled myself as his turn came. I plastered on my fake smile and greeted him. "Hello, Mr. Hill. How may I help you today?"

"I need this money moved from my checking to my savings," he said, as he pushed a piece of paper toward me. I took it and started to bring up his account. As I did, I tried once more to tell him something that I'd told him a hundred times before. I was hoping he might hear me this time and take the hint. It would save us both these awkward encounters.

"Mr. Hill, you can easily do this from home using your computer. All you have to do is set up a username and password to get into your bank account and then you could save yourself time and the work of coming to the bank for this. Here's a brochure that tells you how to do it. If you have any trouble, there's a helpline number on there. They can walk you through the process."

“I don’t like computers. They’re the ruination of the world. I prefer to do my banking in person,” he droned out. That was his familiar reply every time I told him about it. He should just record it and press play. I didn’t think it ever changed by a single word. It was like he had it memorized.

“Well, in case you change your mind, here’s the information.”

I pushed the brochure at him until he was forced to take it or be rude. He took it. If there was one thing he never was, it was openly rude. Not unless you counted staring as rude, which I didn’t think he did, although I did. I went as fast as I could to get the money transferred and get him on his way.

“There, it’s all been transferred. Have a nice rest of the week,” I said, trying to sound sincere. He didn’t move. He just stood there, staring at me. “Can I help you with something else?”

“I’ve seen you with that man. You go out with him every Sunday. Why do you go out with him if you’re a lesbian? He’s much too old for you.”

To say I was shocked was an understatement. I didn’t know what to say for a few moments. Finally, my ability to speak came back to me. “Mr. Hill, it’s none of your business who I choose to spend time with. However, if you must know, that man is my father. He’s the chief of police here in St. Augustine. You said you see us. How? Are you following me?”

He didn’t answer my question about following me. He went on to say more. “I think you lied to me. You’re not a lesbian. Why did you lie?” His voice never changed pitch. He said it in an oddly flat, monotone voice.

“This isn’t the place for such a conversation. This is my place of work. Please, I need you to leave if there’s nothing else you need done that’s banking related.”

Not saying another word, he walked off and out the door. As he did, one of my fellow tellers leaned over to

whisper to me. “He gives me the willies, Miranda. I’d watch him.”

“He gives them to me too and I do watch for him,” I assured her.

The rest of the day passed in a fog as I kept thinking about him and what he’d said. At five o’clock, I closed my window as the front bank doors were locked. I hurried to reconcile my daily take, to get my stuff, and to get out of here. There was a good book and a bottle of wine waiting for me at home.

I came out the back door smiling about being free, which is how we exited the building when the bank was closed. It was how we came in, too. The back parking area was reserved for employees, while the much larger lot in the front was for customers. I came to a screeching halt when I caught sight of Keaton. He was standing next to my car.

Looking around, I saw there was no one else out here with us. My coworkers were either already gone or still inside. I had my hand down at my side. I always carried mace with me and I walked with it in hand. I gripped it tighter and got ready to use it if I had to. Taking a deep breath, I walked closer to my car, but stayed far enough away so Keaton couldn’t grab me.

“Mr. Hill, what are you doing back here and beside my car? This is bordering on stalkerish.”

“You said that the bank wasn’t the place to talk about us. I thought this was better. Would you prefer we go to your place? Or mine?”

That was the last thing I wanted to do. Was he crazy? I stopped several feet away from him. It was time to put a stop to this foolish infatuation or whatever it was that he had for me. Time to forget about not hurting his feelings by telling him lies.

“No, I would not. In fact, I’d prefer it if you’d stay far away from me. You’re right. I lied about being a lesbian. I’m not. The day you asked me out, I was shocked, and I didn’t

know what to say. I didn't want to hurt your feelings by telling you that I would never be interested in dating you. I'm sorry, but it's the truth. However, you following me and watching me has to stop. If I tell my dad about this, he'll have you arrested. You'll be seen as a stalker. Surely, you don't want that?"

"I want you to go out with me. I know if you do, you'll see that I'm perfect for you. I might not be handsome like the men you probably like, but I'm stable, I have a house and I have a good income. I can take care of you and you wouldn't ever have to work again. I'll make sure you and our kids will have whatever you need."

His words only increased my uneasiness. He was crazy to think I'd marry a man like him and have his children. It had nothing to do with how he looked. It was his overall aura. It seemed off to me. Like maybe he had some kind of mental disorder or something.

"Your appearance has nothing to do with my refusal. It's you as a whole. You don't interest me. Again, I'm sorry if that's hard for you to hear, but it's the truth. We will never date, marry or have children. Now, please stop following me. If you have to come into the bank, I ask that you go to someone else's window. If you continue to harass me, I'll have no choice but to go to the police."

He didn't get a chance to reply because the door opened and out came two of my coworkers. I turned back to him after glancing at them, only to see him walking off and getting into a car. As he drove off, I sagged in relief.

"Was that weirdo Hill?" one of them, Iris, asked.

"It was."

"What in the world did he want?" Kim, my other coworker asked. They were the two I talked to the most. I considered us semi-friends.

"He wanted to convince me to go out with him. He seems to think we'd suit and I would make a good wife and him a good husband."

“Is he insane? God, that’s terrifying to think he was waiting out here for you. You need to tell someone. What about your dad?” Iris asked.

“I think Hill is off in the head. I told him if he bothers me again, I’d tell my dad. Hopefully, now that he knows my dad is the chief of police, he’ll leave me alone.”

They gave me skeptical looks and murmured good luck. As they went to get into their cars, I hurried to mine. I was shaken, and I needed to get home behind locked doors before I could think of what I would do next. He had more than spooked me. Maybe it was time to tell my dad.



As it happened, I didn’t tell my dad about Keaton. I decided to wait and see if he followed me again or said anything else. I had no doubt he would be in the bank again next week. Something told me he was too dense to take no for an answer. He was living in his own world. One where he and I would get married and have kids. Just the thought of him touching me made me ill.

I worked on finishing my week. I had all of Saturday off this week. Every other weekend I had to work half a day on Saturday at the bank. I looked forward to the weekends when I didn’t. I was planning to go out with a few girlfriends this weekend. They had been trying to get me to go to the nightclub in town. I’d never been there before, but they insisted it was the place to go and have fun. I could use some fun. We were celebrating Evie’s birthday.

Today was Friday, and the bank had just opened its doors. We were all at our windows, ready for the customers to come in. Sometimes it was busy and other times, the day dragged along with very few people coming inside. Most used the drive-thru window. I worked that window when they let me. I preferred it since it was much busier and the day went by quicker. However, since most of us preferred it, we had to take turns. I wasn’t lucky enough to be on it today. Iris was the lucky one.

The door opened and in walked a man I had never seen before. I'll admit. I couldn't help but stare at him. He was that arresting. It wasn't just his looks, which were beyond handsome, but it was the whole package—the way he walked, his expression and his clothes all added to his air of absolute confidence. He came striding in like he was in total control.

Now, usually seeing a man who acted like that, I was turned off. I'd met enough arrogant assholes in suits to last me a lifetime, but he didn't strike me that way. I bet he would change my mind if he spoke. I bet he was a total jerk.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my coworkers straighten up and pat their hair and straighten their clothes, like they were making themselves more presentable for him. I wanted to laugh. After all, no matter how attractive and sexy he was, he was just a man. I watched as he stopped to speak to the security guard at the door. They seemed to know each other. While they spoke, I took time to study his appearance more. I wanted to figure out what was truly attracting me to him.

He was tall. That was the first thing I noticed. I was five foot seven, which wasn't terribly tall but it was considered above-average height for a woman. Five foot four was average in the US. He had to be more than a couple inches over six feet. He was dressed in an expensive-looking suit. It screamed wealth to me. This man wore it like it was a second skin. No awkwardness you see in most men who wore a suit. You could tell they weren't comfortable in it. He was.

Next were his looks. He was what most people would call devastatingly handsome. His skin was tanned, which wasn't unusual in Florida. His hair was styled perfectly, a thick dark brown thatch that begged for fingers to run through it. The front on one side flopped down on his forehead a little. I couldn't tell what color his eyes were, but they were intense looking even from a distance. His jaw was chiseled and covered in a five-o'clock shadow. On some men, that shadow looked unkempt. On him, it looked perfect.

My perusal was cut short by him finishing his talk with our security guard, Alfie. He came striding toward the counter.

I swear, I think all of us held our breaths to see whose window he'd choose. His eyes were running across us. I almost choked when he got to me and his gaze didn't move past me. As if in a trance, I watched him head for my window. I heard the almost inaudible groans of my fellow tellers.

As he made it to my window, I shook off the daze I was in. *Stop this, he's just a man. No need to lose your head over him. He'll be a pompous ass like the rest. Watch and see,* I lectured myself. I took a deep breath, put on my usual polite smile, and greeted him.

"Hello, happy Friday. How may I help you, sir?"

"Hello," he paused as he glanced at my nametag, "Miranda. It is a happy Friday. I think you'll be able to help me just fine. I need to make a deposit. Usually, it's left in the night drop, but last night I had plans. I'd like to check to see what the balance is on the account too since I'm here."

"Of course. I'll need to see your ID to make sure you're authorized for me to share account information with. Which business is this for?"

"I understand." He took out his wallet and passed me his ID. As he did, he stated the name of the business. "It's for Divine Jewelers. My manager usually is the one to make the deposits, but he had to leave early yesterday and I closed the store."

I was familiar with Divine Jewelers. It was the best jewelry store in town. They carried the widest and best selection, I'd been told. I knew they were one of our larger accounts. As I tapped in their name to bring up their account, I glanced at his ID. I was curious to see who he was. As I read it, I instantly became nervous.

His ID read, *Cian Hayes O'Sheeran*. Everyone around St. Augustine, heck, probably all over Florida and other parts of the US, knew the name O'Sheeran. It was the last name of a large Irish family who lived here and was suspected of being the head of the Irish mob in the States. That rumor had been around for as long as I'd been alive and even before that. They

were uber rich and owned properties and businesses all over the States and other parts of the world.

My father often spoke of them. He detested them. He was sure the original rumors were true, even if the more recent ones said the family had left that life behind long ago, and they were now nothing more than legitimate businessmen. Although I'd lived here all my life, I had never seen them. Or if I did, I didn't realize it. I didn't pay attention to tabloids and magazines that gossiped about the rich and famous. I didn't watch the television shows about those kinds of people either. I'd rather read a good book.

Grasping at something to say, I checked the account and saw he was indeed one of the people authorized to have access to the account as well as a long list of other O'Sheerans. "Mr. O'Sheeran, I can gladly make the deposit and let you know the new total. It'll take me a few moments to have this counted." I gestured to the metal box he sat on the counter. I hadn't even noticed him carrying it when he came in.

"That's fine. I'm in no hurry, Miranda."

The way he said my name made it sound different from how anyone else had made it sound. It sounded mysterious and sexy. I'd always thought it was boring and wished my parents had named me something different.

"If you'd like to have a seat over there, I'll be with you as soon as I can."

Leaving him to wait, I went to count the money. If we'd been busy, I'd have let someone else do it, but we weren't and I needed time to regain my composure. I stood there while the money was counted through the counting machine, trying to calm down.

Why was I losing my mind over him? He was just a man. There were lots of them. Even if he were someone who would be interested in a woman like me, which was laughable, I could never go out with him. My dad would lose his mind and disown me. Admittedly, I'd never reacted to a man like this, but that wasn't the point. The point was we were from

two different worlds that would never meet. I was here to serve people like him, not be with someone like that. Everything about him and his life screamed money and excess.

A few minutes later, I was back at my window. He came over to me. I handed him his receipt and jotted down on another piece of paper his balance. It was too obscene for me to even say out loud. He didn't bother to look at them before putting them in his pocket.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. O'Sheeran?"

"Please, call me Cian. Mr. O'Sheeran sounds like you're talking to my *daid*." The way he said his name sounded like he was saying KEE-an. It rolled off his tongue with a slight Irish lilt to it.

"Cian, can I do anything else for you today?"

"You can, beautiful Miranda. You can give me your number. I'd love to take you out to dinner."

His request shocked me and it took me a couple of seconds to respond. "Thank you for the offer, but I can't."

"Why not? I don't see a ring on your finger, so I have to assume you're not married or engaged."

I thought of lying and telling him I was or to say I was a lesbian, but that had backfired on me last time. So instead, I went for the truth. "My dad would kill us both if I went out with you."

"Why? Does he have something against businessmen?" He was frowning.

"No, but he does dislike your family. I'm sorry. It could never work even if he didn't. People like me have nothing in common with people like you."

"He dislikes my family? Who is your father? And I beg to differ, but we do have things in common. I'm not that different from you." He was really frowning now.

"His name is Martin Tremblay, and he's the chief of police here in St. Augustine. I think you can understand why

he would object.” His eyes barely flickered, but it was a reaction. I knew he’d leave now. We were attracting a lot of attention. I waited for him to make a hasty retreat.

Cian:

It was a surprise to find out the beautiful blonde before me was none other than Chief Tremblay's daughter. I hadn't known he was married let alone had any kids. Which when I thought about it, shouldn't be that surprising. I could see where she was right to think he'd be less than thrilled with his daughter going on a date with me. He thought my whole family was nothing more than a bunch of criminals.

He would've been right many years ago. When my *daid* and my *uncaili* had been young, the family had been your typical mob family. It was after they began to settle down and have families of their own that they decided that life wasn't what they wanted. Instead, they began to find ways to move us away from that lifestyle and into a legitimate one. It had been slow and painstaking at times, along with dangerous, but we were now no longer into the illegal things we'd done in the past.

Did that make us saints and perfect people? Hell no. We still knew when to make our stance known. For us, those hurting others, especially innocent children and women, were never tolerated. Like what had happened with Ashlynn's sister, Alexis, and the porn company, Karnal Kiss. Those men deserved what they got. Just like Ivo had by coming after Ashlynn. Our hands were cleaner these days, but they'd never be totally clean.

However, despite knowing who her dad was, I didn't want to walk away and give up. Would it make it hard to have a relationship with her? Yes. Would it be impossible? Not if that's what I wanted, and I had a feeling that might be the case.

"*A stór*, I can win your dad's approval. It might take time, but I can do it. What bothers me is your assumption that we're too different to be with each other. You said people like us. Do you mean differences in religion, background or what?"

"I doubt you'd ever change my dad's mind in a million years. As for differences, just look at us. You're a rich man and I'm an ordinary woman. I work in a bank and you own

companies all over the place. I live in an apartment and you most likely live in a mansion. I live frugally and your life is extravagant. Those kinds of relationships never last if they even begin. I'm flattered that you want to take me to dinner, but the answer has to be no."

I could tell she wasn't going to change her mind, not yet, so I pretended to surrender. It might take me a bit to find a way to convince her that one dinner wouldn't hurt. After that was over with, I'd find other ways to talk her into seeing me again and again. Before long, she'd be seeing me whenever I wanted. Would it be for more than sex? Well, that was to be determined. There was this niggling at the back of my mind that was telling me she could become much more than a good time. It was that thought that would have me persisting rather than saying forget it.

I gave her one of my best smiles. "Then I guess this is goodbye. I hope to see you again soon, Miranda. Until then, take care." Before walking off, I grabbed her hand across the counter and lifted it to my lips. I pressed a kiss to the palm of her hand then I pressed her hand closed around it.

As I strolled out of the bank, I saw people staring at me. When I got outside, my bodyguard, Thomas, was waiting by the car. It was all I could do to convince him he didn't have to come inside with me. Honestly, sometimes the guards were too much. I knew we were wealthy and that made us targets, but we could defend ourselves. We'd all been taught how to from an early age. We knew self-defense and carried guns too. Hell, in some cases, we were better trained than our bodyguards, or at least the ones not raised in our family. Many of the ones who worked for us, their families had worked for mine for generations.

I understood why Darragh and, by extension, Ashlynn needed them. He was the head of the family and she was his intended. They were the couple all of us would look to, to lead us. They were to be protected at all costs. There were times I could get away with not having a bodyguard, but after the recent incident involving Ivo, Darragh wasn't taking any chances with any of us. If we went anywhere, we had to have a

guard with us. Luckily, Thomas and I got along well. He understood me and knew when to back off about giving me space. I got in the car. Thomas got behind the wheel. Today, I'd let him drive me, despite preferring to drive myself.

“Where to now, Cian?”

Unlike many of the rich, we didn't insist on our people calling us Mr. or Mrs. We thought of them as family. There were some who we weren't as close to us, who worked at our various businesses who did call us that, but not our guards, enforcers, and such.

“I think I'll go to the main offices. I want to follow up on a few things and see what the others are doing.”

He nodded then started the car. As we slid into traffic, I sat back and thought of Miranda. I'd been immediately struck by her when I entered the bank. It was her hair that caught my eye first. It was several shades of light blonde. It was pulled up in a twist at the back of her head. As I got closer, I saw her eyes were a light gray, almost a clear color that was different. Her face was oval and was laid out in such a way as to make her strikingly beautiful.

When she walked away from me to count the money, I'd gotten a glimpse of her body and got an idea of her height. She wasn't close to my height but in her low heels, she was taller than a lot of women. She'd been dressed conservatively in a long skirt and sensible blouse, but it did nothing to hide what I knew was a gorgeous and sexy figure underneath. She wasn't bone thin, but I wouldn't say she had a lush figure either. She had enough curves to more than satisfy me. I could see her ass beneath her skirt was round and plump. It had made me wonder what she'd look like naked. I wanted to feast my eyes on her without a stitch of clothing to block my view. Those thoughts had made me ask her for her number. I was stunned when she said no, then even more when she told me why.

As we pulled into the private underground parking lot to our headquarters, I was busy making plans for my next steps. First and foremost was finding out what I could about

Miranda Tremblay. Once I had that, I could start forming battle plans to get her to agree to dinner. All I needed was a foot in the door.

Getting out of the car, I hurried up to the main corporate headquarters where each of us had an office. The whole family worked mainly from here. If needed, we might go to one of the other businesses, like I'd done yesterday at Divine. Finding Cody was my first task.

Cian: Chapter 2

Upstairs, I went straight to Cody's office. He worked on the level below the family. As I got to his door, I was relieved to see he was in. He was behind his massive desk, which was filled with computers. He had an office here as well as space at the family compound. I assumed he had more at his place, which wasn't far from us. Only the family lived in the main compound.

I knocked on his open door to get his attention. He looked up with a frown. I didn't take it personally. He always looked like that when you interrupted him. He'd warned us more than once not to get offended by it. He took a few moments to switch his brain from whatever he was doing to whomever needed him. His frown cleared, and he smiled.

"Hey, Cian, what brings you to my dark cave? Has the world ended and no one told me?" he joked.

"Ha, ha, very funny. Don't pretend like I never come talk to you. We both know that's a damn lie. I came to see what you're working on and to find out if you might have some time to check something out for me."

"For you, of course. After all, you do help pay my salary. What can I do for you, o'mighty one," he teased. He could be a tad irreverent, which we liked. He didn't treat us like we were gods or something. Despite what people might think, we didn't see ourselves like that and hated to be treated like we weren't human.

"Well, first, I'd like for you to bow then crawl over here to kiss my feet and grovel," I shot back.

"The day I do that, you know to put me in the nursing home, because it means I've lost my fucking mind. I only crawl and grovel for a very special kind of woman and you're not a woman."

"Stop, I don't want to know what kind of kinky shit you do with women," I told him, as I walked in and took a seat. He grinned at me.

“Yes, you do. Admit it. You’re dying to know. However, that will have to remain my secret. So, what can I do for you? I’m working on upgraded security camera installation for the family compound. I could use a break. Tell me you have something exciting for me to work on.”

“It’s not exciting unless you think Police Chief Tremblay is exciting.”

He groaned. “What is he doing now? He’s just pissed that he couldn’t place the blame for the robbery at Camelot Jewelers on Darragh. Did he try to arrest you for something? Do you want me to see if I can find any dirt on him?” he asked gleefully as he rubbed his hands. I swear he looked like a villain in a cheap movie doing it.

“I don’t know if he’s still pissed about that or not. He hasn’t tried to pin anything on me. And no, I don’t want you to find dirt on him, although I do expect you’ll find out some things about him as part of what I need you to do.”

“Out with it. The suspense is killing me.”

“I want to know what you can find on Miranda Tremblay, his daughter. She works at St. Augustine Trust Bank.”

“Why do you want to know about his daughter? Hell, I didn’t know he had one. What’s she done?”

“She hasn’t done anything, and I didn’t know he had one either. I met her this morning at the bank and I want to get to know her. She said her dad wouldn’t allow it. I’m not ready to accept that answer.”

He looked startled before he leaned toward me. “Are you saying you want to have sex with his daughter? Are you crazy? He’ll kill you, Cian.”

“No, I didn’t say I want to have sex with her, although I do want that too. I want to take her on a date. In order to do that, I have to find a way to convince her to go out with me.”

“A date? Since when do you date? As in really date? You take women out and then to bed. You don’t date.”

“I want to date her. Will you help me or not? Stop busting my chops. Why is it so damn unbelievable that I might want to do more than wine, dine and bed a woman?”

“Because that’s how you are, Cian. I’ve never known you to go out with a woman on a real date. You’ve never taken one to dinner who didn’t end up in your bed before the night was over. Hell, there’s been a very select bunch of women you’ve repeated that with. When you say you want to find out about a woman to date her, it’s news. Does your family know yet?”

“Fuck no. I haven’t told them and you’d better keep your mouth shut. If they knew I was asking about a woman, they’d descend on me and her like locusts. My *mam* and the *aintíni* would be going to see her. I want her to say yes to a date, not run screaming into the night, never to return.”

He laughed because he knew I was right. They would be all twitterpated with the hope this meant I was going to settle down and get married. I wasn’t ready to say that, yet. First, I had to get to know her, then I could decide if she might be the woman I could see myself spending the rest of my life with.

“True, they would. I love your family but I’m glad I’m not part of it. The pressure to get married and have babies would make me crazy.”

“Don’t count yourself safe yet. They’ll start with you too. As soon as they get more of us married off, they’ll need more victims. That leaves you and those closest to the family as their targets,” I warned him with a grin.

Cody gave me a horrified look. “Well, in that case, I’m not looking anything up. If she’s the one for you, then I’m only pushing myself closer to doom. Forget it. Get out of my goddamn office.”

I laughed at him. “Forget it, *bastaird*, you work for us. You have to do as I say.”

He pretended to grumble as he jotted down what I told him. “Is there anything else you can tell me other than her

name and where she works, oh mighty master?”

I fought not to laugh at him. “She looks like she’s in her mid-twenties, although she could be older and look younger.” I was kind of hoping for that. If she was in her mid-twenties, that put me fourteen or so years older than her. I didn’t have an issue with it, but she might.

“Cradle robber,” he said with a smirk. I gave him the middle finger.

“If I’m one, then Darragh is too. He’s fourteen years older than Ashlynn. Do you call him a cradle robber?”

“No, because he’s the *ceannaire an teaghlaigh*. I know better.”

It always amused me when non-Irish people within our organization used Irish words. He was right. Darragh was the leader of the family. He was given that title when he took over and my *uncail* Patrick stepped down as the head a couple of years ago.

I sat with him and chatted for close to twenty minutes before I left him to get back to work. I had work to do myself and the day was slipping away. I wanted to take the weekend off. If I wanted to do that, then I needed to get my ass in gear. Despite what most people might think, we did work.

Waving goodbye to Cody after thanking him, I headed up to the top floor to my office. I couldn’t wait to find out what he discovered about Miranda. I was eager to start my campaign to get her to agree to go out with me. I had a really good feeling that this might be the beginning of something big for me.



I worked later than planned last night, but I got everything done, so I could enjoy the weekend, barring any unexpected problems. Earlier today, Cody reached out to inform me he hadn’t started working on Miranda’s thing since he was saddled with an urgent work-related thing from Darragh. I assured him that it wasn’t urgent and to take care of the work things first. Even if to me it was top priority, it

wasn't for the family or our corporation, Kin of Éireann Inc. We used the Irish word for Ireland. When the whole family went legit years ago, this was the name our parents had decided on.

I spent the majority of the day trying not to think about Miranda or go to the bank to see if she was working. I figured if I did that, she'd label me a stalker. Feeling at a loss and wanting to be around other people who would include at least a few of my family members, I agreed to come out tonight to our nightclub, Sirens.

We had multiple locations of Sirens nightclubs all over the US. The one closest to St. Augustine was in Jacksonville and it drew people from towns as far away as two or three hours, including our closest neighboring state, Georgia. We had two more in Florida—one in Orlando and another in Miami.

My cousin, Aidan, was the one who mainly oversaw that business. Despite all of us contributing ideas and work to all of our various businesses, there was always one or more family members who oversaw each business line. Aidan had been the one to convince me I needed to get out tonight. I was a little reluctant to agree. The reason was, Sirens was one of the places that I often picked up women. In the past, the thought of going there would've gotten a resounding yes out of me. However, that was before yesterday, when my mind had been overtaken by a gorgeous woman named Miranda.

I was finding the prospect of meeting other women unexciting. I had no intention of going home with any of them or taking them to a hotel. I never brought them back to my home on the compound. That was a rule all of us adhered to. Also, I knew that I'd get offers and I didn't want to waste energy on turning them down politely. It wasn't ego about my looks that had me certain I'd get offers. My money and name guaranteed there would be more than one. My cousins, brothers, and I had been targets since we were sixteen. Grasping women or their conniving parents and friends had no shame in pursuing us for what we could give them. That was

why we'd never been ashamed of taking them up on their offers of sex.

Sure, they had hoped to get more than that out of us in most cases, but we had always been up front about our encounters only being about sex, and there were no strings attached. I'd never led a woman on with false promises and neither had the other men in my family. Our parents had wished for us to settle down for years, but they were realistic enough to know that until that time came, we'd be out having fun. All they asked was for us to be responsible and not to lead anyone on or leave a string of illegitimate kids behind.

Tonight, it was me, my cousins—Aidan, Tiernan, Rory, Declan—my sister, Cara and my brother, Ciaran. More might show up as the night progressed, but at the moment, we were the ones who wanted to go dance, drink, and relax. With us, we'd normally each have a bodyguard, but since there was security at the club, we only took half of them—Thomas, Owen, Milo, and Nolan. They were the regular guards for me, Aidan, Tiernan, and Declan.

Every Sirens had the same setup. It was three floors. On the first floor was a large bar and various seating areas and tables. On the second floor was a massive dance floor. We varied the music played on different nights. On the third floor was the VIP floor. It cost extra to get on this floor. It had its own smaller bar, dance floor and seating areas. The staff who worked the third floor rarely worked any of the others and vice versa.

We spent the majority of our time on the third floor since it was more private, although we did prowl the other ones too. The price that it cost to get access to that floor made it mainly consist of celebrities, the rich, and other dignitaries. It was the only way we'd figured out how to attract customers from all income brackets. We hadn't wanted to make it impossible for the regular people to come and have a good time. Our clubs catered to all income levels.

We arrived around nine o'clock. Despite it being early by nightlife standards, it was busy on all three floors. We came in the back and headed straight for the third floor. I knew the

others would eventually scatter to the other two, but I planned to stay here. There was no need for me to go searching through the available ladies tonight. I was here to purely drink a little and maybe dance if the mood struck me.

Claiming a table for ourselves and leaving our guards to do the same at one nearby, we waited for a waitress to come take our orders. She was one of the regulars. She greeted us courteously and didn't waste time taking our orders. As soon as she had them, she went straight to the bar. Looking around, I saw a lot of faces I recognized. Many of them were high rollers and other wealthy patrons who came here a lot. The rest were people I didn't recognize.

I tuned in to Aidan's griping. He was bitching about the fact they were having a hard time finding bartenders who were able to handle the top floor. It took someone with experience and nerves of steel to deal with the entitled assholes who you ran into up here. He was losing one of his main bartenders in two months. He'd been great to give lots of notice that he was moving to Miami because his wife got a transfer for her job. He would be transferring to the Sirens there, so it wasn't a total loss for us.

"I assume you're working with an agency to help you find them, right?" Rory asked.

"Yeah, the one we always use," Aidan said.

"Why don't you run some ads online and in the big papers in the want ads?" Tiernan suggested.

"How likely is it that those ads will attract the kind of person we want?" Aidan asked, dismissively.

Tiernan shrugged. "You might not, but it won't hurt to try. You're not having success using the usual methods, so think outside of the box. The most you'll lose is some money for the cost of the ads. If it happens to work, we've found a new place to advertise and you'll more than make up the cost in less than a week when they start."

I could tell Aidan was thinking over his suggestion. It was true, we did tend to go through agencies to attract the kind

of staff we wanted for all our businesses, but this wasn't a bad idea. He might just get lucky.

Our drinks came quickly, then our waitress was off to serve another table. As the night progressed, we had a few more drinks. Each of us took turns getting up to dance with Cara. More than a few times we'd had to run off overeager men trying to get too close to Cara or were attempting to feel her up. She insisted she could take care of herself, but we didn't care. No one was going to harass one of the women in our family. Hell, we'd have done the same for any woman who we thought might need help.

We attracted more than our share of people wanting to talk to us. Some wanted to be seen with us in the hopes it would increase their business or social standing. Others wanted to be able to say they partied with us. There was a mix of men and women. However, the biggest nuisances were the women who thought they had hit the motherlode when it came to finding rich men to get their hooks into. I didn't begrudge the others the chance to maybe go home with one of these women. I just didn't want them bothering me. After I sent the fifth one away, my family called me out on it.

"What the hell is going on with you tonight, Cian? That's the fifth one you chased off. Are you getting too picky in your old age?" Declan teased.

"Old age? I'm only five years older than you, asshole. No, I'm not being picky. I'm not in the mood to go home with anyone tonight." I was trying not to say too much and have them question me about Miranda. I hoped they'd take my answer and drop it, but I wasn't that fortunate. Rory was the next one to question me.

"Why not? Come on, when was the last time you slept with a woman?"

I thought back and realized it had been a couple of months. For some, that might sound like a short time, but I had a huge sexual appetite. I didn't sleep with a different woman every night or anything. You couldn't risk that kind of behavior. But usually I'd have been hooking up with someone,

even if it was one of the women I did allow repeats with. Knowing I wouldn't get away with not answering and if I lied, they'd most likely ferret it out, I gave up and told them. "About two months ago, why?"

"Jesus, you must be sick. What the hell? Do we need to get you to a doctor? If it's been two months, you need to find someone tonight," Aidan exclaimed.

"Leave him alone. Just because he's not being a total manwhore like the rest of you, doesn't mean there's anything wrong with him," Cara defended me. I blew her a kiss.

"Oh yes, it does. Unless he has a good reason, we're calling Dr. Keim," Rory said, as he took out his phone. If I didn't put a stop to this now, they'd have all the parents descending on me, and Dr. Keim, our personal physician, would be waiting at the compound when I got home.

"Enough! There's no need to call Dr. Keim. Rory, put down your goddamn phone. If you text the parents or the doc, I'm going to kill you. Jesus, can't a guy have any privacy in this family?" I groused. Being a close-knit family like ours could have its drawbacks.

"No," they all chimed in at once. Cara merely shrugged at me then shook her head no, too.

"Fine, if I tell you what's up, you have to swear you won't breathe a word to our parents."

As if choreographed, they all held up their right hands and crossed their hearts then acted like they poked their eyes. That came from the poem we'd heard as kids. We'd liked it so much, we'd used it whenever we wanted to swear to something.

"I haven't been feeling the whole casual sex thing lately. I think seeing Darragh find Ashlynn made it real for me, how empty my life is and how much I want to meet someone special. I'm only a year younger than him."

"Listen, I get it. We all have been feeling the pressure from the folks and seeing Darragh and Ashlynn has made it worse, but you can't give up on women. You have needs. Until

you meet someone you think might be the one, don't deprive yourself. How do you know one of those women might not be your *mo anamchara*?" Ciaran asked me. The others were nodding their heads in agreement.

"I know it's highly unlikely they are because I think I might have already met her," I said softly, hoping they might not hear me. Yeah, not likely.

"Who? When? Where? Do we know her? When do we get to meet her?" came the questions from around the table. I felt like I should be taking cover and waiting for a cease-fire. I gave a shrill whistle to stop them talking so I could answer them. They wouldn't be put off now, even if I tried. I must've been nuts to say that.

"You don't know her, or at least I don't believe you do. I'm not going to let any of you meet her until I get her to agree to go out on a date with me. After that, we'll see how much time it takes for me to figure out if she's the one. Once I know she is and she's comfortable, I'll introduce her to the rest of you animals. I don't want to risk running her off. I met her at the St. Augustine Trust Bank yesterday. She works there."

I stopped there and didn't answer the question about who she was. Cara was the one to pounce on that omission. "You didn't say who she is. What's her name, Cian?"

"Her name is Miranda."

"Do we know her family?" Rory asked.

"Oh yeah, you know her father." I paused before I dropped the bomb. I had opened my mouth, so I might as well confess it all. They gave me impatient looks. Taking a breath, I told them the rest. "Her father is Chief Tremblay."

The looks of astonishment on their faces were almost comical. Their mouths hung open and they blinked rapidly. It took almost a whole minute before anyone broke the silence. I shouldn't be surprised it was Rory. "You're lying. Tremblay doesn't have any kids. Come on, tell us who she really is."

"I didn't know he had any kids either, but she told me herself he's her dad. I have Cody checking into her for me.

She has no reason to lie. I found out when I asked her to go out to dinner with me and she said she couldn't because her dad would kill us both."

"And you met her at the bank yesterday and asked her out immediately?" Tiernan parroted back.

"Yes."

"What in the world were you doing in the bank?" Cara asked.

"Depositing the prior day's take from Divine. I had to close because Abbot had an emergency and had to leave early. When we closed, I didn't drop it off at the night drop at the bank because I had other plans. I was meeting you for dinner, Cara, remember? So, I waited and went in to do it yesterday morning when they opened. She waited on me."

"What does she look like?" Aidan asked.

"She's beautiful. I can't adequately describe her. You'll have to wait until you meet her, assuming you do."

"You know, I think I should go to the bank on Monday and make sure my accounts are all in order," Aidan said with a smirk on his face.

"I swear to *Dia*, if you idiots go in there and scare her away from going out with me when I ask again, I'll kill you. How likely is it that you won't tell the others?"

"Zero percent chance," Declan said gleefully.

"Will you at least keep it from the parents until I have a chance to woo her and get her to agree to a date? You know how they'll be if they catch wind of this."

That, at least, they all agreed to do. I had to take the wins I could get. With this out there, they kept trying to get more information out of me until they realized I had nothing else to tell them. Once they did, we settled back to having fun.

It was around midnight when Cara convinced me to accompany her to the dance floor on the second floor. She wanted to see who she might know. I agreed. When we got up to go, the whole family decided to go with us. This meant our

guards had to as well. We had to look like a huge entourage as we made our way down to that level. I was hoping we could leave soon. I was no longer feeling this place.

Miranda: Chapter 3

I couldn't believe I'd let Evie and Rosie talk me into coming to a nightclub with them. It wasn't my usual scene. Probably why I'd never come here before. I preferred smaller places, like a local bar or coffee shop. These kinds of places made it almost impossible to hear yourself think. However, it was Evie's birthday, and I had promised I'd go wherever she wanted to go. Hence, the reason I was here.

I would admit, the place was super nice. The owners had spent money to make everything in it look posh. It was a wonder they let us in the door. Evie explained the three levels to me. Rosie had been here before and knew the layout. None of us could afford the top floor, even though we'd tried to sneak up there and get a peek. Security hadn't wasted time in escorting us back down. I was happy to sit on the second floor and watch people dance.

My friends weren't. They insisted I had to not only have a couple of alcoholic drinks with them, but I had to get up and dance. Dancing was something I liked to do, but not in crowds like this, when people were pressing uncomfortably up against you. It made me feel a tiny bit claustrophobic.

Besides the crowded dance floor, the other thing I disliked was the men. They seemed to come out of the woodwork and found us. They flirted and tried their best to convince us to let them buy us drinks, to join us at our table, to dance with them and in some cases, to go home with them. I was polite when I turned them down. Too bad most of them weren't polite in return.

It was around midnight and I was praying my friends would be ready to leave soon. If I had to hang until closing time at two a.m., I might scream. I was ready to go home. Evie and Rosie didn't appear to be losing any steam, which told me my wish was unlikely to be granted. I enjoyed dancing as much as they did, but they loved all the male attention. I preferred for it to go away.

Leaving them to dance, I headed to take a break. I doubted I'd find our table free, but getting free of the mass of heaving bodies on the dance floor would be a relief. To my astonishment, I saw an empty seat at the bar. I was so focused on getting to it that I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings. Out of nowhere, my arm was grabbed. I swung around to confront whoever had grabbed me.

I froze for a couple of seconds. Standing there was one of the last people I expected to see. It was one of my dad's officers, Dwight Carruthers. I wanted to groan. Why the hell would he be here? Of all people to see me, it had to be him. Officer Carruthers was so far up my dad's ass, he'd better hope my dad didn't fart or it would blow out his brains. I couldn't stand him. Not only because he was a kiss ass but there was this vibe he gave off that I didn't like. He'd do anything, I think, to earn points with my dad.

Of course, my dad thought he was an exemplary officer and the others should be more like him. God forbid that happened. There should only be so many ass-kissers in the world. However, seeing that he was one of my dad's men, I pasted on a fake, polite smile and spoke to the asswipe. "Hello, Carruthers, I didn't know you came here." *If I had, I'd have stayed far away*, I thought to myself.

"Miranda, what in the hell are you doing in this place? This is no place for you. Come with me. I'll escort you home." He tugged on my arm, as if to take me with him. I tore it out of his grasp. He gave me a surprised look. *Honestly, did he think women would stand for him dragging them around like a dog on a leash?* Feeling kinship to the dog, I thought about biting him.

"Miranda, what's gotten into you? I only want to protect you. Your father will lose his mind if I tell him I saw you in here. Let's go. As long as you promise not to come here again, I won't tell him. It'll be our little secret." He gave me a smarmy look as he said the word secret. I wanted to puke on him.

As if I'd ever have a secret with this idiot. More than once, I'd wondered if he might be interested in me. Tonight,

with that remark and the way he was checking me out, I thought it was more than likely.

“I don’t need anyone to protect me. I can protect myself. As for my dad, I’m an adult. I can go wherever I please, Carruthers. There’s nothing wrong with dancing or drinking for that matter. I’m here with friends celebrating one of their birthdays. If you’ll excuse me, I need to go find them.”

As I turned my back on him and walked off, I saw the incredulous look on his face. Good. Apparently, he thought I’d do as he said. Wrong. It was bad enough I had to tiptoe around my dad. I refused to allow this dumbass to tell me what to do. He wasn’t anyone to me.

As I pressed my way through the crowd, making sure to look behind me frequently to ensure he wasn’t following me, I ran into someone. By the feel of the body, which was hard as steel, it was a man. I turned my head back around to apologize. I had to look up a bit to see the man’s face. When I saw it, my words of apology died in my throat.

Standing there, smiling down at me with a killer smile, was none other than Cian O’Sheeran. God, this would be my luck, running into one man I couldn’t stand and then into one I liked too much. Why was God so unfair? If Cian wasn’t who he was, I’d be more than happy to have run into him. Vaguely, as I took in the sexy man before me, it registered there were others with him.

“Well, it looks like this is my lucky night. Hello, Miranda, what’re you doing here? Care to join us on the third floor? It’s quieter up there and less crowded.” He flashed me a sexy smile. My legs felt a little weak when he did. As I fought to speak, I heard those with him start whispering. They were all scrutinizing me intensely.

“Mr. O’Sheeran, hello. Thank you for the invitation, but I’m not alone. I have to rejoin my party. Have a good night.” I tried to walk away, but he still had an arm around me, pressing me close to his body. It hadn’t even registered until then that he’d put an arm around me when I ran into him. Jeez, so much for my situational awareness. What was it about this

man that seemed to melt my brain cells? I'd been hard pressed to think of anything but him since yesterday. For me, that was very unusual. Men didn't snag my attention like that. I saw a frown appear on his handsome face.

"Party? Who're you here with? A date?" There was a growling tone to his voice.

"Not that it matters, but no. I'm here with two of my friends. We're celebrating one of their birthdays. Evie wanted to come here to celebrate."

Instantly, the frown disappeared from his face and he was back to smiling. "Well, let's find them and all of you can join us. We'll order a bottle of champagne. A woman should always celebrate her birthday with champagne."

I wanted to tell him no and walk off, but I couldn't do it. Knowing I might pay for this lapse in judgment later, I nodded like a simpleton and let him steer me in front of him. Instantly, men surrounded us and made a path. Were these bodyguards? Were they all for him? Glancing around at the men who had stayed the closest to him, I noticed some resemblance. Maybe these were family members. I racked my brain to recall what my dad had said about his family. I knew there were a lot of them. However, whenever he had gone off ranting about how they were destroying people's lives and St. Augustine, I'd tuned him out.

"Tell me if you see your friends, *a stór*," he uttered. It was hard for me to concentrate with his hand on my lower back burning a hole through my top. I felt like I was running a fever and my nipples hardened. Frantically, I scanned the crowd. I was about to call it quits and tell him they must have left and that I needed to leave as well when I spotted them. They saw me at the same time. They came toward us. Their eyes were devouring the men all around me. I didn't mind that they were checking out the others, but it did upset me to notice they looked at Cian as much as they did the others. The men surrounding us like a wall looked back at us.

"Are those your friends, Miranda?" Cian asked.

"Yes, that's them."

He gave a nod to the guards, and they allowed them to enter the protective circle.

“Oh my God, where have you been, Miranda? We’ve been looking all over for you. You said you were going to sit down, but we didn’t see you sitting anywhere. Why didn’t you tell us you knew the O’Sheeran family?” Rosie asked indignantly.

Leave it to her to recognize them. She loved those gossip magazines and shows on television. Whereas I ignored them, she didn’t miss one. I shouldn’t be surprised she recognized them. Evie didn’t say anything, although she did look pleased. Rosie, on the other hand, was batting her lashes at them and giggling. She was the more forward of the two of them. Honestly, she was always on the prowl for a man. She often lamented that she couldn’t find a boyfriend. I thought it might be because she flirted with every man she met. The number of guys she bragged about sleeping with made me cringe. No wonder she couldn’t get or keep a boyfriend.

“I don’t know them. Or at least I only know Cian here. We met yesterday when he came into the bank and I waited on him.”

“Seriously, you met him and didn’t tell us. What’re you doing with them now?” Rosie demanded.

“She mentioned that one of you ladies is celebrating her birthday. Why don’t you join us on the third floor? We’ll have some champagne to celebrate and if you want to dance, there’s more room up there,” Cian suggested cordially.

Rosie squealed in excitement. I mean, she honestly squealed like a teenager meeting a rockstar or celebrity. Knowing now that she’d heard his offer, she’d never allow us to leave without causing an ugly scene, I let the bodyguards lead the way. In no time, they’d made a path through the throngs of people to the top floor. The security who had run us off earlier for trying to get a peek let us through without a peep.

Acidly, I wondered how many women Cian and his family brought up here every night they were here. I bet it was

a lot, which led me to wonder how often did women go home with him at the end of the night? That thought made my mood sour. I hated the thought of him being with other women, which was ridiculous. It wasn't any of my business who he had sex with.

We were seated immediately, and a waitress came hurrying over to take our orders. Cian ordered a couple bottles of champagne. As she bustled away and my friends took in the even more swanky atmosphere of the top floor, I was bombarded with requests for introductions from the men and single woman with him. The ones I assumed were bodyguards had taken a seat at a nearby table.

“Sorry, how rude of me. This is my friend, Rosie.” I pointed to her simpering self. Then I pointed to Evie. “This is Evie. It’s her birthday we’re celebrating.” The guys all nodded and said hello to them then gave me an expectant look. I didn’t know what they wanted from me. Finally, one of them clued me in.

“We’re happy to meet your friends. Mind introducing us to you since Cian is too rude to do it?” He smirked at Cian, who glared at him. The other men were grinning.

“I’m Miranda.”

“And you know my brother from where again?” the same guy asked. Hearing him say he was Cian’s brother had me looking at him closer. He did look a lot like him, but then so did the others.

“Christ, stop it. You heard me say her name and heard her say where we met. Why don’t I introduce all of you to her? Although, if I was smart, I’d tell her you were no one,” Cian told his brother. It didn’t seem to faze him. He smiled wider.

Quickly he ran through their names and who they were. I got lost to be honest. I did recall the one he called brother was called Ciaran and the one young woman with them was his sister, Cara. The rest were his cousins.

“Nice to meet all of you. I hope we’re not keeping you from your own celebration tonight. What brings you here?” I

asked. That earned me stunned looks. *What had I said wrong?*

Rosie enlightened me after she laughed hysterically. “God, Miranda, you need to get out from underneath that rock you live under. Everyone knows Sirens is owned by the O’Sheeran family. It’s the place to go and to be seen. That’s why I convinced Evie we should come here to celebrate. You never know who you might meet or what fun you might have.” She fluttered her eyelashes at the guys and gave them a sexy look. I wanted to smack her across the table.

I’d known it was her idea to come here. I shouldn’t be surprised it was to prowl for men. Evie was usually more laid back in the kinds of places she wanted to go. She was more like me. To be honest, the reason Rosie and I had become friends was I’d befriended Evie, and she had been friends with Rosie since they were kids.

“Well, I don’t pay attention to those kinds of things, Rosie. I don’t call that living under a rock. I have other things to spend my time doing rather than listening to gossip shows and reading tabloids and magazines,” I snapped back.

I was tired of her taking tiny potshots at me. In fact, I was tired of her all together. It took tonight and her latest behavior to make me admit it. I’d avoided admitting it, because I was afraid if I wasn’t friends with her, I’d lose Evie as one.

She rolled her eyes. “Miranda thinks anything that doesn’t pertain to her job, the community center, or the homeless isn’t worth her time. She’s so boring. She needs to get a life,” she said acidly. Evie cast her a nervous look before glancing at me. I could see the apology in her expression. She often apologized for Rosie’s behavior.

“I don’t think there’s anything boring about her. Having concern for your community and those less fortunate than you is admirable. Our family is interested in those things as well. I’ll have to introduce you to my *mam* and my *aintíní*. They’ll love you,” Cian told me with a smile.

“Y-your what and what?” Rosie sputtered. She didn’t look happy at being called out like that. I was pleased about it.

“My mom and aunts. I forget, not everyone is versed in speaking and understanding *Gaeilge*.”

Rosie scowled and stayed quiet. This allowed Evie to speak. She engaged them in light talk. The champagne was delivered soon afterward, and we all drank a toast to Evie. It wasn't long before his brother and cousins asked them to get up and dance. They both eagerly accepted and headed to the dance floor. I wasn't in the mood. Cian stayed with me.

“You really didn't have any idea who I was yesterday or that my family owned this place, did you?”

“No, I didn't. I have no interest in those things. However, I was telling you the truth when I said if my dad knew I was even talking to you, he'd lose his mind.”

“Because he believes the rumors that my family is into a bunch of illegal things. I won't lie, when my *daid* was a young man, the family was. It was how his ancestors made a living after coming to America. After he met my mother and they started to have kids, that kind of life lost its appeal. He and my *uncaili* wanted to end the bloodshed between us and other families, both Irish and non-Irish. It has been many years since we were involved in any illegal business. All of our various ones are totally legitimate now.”

I didn't know what to say to that. He was so openly talking about a past life of crime with me, the police chief's daughter. I could see nothing but what appeared to be sincerity on his face and in his voice.

“Your father refuses to believe we're not dirty. He's been trying to find something he can pin on us for years, so I can understand why he'd lose his mind knowing we met, but that's not going to be enough to deter me, Miranda.”

“Deter you from what?”

“From convincing you to go out with me. Or from you and I getting to know each other much better. I want to know everything there is to know about you.” His voice lowered into a sexy grumble. I had to fight not to let him see me shiver in

awareness. His tone was making me hot again and my nipples were back to being hard pebbles.

“Mr. O’Sheeran, I don’t—” he cut me off.

“Miranda, please don’t call me Mr. O’Sheeran. I told you, call me Cian. Is it just your father’s reaction that has you so reluctant to get to know me? Or is it still your misplaced idea that we have nothing in common?”

“My father is a big issue, of course. I hate to be at odds with him. However, that’s not the only thing. Let’s be honest with each other. I mentioned it at the bank. You and I are from two different worlds. There’s nothing we can possibly have in common. You’d be bored in an hour with me. I don’t have a clue about your life, as Rosie showed you. What is it you truly want from me? Do you get some thrill out of chatting up ordinary women? Or have your usual conquests of rich women, celebrities, and other people in your circle of friends gotten boring and you want to go slumming?” I decided to hit him with all of it bluntly. I found when people weren’t expecting you to be totally blunt, they would tell you the truth. I was dying to know what he was after.

“Why the hell would you think any of those things? I’m not an elitist prick, Miranda. I don’t just associate with the rich and famous. Why is it so hard for you to believe that I’m interested in you, as a woman? I’m attracted to you. More than I can ever recall being attracted to a woman. I want to see where that might lead.” He was frowning.

As I tried to decide whether he was telling the truth or not, a horrible thought popped into my head. Had he lost a bet or was he trying to win one? Insecurity swamped me. I wanted to scream. Even now, my past was rearing its ugly head and haunting me. How could I ever be sure a man was into me and not doing it for some other reason?

“I’m sorry, but I can’t take that chance. The past has taught me not to believe in fairytales. If you’ll excuse me, I think it’s time for me to leave.” I came to my feet and he shot to his. He was reaching for me when one of the security staff

who stood at the top of the stairs came up to us. He had an uneasy look on his face.

“Mr. O’Sheeran, I’m sorry to disturb you, sir, but we have an issue.” As the security guard spoke, Cian’s family and my friends came back to the table. Right behind them were their bodyguards. They must have seen the club’s security approach us.

“What seems to be the problem, Faraz?” Aidan asked.

“There’s a police officer insisting that he be allowed to enter and he’s adamant that he speak to Ms. Tremblay. He said she’s with you.”

I groaned. I knew who it was. How did he even know I was up here? I thought I’d lost him downstairs before I ran into Cian. Suddenly, over the noise, I heard his grating voice yell, “I insist you let me through or I’ll have you arrested for holding her against her will. Miranda!” Carruthers yelled. He was trying to push past the remaining security guards at the top of the stairs. I cringed.

“Fucking Carruthers. What’s he doing here? And why is he so hot to get to you, Miranda?” one of Cian’s cousins asked. I think it was Declan. I was wondering how he knew Carruthers by name.

“Oh, he’s always hot for Miranda, isn’t he?” Rosie smirked at me. I resisted smacking her in the face. I was over her.

“He’s one of my dad’s men. I ran into him earlier and he wasn’t happy to see me here. He tried to get me to leave. Let me talk to him.”

As I moved toward Carruthers, I was accompanied by Cian. Not far behind were the rest of his party. Ugh, couldn’t this night be over? I didn’t want them to witness Carruthers treating me like a wayward child, or like he had any say in what I did or who I spent time with. When we reached him, I gave him my most withering look. He was still trying to push past the security guards. Faraz retook his position.

“Carruthers, what is your problem? No one is holding me against my will, so to threaten these people with arrest is ridiculous. The only one causing an issue is you. I insist you leave and stop bothering me. If you don’t, I’ll have to speak to my dad about you and your inappropriate behavior.”

“Miranda, it’s my duty to look out for you. Your dad expects nothing less. There’s nothing inappropriate about my behavior. Stop pretending like you don’t know what your dad wants.”

“Wants? Do clue me in on what he wants, since you seem to know something I don’t,” I hissed at him.

“He wants us to marry. It’s his fondest wish and mine too. I’ve let you pretend long enough. Come along and I’ll forget your brazen behavior in consorting with criminals.” He held out his hand. I stood there at a loss for words. *He and my dad wanted what?*

I heard a giggle which I knew had to be Rosie. However, that was drowned out by a deep growl. The next thing I knew, Cian had gently tugged me to stand behind him, and he was almost in Carruthers’ face.

“She’s not going anywhere with you, Carruthers. And I highly doubt her dad wants her with a worm like you. However, if he does, she’s a grown-ass woman and can decide who she spends her time with and who she dates and marries. Just to serve you notice, I intend for her to date me and who knows, maybe we’ll even get married. Why don’t you run home and cry to your chief about that? In the meantime, she stays here with me. I’ll make sure she gets home safely... sometime tomorrow.”

I wanted to call Cian out on his outrageous words, but I didn’t. I was enjoying what it was doing to Carruthers too much to ruin it. I’d have a chat with Cian after we got rid of this pain in my ass. I’d been right. He did want me. Eww, the thought made me sick to my stomach. Carruthers’ face turned dark red, almost purple, as he puffed up and choked on his ire. I watched in fascination to see what he would say or do. The explosion when it came was glorious.

“Y-you fucking degenerate ruffian! Miranda isn’t going to date or marry a man like you. She has more sense than that. She’s just upset that her dad and I know what’s best for her. She’ll soon come around once he talks to her. The last thing that’ll ever happen is him allowing his daughter to be with someone like you. Miranda, this is my last warning. Come with me now, or I’m telling your dad I saw you here, and you were with this bunch.”

“You can go to hell, Carruthers. Tell him whatever you want, but I’m not going anywhere with you. Now or in the future. This fantasy about us marrying is just that, a fantasy. I’d never marry a man like you.”

Before he could say anything else, two of the security guards began to maneuver him down the stairs. When he tried to break away to come back at us, they got a hold of him and escorted him down the stairs. The whole way, I could hear him screaming at them that he’d have them arrested. I hoped they weren’t going to get into trouble. I told Aidan that.

“Don’t worry, we have the right to ask anyone we want to leave. If they don’t, then they can be removed from the premises. If he tries to have them arrested, we have the best lawyers in the state. They’ll be out within the hour,” Aidan assured me.

“That may be so, but he’s not going to let this go. I think it’s best if I leave. Knowing him, he’ll call my dad as soon as he gets out to his car. I don’t want to cause you more trouble by being here. Like I said, Cian, this wouldn’t work even if we wanted it to.”

I started down the stairs. He was right behind me, along with his protesting family and my friends. They were all trying to convince me not to leave. I didn’t care if Rosie and Evie stayed. I wanted out of here. Tonight was too much for me. Having to fight my attraction to Cian when it was the last thing I wanted to do, on top of Carruthers’ illogical delusions, was more than enough.

“Miranda, don’t go,” Cian demanded.

“I’m leaving,” I stated firmly. I had to get out of here before my resolve weakened. I pushed my way through the crowds on the lower floors until I reached the front door. He caught my arm and swung me around to face him. His face was determined.

“Fine, you can go home and think about tonight, but let me be clear. This isn’t going to stop me from pursuing a relationship with you. Your dad and Carruthers be damned. I’ll see you later, *leannan*. Dream of me tonight, like I’ll dream about you,” he uttered, before he lowered his head and kissed me. I struggled faintly to break it, but it didn’t work. To be truthful, I didn’t fight that hard. His kiss was drugging and perfect. I lost my focus in no time. As his mouth devoured mine, I fought not to whimper and beg him to take me home with him.

When he broke it, I was panting. He looked a bit like he was too. Snapping his fingers, he pointed to one of their bodyguards. “Thomas, make sure she gets home safely.”

“Certainly, Cian,” his guard replied immediately.

“I don’t need an escort home.”

“You either let him do it, or I will.”

Knowing having him at my place was the last thing my tenuous self-control needed, I nodded and didn’t argue. Leaving him and his group at the entrance, I left the club. I noticed Rosie arguing with Evie. Luckily, we’d come in separate cars. At my car, Thomas opened my door after I unlocked it with the fob. As soon as I was seated, he shut it. I was wondering where his car was when a dark sedan pulled up alongside us. He got in it. I couldn’t see who was in the car with him.

Giving into the inevitable, I started mine and headed toward home. The whole way there, I went over the evening again. By the time I made it home, I still hadn’t come to any clear conclusions. Thomas was out and at my door in a flash and he insisted on walking me to my door and seeing me safely inside.

“Thank you, Thomas. I appreciate you making sure I got here safely, but it wasn’t necessary.”

“It was very necessary, Ms. I’ll see you soon. Go inside and I’ll stay until you’re safely locked inside.”

Not wanting to get into a debate about whether we’d see each other again or not, I didn’t say a word. I unlocked my door and entered. I quickly closed and locked the door behind me. Peeking out the peephole in my door, I watched him get into the sedan and leave. I sank to my butt on the floor and held my head. What was I going to do? It was bad enough fighting my attraction to Cian. Now, I had Keaton and Carruthers to worry about, along with an irate dad when he found out. This wasn’t the excitement I’d been wishing for to break up the monotony.

Cian: Chapter 4

It was all I could do last night to dodge the hundreds of questions my family had about Miranda. I wasn't going to talk about her right then. Tomorrow, I knew I'd have to, and I needed to prepare for it.

When she left the club, I had to watch her go when everything in me screamed that I go after her. It was my job to make sure she got home safely, not Thomas's job. As they drove off, I half paid attention to her two friends arguing. Evie was insisting they should leave and Rosie was demanding they stay and party with us longer. I knew a woman on the prowl when I saw it. She was hoping to end up in one of our beds tonight and it didn't matter to her which one of us it was.

How she was friends with Miranda, I had no idea. I ended the argument by informing them we were leaving too. Rosie pouted and tried her best to entice one of us to party with her somewhere more private. We all declined. The last sight of them was her mulish face as Evie led her to another car in the parking lot.

Sidestepping with difficulty my family's questions, we headed home. I tuned them out on the ride to the compound. All I could think about was Miranda. It wasn't a coincidence running into her at the club. It was fate. This only convinced me even more that she and I were meant to get to know each other better. At home, I escaped to my house, leaving them to talk about me.

As I lay in bed a little later, I thought about the night. It infuriated me that Carruthers thought he had some hold over her. She'd never be with someone like him. In fact, I was determined that the only man she'd be with going forward would be me. The feel of her against my body when she ran into me, the burning of my skin when it touched hers, and the taste of her lips, made me burn even more for her. I fell asleep thinking of her.

In the morning, she was the first thing I thought of when I woke up. I stayed in bed, thinking of her, until I knew I

was in danger of being late. Groaning, I got up to get ready. It was Sunday. The whole family had breakfast together almost every Sunday at the main house. There were very few excuses that were acceptable for missing it. Short of being out of town, sick as a dog or dying, you were expected to be there.

As soon as I entered the main house and walked into the kitchen, where I could hear everyone talking, I knew the ones I'd been with last night had opened their big mouths and blabbed about Miranda. All eyes landed on me expectantly. Those who hadn't met her were giving me the *hurry-up-and-spill* look while my parents were beaming as if I'd already announced I was engaged.

"Before you all start, I want to say to those of you who were with me last night, you're a bunch of big mouths. Wait, one day, I'll pay your asses back."

"Why would you keep this a secret?" Siobhan asked.

"I just met her Friday, for *son Chríost*. I haven't had a chance to learn anything about her yet. All I want is a date."

"You knew enough to ask Cody to look into her and then to kiss her at the club. I'd say you knew enough," Darragh insisted.

I narrowed my gaze on him. He had a self-satisfied smile on his face. Ashlynn was leaning against him, smiling too. "How the hell do you know I had Cody look into her? Does he run to you and tell you everything? I thought he worked for the family, not just you."

"I didn't know you did until you just confirmed it with that remark. I simply wondered. So, you are serious about her. Please don't tell us you're doing it to get laid or just to piss off her dad," he demanded.

"I don't give a rat's ass about Chief Tremblay, other than he's a complication. I wouldn't go after his daughter just to make him mad. We have enough trouble with him as it is. As for your slam about wanting to get laid, I won't dignify that with an answer," I said hotly. I was angry that anyone in my family would think I'd do either of those things with a woman

like her, especially with who her dad was. They should know me better than that.

“I’m just messing with you, Cian. I know you wouldn’t do either of those. Let’s face it, you don’t have to go to those lengths to get a woman to sleep with you,” Darragh stated.

“True, I don’t. However, there’s something about her that I’ve never felt with a woman before. I want to see what it is.”

“Oh, we’ll get to plan another wedding soon. I can’t wait,” my *mam* cried out happily.

“*Mam*, don’t get ahead of yourself. I didn’t say we were going to get married,” I cautioned her. If I didn’t, then she’d have the ladies helping her to plan our wedding down to the second.

“That’s not what you told Carruthers last night,” Ciaran chimed in to throw me under the bus. I should’ve smothered him when he was a baby.

“I only said that to piss that little cretin off. He was standing there thinking he was going to marry her, and she was supposed to just fall in line with the plan. He seems to think it’s what her dad wants and if he does, she’ll do it.”

“Sit down and tell us about her. Ciaran, Cara, and your cousins said she’s gorgeous and seems to be a down-to-earth kind of woman. Is it true, she had no idea who you were when she met you and she didn’t know we owned Sirens?” My *uncail* Patrick asked. I stopped resisting and sat down. They wouldn’t stop until I did.

In our kitchen, there was a massive table that sat off to one side. It’s where we liked to eat when it was only family. I caught the grin Alexis was sending my way. I winked at her and she laughed. In the short time she’d been part of our family, she’d become like another sister to us, just like Ashlynn had.

“She’s beautiful, and she’s closer to my age than his. I think I should go after her,” Tiernan said with a smirk. The fucker was right about one thing, he was closer to her age than

I was. He was thirty-three. However, there was nothing on this planet that would convince me to let one of my cousins or brothers have her.

“That might be true, but if you go sniffing around her, the family will be down a member. That goes for the rest of you. If anyone in this family is going to be with Miranda, it will be me,” I warned them. This had them all laughing at me, the jackasses.

“No one is going to try and take her away from you, *Mac*,” my *daid* said.

“I don’t know. You didn’t see her, *Uncail*. She’s drop-dead gorgeous. I might have to fight Cian for her,” Tiernan insisted.

“*Uncail* Cormac, *Aintín* Cyndi, you’re going to be minus a son if he keeps it up,” I warned them.

“Tiernan, leave your *col ceathrar* alone. Don’t tease him like that. A man in love will kill to defend his woman,” Cormac informed him matter-of-factly. Cyndi nodded her head in agreement.

“I’m just jerking his chain. I thought he was going to beat the hell out of Carruthers last night. The buffoon didn’t have enough sense to shut up. He truly believes he’s going to marry Miranda. You could tell she can’t stand his ass. I wonder if he told her dad she was with us at Sirens last night. Did he have the cops come back to the club after he was thrown out?” Tiernan asked Aidan.

“No, he didn’t. I waited to get the call, but it never came. I spoke to Faraz this morning, and he said all was quiet after we left. As for whether he told her dad, I don’t know. Hopefully not, because if he did, we should expect an unwanted visitor any minute now.”

I was glad to hear the security guards hadn’t been arrested. Faraz, Aidan’s head of security at the club, would know if the cops had been called. The thought of Tremblay coming to our door didn’t bother me, other than him possibly

persuading Miranda not to give me a chance. That might kill me.

“Well, when will we get to meet her?” Ashlynn asked, fighting to hide her smile. She knew how the family had been after Darragh when he met her.

“Don’t you start, you little troublemaker. You’re supposed to be on my side. You should feel sorry for Miranda and protect her from meeting this bunch,” I reminded her.

“Nope. I was thrown to the wolves, and everyone else who ends up in this family has to be treated to the same experience I was. If she can handle this lot, she can handle anything,” she remarked piously.

Boos rang out around the table. She dissolved into tears of laughter. Darragh gave her an adoring look and kissed her. *Dia*, he was whipped. It took a couple of minutes for everyone to settle down. I stayed quiet. Maybe they’d forget about me. Too bad, they weren’t that easily distracted. In no time, they were back to badgering me.

“Listen, all I know is she’s Chief Tremblay’s daughter and she works at the bank. I met her Friday when I made the deposit for Divine. I asked her out to dinner and she said she couldn’t. She thinks her dad wouldn’t stand for it and that we’re too different. From what one of her friends said last night, she spends time helping at the community center and with the homeless. I did ask Cody to see what he could find out about her. I assume she’s single. I kissed her and I hope we’ll see each other soon.” I quickly filled them in.

“Boy, her friend, Rosie, was an alley cat in heat, wasn’t she?” Rory muttered. I didn’t disagree. The others all mumbled yes.

“Cian, you have a week to find out what you can about her and to get her to agree to go out with you. If you haven’t gotten her to agree by then, we’ll have to see what we can do to help you two get together,” Maeve stated.

“*Aintín* Maeve, I’m begging you, don’t do it. I don’t want her to feel ganged up on or that she’s being forced to do

something she doesn't want to do."

"I have more tact than that. Trust us. I can understand how she might be leery of being involved with one of you. It's not like you haven't been all over the place with those women you insist on going out with." She grimaced.

"Miranda doesn't know about those women and I'd prefer to keep it that way. If she finds out, I might never get married and have those babies you all want so much," I warned them. This sobered them up. After that, they mercifully let the interrogation die down. It wasn't much longer before we were sitting down to a huge breakfast.

Like other rich people, we had servants. This place and our houses didn't clean themselves and we were too busy and uninterested in doing it ourselves, so we had cleaners. The main house had a chef. Her name was Agatha. She mainly cooked for big dinners, sometimes for everyday dinners and when we entertained. For Sunday breakfast, the women in our family insisted on doing the work.

Our parents had tried to balance the extravagant parts of our lives with ordinary things. They didn't want us to grow up to be unbearably spoiled and stuck up. Overall, I think we turned out well. I might have people to do the work for me, but I knew how to cook, do my own laundry, and even clean if I needed to. We'd all been expected to do chores growing up and had been expected to work and not just mooch money off the family trust. There weren't a lot of families like ours who could say the same.

After breakfast was over and we'd all pitched in to help clean up the mess, we spent several hours hanging out. Some of us went swimming while others hung out in the game room. Later, when I went home, I was feeling happy and more optimistic about my chances of winning Miranda. All I had to do was put my mind and skills into it. *Look out, Miranda Tremblay, I'm coming for you.*

Miranda:

I waited uneasily when I got up on Sunday for my dad to burst through my door and mention last night. I almost called him to say I was sick and wouldn't make it to our usual Sunday brunch, but I didn't. I refused to let him see me as a child. To my surprise, when we met at our brunch spot in town, he never said a word about Carruthers or Cian. I guess Carruthers hadn't tattled to him after all. I breathed a sigh of relief.

We met at Crystal's, the classy place in town that served breakfast and lunch. My dad loved their Sunday brunch and insisted we go there every week. I'd more than once told him I would cook for us, but he refused to change it. I enjoyed their food too, but thought the price was too much.

He had raised me to be frugal, and this was one of his rare indulgences so I didn't complain. It was nice to go out, sit down to be waited on, and eat a meal I didn't make myself. As we chatted, I relaxed more. He seemed happy and he wouldn't be if he knew about Cian. He was regaling me with anecdotes about some of the people he'd met with this past week. He was careful never to divulge anything I shouldn't know, but he did enjoy the absurdities of some people. After hearing about his week, he asked me about mine. "How was your week? Anything new or exciting happen?"

For a moment, I debated whether I should tell him about Keaton Hill. I couldn't mention Cian or Sirens. As I debated, I happened to glance around the restaurant. My gaze landed on one of the last people I wanted to see. Sitting at a table alone, across the dining room, was Keaton. He was staring at me and my dad. Seeing that he hadn't stopped spying on me and I knew it was intentional, I gave up all thoughts of keeping it to myself. He deserved whatever happened to him.

"Actually, there was something. See that man over there?" I pointed straight at Keaton. His eyes widened as I did it then he got a startled look on his face when my dad turned his head to look.

“Yeah, what about him?”

“He’s a customer at the bank. For months he’s been coming in and having me do stupid things he could do at home on his computer. About five months ago, he asked me out. I turned him down and I’ll admit, I lied to him. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, so I lied and told him I was a lesbian.”

“Miranda, God, only you’d think to say that.” My dad groaned as he glanced back at me.

“Well, I wish I hadn’t. He came into the bank again on Wednesday and told me he knew I lied. He proceeded to ask me about the older man I was with every Sunday. I had to tell him it wasn’t the place for such a conversation or any of his business. Later, when I left work, he was waiting for me beside my car.”

Dad stiffened and sat up rigid. His head whipped around to look at Keaton. The fire coming out of those eyes was great to see. He shoved back his chair and came to his feet. He strode hard toward Keaton’s table, and I got up to follow. I might want him to persuade Keaton to leave me alone, but I didn’t want him to hurt him. That’s the last thing the chief of police needed was an assault charge against him. “Dad, stay calm.”

“Stay calm? He’s obviously been watching you, Miranda. Men like that are dangerous. I want him to know if he doesn’t stop immediately, I’ll have his ass thrown in jail. Have you ever seen him following you?”

“I’ve seen him around, but not often. I don’t know if he was following me or not,” I hurried to tell him. I was shocked to see that Keaton remained seated rather than running. He appeared relaxed. When we reached his table, Dad went on the attack.

“I understand you’ve been stalking my daughter. You will stop immediately and stay away from her or else. I’m the chief of police and I can make your life hell if you don’t. She’s not interested in you. Find someone else who is. In fact, I think it would be in your best interest to find a new bank. If she tells

me she sees you following her, or you approach her again, we're going to be having a very different conversation."

"Sir, I don't know what your daughter has been telling you, but I'm not stalking her. I assure you. I do have an account at her bank and your daughter often does wait on me, but that's merely a coincidence. I admit, I did ask her out a few months ago and she turned me down. I recently was here enjoying brunch and saw her with you. When I mentioned it to her last week, she informed me you were her father and that she lied to me about being a lesbian. That was the end of it," he stated calmly.

I gasped. "That's a lie. You were upset and waited in the parking lot for me. You spouted off about us being perfect for each other and that we should get married and have kids. I've run into you around town more than once."

"True, I have seen you around town, but that's bound to happen in a town this size. As for waiting for you in the parking lot, I don't know what you're talking about. Sir, I think your daughter might be looking for some attention. I have no reason to force myself on a woman who isn't interested in me. I understand why you'd be upset if she told you those things about me and I won't hold it against you. As a father, you have to protect your daughter. I'd do the same if I had any. I hate to be rude, but If you'll excuse me, I'm done with my meal and I have a date. It was nice to meet you and thank you for the tremendous job you do."

The bastard stood up like he didn't have a worry in the world, placed some bills on the table, nodded cordially at my dad, then sauntered out. Dad turned to stare accusingly at me.

"You don't believe him, do you? He's lying, Dad," I told him. I could tell he was doubting me. What the hell?

"Miranda," he growled low to me. People were staring at us. He marched back to our table. He didn't give me a chance to sit or say another word. Like Keaton, he laid out enough money to cover our bill plus the tip, then gestured for me to follow him.

Out in the parking lot, he uttered softly to me, “I don’t know what that was about, but don’t ever embarrass me like that again. I have a reputation to uphold and going off on men where you lie and say they’re stalking you and making unwanted advances isn’t helping me maintain it. What if I’d punched him or something?”

“I didn’t make it up! He’s a sociopath or something.”

“If he had done something wrong, there’s no way he would sit there like that. He was too calm to face me if he was lying. I suggest you go home and think about what you just did. You embarrassed me, him, and yourself. God, I never thought my own daughter would act so immaturely. Did you ask him out, and he turned you down and this was your way to get back at him?”

His accusations and his determination to believe I lied cut to the bone. He had no basis for thinking that of me. I’d always been the good daughter who didn’t cause problems or lie. As the burn of anger and shame rolled through me, I thought the hell with him. If he wanted to believe that, then my days of caring about what he thought were done. I’d take care of Keaton myself if he persisted. If Carruthers became a nuisance, I’d deal with him too. And if Cian O’Sheeran ever asked me out again, I’d say yes in a heartbeat.

I didn’t say another word to him. Instead, I marched to my car and got in. As I pulled out of the parking lot, I didn’t bother to even look at my dad. The whole drive home, all I could do was fume about it. Suffice it to say, the remainder of my weekend sucked.



When I woke up Monday morning to go to work, I had a surprise waiting for me. Sitting on my small patio in front of my door was a vase of beautiful flowers. They were a mix of roses, lilies, and other flowers I didn’t know the name of. As I lifted them to check them out, dreading they were from Keaton or Carruthers, I saw a card tucked into the middle of them. Opening it, I read the note. Instantly, I was filled with relief followed by happiness.

Beautiful Miranda, these don't come close to comparing to your beauty, but I hope they bring a smile to your face and some joy to your day. Until we meet again, Cian.

Hugging them to my chest, I took them inside and sat them in my bedroom right next to my bed. Humming to myself, I left my apartment to go to work. I couldn't wipe the smile off my face. I was still wearing that smile when I took my seat at the drive-thru window. I was happy to be working that position today.

The first part of the morning went by quickly since I had a steady stream of cars. When I took my mid-morning break, Iris cornered me in our small breakroom. "What made you so happy this morning? I swear, you look like you won the lottery. Did you meet someone new when you went out Saturday night with Evie and Rosie?"

She knew all about my plans for the weekend. We often talked about what we had planned, only I usually had nothing exciting to tell her or Kim.

"No, I didn't meet someone new on Saturday." It wasn't a total lie. I met Cian on Friday.

"Well, then, what is it? After your run-in with Keaton-the-creep-Hill last week, I thought you would still be frowning."

"Don't ruin my good mood by reminding me of that asshole. Wait until I tell you what happened yesterday." Knowing we didn't have more than ten minutes for our break, I brought her up to speed. She was upset for me.

"Miranda, I can't believe your dad would say or do that. What was he thinking? The man needs his head examined. If you want, I'll tell him exactly what was said. I heard the whole thing in here and saw him with you in the parking lot later."

"No need for that. I decided to let my dad think what he wants."

"So what put that smile on your face?"

“Flowers,” I responded, as I got up to return to work. She raced after me.

“From whom?” she whispered rapidly as she took her seat at the counter and I kept going toward mine.

Smiling over my shoulder at her I said, “From Cian.” Her gasp and stunned look made me smile harder. I knew I’d be interrogated at lunch, but I didn’t care. I was happy, and I wasn’t going to hide it.

I was right. As soon as it was time for lunch, she and Kim practically dragged me into a corner in the breakroom and started interrogating me about Cian. They’d barely given me time to grab my salad from the fridge. In between bites, I told them about Saturday night, including Carruthers. They were suitably irate over his presumptive behavior and equally gaga over me not only meeting Cian again but getting to go to the third floor of Sirens and spending time with him and his family. Unlike me, they did know all about him and his family. Was I the only one who didn’t know?

“Oh my God, you and Cian O’Sheeran together. I’d have passed out if he took me to the third floor of Sirens and ordered champagne. Then to hear him tell Carruthers off like that. It’s so romantic, and he sent you flowers. So, when are you two seeing each other again?” Kim asked excitedly.

“We haven’t made any plans to go out. I told you what he said before I left Sirens. I haven’t seen or spoken to him since then. The flowers were on the porch this morning. Maybe he was just being nice or something.”

“Men like him don’t give you flowers just to be nice. Mark my words, he’s going to call you or come see you. I bet it won’t be long,” Iris babbled.

“He doesn’t have my number.”

“You don’t think he can find that out? Please, he probably had that by Friday night. Promise us, when he does, you let us know we were right. And if you go back to Sirens and the top floor, take us with you. I’ve always wanted to see

it,” Kim gushed. It was hard, but I distracted them by talking about their weekends while we finished our lunch.

The rest of the day passed a little slower, but still, overall, it was a quick day. I escaped them and went to my car while they were busy yakking at someone else. I headed to the store. I had been too distracted Saturday to go before going out to the club and too pissed yesterday to do it. I needed to pick up my fresh fruits and vegetables for the week.

As I shopped the grocery aisles, I recalled the last time I was here and ran into Keaton. This prompted me to look around for him. Thankfully, I didn’t see him. It didn’t take me long to finish and get home. Tonight, I was in the mood to make a homemade shepherd’s pie. I wanted comfort food. I was still upset about my dad, even though the flowers had lifted my spirits.

Changing into my comfy clothes, I started preparing it. I hadn’t gotten to the stage of putting it together when my doorbell rang. Wondering who it could be, I wiped my hands and hurried to answer it. Maybe it was Dad and he was coming to apologize. A peek out the peephole had me gasping in shock. I stood frozen, wondering if I should answer the door.

Cian: Chapter 5

I'd waited as long as I could to see Miranda again. I lasted until Monday evening after work. Now, I was standing in front of her apartment door, knocking. I knew she had to be home because Thomas pointed out that her car was in the parking lot. I had to threaten him to get him to leave me here. I didn't need or want him hanging outside. Finally, her door opened. She was giving me a startled look.

"Cian, what a surprise. What brings you here?"

I knew I might look like an idiot for just showing up without calling or being invited, but I was hoping since she opened the door, that she was willing to let me in. All I wanted was to see her and talk. I had this overwhelming urge to get to know all I could about her as fast as I could.

"Hello, Miranda. I stopped by, hoping I might convince you to go out to dinner with me tonight. I would've stopped by the bank earlier to ask, but I got caught up in a business meeting that wouldn't end. When it was over, I realized I didn't have your number but knew where you lived from Thomas." I told that tiny fib. In reality, I could've called Cody and gotten her number within minutes, but I didn't.

"Won't you come in?" she asked, which made me smile harder. She turned around and led me inside. I couldn't help but take in the sight of her in casual clothes. Her yoga pants were molded to her delicious ass. I had to fight not to reach out and touch it. If I did, she'd likely slap my face and kick me out.

Suddenly, she swung around to face me. Thankfully, I had my eyes off her ass by then and she didn't catch me. She swung back around and kept walking. I closed the door behind us and flipped the deadbolt. She led me into her kitchen and pointed to one of the stools at her tiny island. Immediately, she went into hostess mode. "Have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Whatever you're having." I gestured to her glass of red wine.

“It’s just a glass of regular red wine. I have white wine, lemonade, water, iced tea, and soda in the fridge. Sorry, no champagne,” she joked and I chuckled.

“Despite what you might think, I don’t drink champagne all the time. I’ll have what you’re drinking. I see I’m too late to take you out to dinner. What’re you making?” I gestured toward the bowls she had on the counter, as she poured me a glass of wine and handed it to me.

“Sorry, yes, it is too late to go out. I already started to make dinner. I’d invite you to stay, but it’s only shepherd’s pie. Nothing exciting.” As she told me that, she got into one of the cabinets and took out a cast-iron pot with a lid on it.

I laughed again. “Miranda, I’m Irish. Who do you think invented shepherd’s pie? Besides, even if we hadn’t, give an Irishman anything with potatoes in it and he’s happy, as cliché as that sounds. If you’re serious about the invitation, I’d love to stay for dinner. My *mam* hasn’t made it in ages.”

“Your mom makes it?”

“Of course, it’s a family favorite.”

As she started to put it together, I watched and took a sip of my wine. It wasn’t bad, even if it was cheap like she said. It didn’t compare to our wine in Temecula, but it was nothing to be ashamed of either. Seeing she seemed a bit stiff and wanting to put her at ease, I stood up.

“Here, let me help. I hate sitting here watching you do all the work,” I said before I came around the counter. I washed and dried my hands before I picked up the iron pot and placed it between us.

“Cian, you don’t have to help. It doesn’t take much to put this together. Why don’t you sit and we can chat?”

“Sorry, but I can’t do that. If I did and my *mam* or *aintíní* found out, they’d disown me after boxing my ears.” I made sure to look terrified as I told her that. She laughed then nodded. Working together, it took no time for us to get it together. I think I surprised her that I did know how to make it.

Once the pie was in the oven baking, she picked up her wine glass and I grabbed mine.

“Let’s go sit in the living room while that bakes,” she suggested. She led the way. It was small yet felt cozy. She only had enough room for a loveseat and one chair. We sat down on the loveseat.

“I forgot to thank you for the beautiful flowers you sent this morning. I found them when I left for work.”

I saw the pleasure on her face as she thanked me. “You’re more than welcome and I’m glad they brightened your day. It was early when I dropped them off. I didn’t know if you were awake yet so I didn’t knock.”

She choked on a sip of wine. “W-what? You brought them yourself?”

“Yes, I’d never leave that to someone else, Miranda. A woman like you deserves only a man’s best. Having others deliver them isn’t my best. I meant what I said Saturday night. I want to get to know you and see if we can have a relationship.”

“Cian, so much has happened since Saturday night, I can’t even begin to straighten it all out in my head. I know what you said and I want to believe you, I do, but it doesn’t seem real.”

“First, let’s address what has happened since Sirens.”

“My dad and I sort of got into it at brunch yesterday,” she told me, as she frowned at her hands. She’d set her glass on the table in front of the sofa. I set mine down too.

“About me and you being at Sirens? So, Carruthers did run his mouth to your dad,” I said, trying not to let my anger come through. I knew that fucker Carruthers would run to Tremblay and blab.

“No, he didn’t tell my dad. It had nothing to do with you or Sirens. It had to do with the creepy man from the bank, who my dad let bamboozle him into thinking I was trying to seek attention and lied. I’m so mad at my dad right now, I could scream,” she muttered.

“Creepy man? What man? What did he do and say?” I tried not to let it sound like an order, but I wasn’t completely successful.

She looked up at me. I could tell she hadn’t intended to tell me that. It had slipped out. She instantly tried to distract me and downplay it. “Oh, you know, just some guy who’s a little weird. He’s really harmless. We ran into him when we had brunch at Crystal’s. It’s not anything to worry about. I’m sure my dad and I will be back to our old selves in no time. How did you spend your Sunday? Did you do anything exciting or fun?”

Her attempt at diverting me was lame. I let her see that I wasn’t buying it. “Miranda, you’re lying to me. He’s more than a little weird man if you felt the need to mention him and tell me your dad took his side against you. I know we don’t really know each other yet, but I think I’ve gotten enough of a glimpse at your character to know you’re not someone to overreact. Call it a gut instinct.”

“Cian, I really don’t want to give this person more attention than he deserves. I don’t want to talk about him, okay? You said you wanted us to get to know more about each other, have dinner, and maybe see if this has the potential to go somewhere. If that’s true, let’s concentrate on that.”

I was silent for a few moments. I didn’t want to drop it, but I also didn’t want to push her and be shown to the door. Finally, I nodded. “Okay, I’ll drop it this time, but only if you make me a promise.”

“What kind of promise?”

“That if this man continues to be a creep, or you feel threatened in any way by him, that you’ll tell me. I have no idea why your dad would believe him over you. Maybe he was just having a bad day or something. Honestly, your dad is a mystery to me and my family, other than the fact he would love to arrest all of us and throw our asses in prison and throw away the key,” I said, trying to lighten her tense expression.

“If he’s heard the story that you told me about your family, then I can see why he’s skeptical, Cian. If he hasn’t

spent any time around you, then there's no way he could know the real you. I don't know the real you. I'm going on faith that you were telling me the truth, which is scary for me. I tend not to be that trusting of a person," she admitted, which I was happy to hear she was putting her faith in me.

I scooted the scant inches between us and took her hand in mine. She didn't pull away from me. "I know, and I'm so damn glad you're taking a chance to get to know me. It's weird for me too. I don't meet someone and have what I think is an instant urge to get to know them like I have with you. As for saying that I want to see if we could have a relationship—"

She interrupted me. "Not your style? I think I get that now. I truly didn't know anything about your family other than what my dad has said. So, after I met you, I'll admit, I did some internet sleuthing."

I groaned and closed my eyes. The very last thing I wanted her to find out about was my history with women. At least not this early in our acquaintance. "You read those articles about me and the different women I've been seen with," I stated bluntly. Now that she had brought it up, there was no need to dance around it.

"Yes, I did. Even assuming most of them were lies or exaggerations, you and your family are not men who're short on female companionship. You have no need to wine and dine a woman. In your life, women seem to be interchangeable. That has me more confused and worried. Assuming you're ready to possibly have a relationship, why not with one of them or another woman who's from your background?"

I heard the genuine puzzlement in her tone. I didn't like it at all. For one, I wanted her to take my request seriously. Second, I hated the thought that she felt she was less than me just because I had more money than she did. She'd insinuated that more than once.

"I believe when we get to know each other better, we'll find our backgrounds aren't that different." I saw her open her mouth, as if she was about to disagree. I hurried to continue.

“Yes, my family and I have money. We have a lot of it and we own numerous businesses. However, that doesn’t define us. Underneath that wealth, we’re just a regular family. We get together to have breakfast every Sunday like you have brunch with your dad. We hang out and go places together to have fun and to relax. We argue and have misunderstandings like all families do. Right now, we’re all excited and counting the days until my cousin, Darragh, marries the love of his life, Ashlynn. He met her a few months ago and fell madly in love with her instantly, and she did the same with him. They can’t wait to get married and start a family.”

“I read something about him getting engaged. It’s nice to hear they’re a love match. I think a lot of people, even me, assume that when wealthy people marry, it’s for things like more money, power, or as business agreements. That sounds horrible when I say it out loud. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You’re being honest, which is what I want you to be. You’re not entirely wrong. In many cases, they are those kinds of arrangements, just not in my family. You’ll never find one of us agreeing to an arranged marriage for any reason. All our parents were love matches, and that’s what we all want. It’s just taken much longer than most of us ever expected to find that person. Darragh has given the rest of us hope. And our parents hope since they’ve been dying for grandchildren for years.”

She relaxed into the cushions and sighed. She was half-smiling. “I have this image of a group of parents all huddling together, plotting out ways to throw likely candidates in front of their children, hoping they’ll fall for one of them.”

I laughed. “That’s not far from the truth. I swear, my *aintín* Maeve, Darragh’s *mam*, has been called a witch by many people over the years. If she truly had those capabilities, I could see her getting together with my *mam* and my *aintín* Cyndi and cackling over a cauldron, making love potions.”

She chuckled and shook her head. “Your aunt has been accused of being a witch? Why?”

“When my *uncail* Patrick first met her, she was helping people out with their various aches and ailments, using herbs and ointments she made from various plants. Patrick thought she was a quack since she was treating our grandmother with them. He wasn’t very nice to her. It wasn’t the best start to their relationship. However, over the years, she’s helped so many people that it became a rumor. She’s a woman well read and versed in homeopathic cures. To this day, people still come to her for things rather than going to their doctors. She’s good about pushing them to go to see their medical doctors rather than to rely just on her potions and creams.”

“Oh, that sounds so interesting. I’ve always wondered if those truly work. Some people swear by them. I’d love to pick her brain.”

Seeing an opportunity to get more time with her and to expose her to my family, I took it. After all, if she couldn’t get along with my family or they couldn’t get along with her, then she wasn’t the woman for me, no matter how attracted to her I was. “I can arrange that. You should come over to the compound soon. We’ll hang out, swim in the pool, and cook. She loves talking about her plants.”

“Well, maybe one day. I hate to horn in during family time. What do you mean, the compound?”

Before I could answer, the stove timer went off. She got up and headed to the kitchen. I followed her and beat her to the oven. Using the potholders she had on the counter, I took the food out and sat it down on the hot pad she had there. Seeing I had that under control, she went into a cabinet then a drawer to get plates and silverware. I went back to get our wine glasses and poured more wine into them. As she dished up two plates of the pie, I answered her.

“That’s what we call where we live. It’s probably odd to people, but we all live in one big walled property. It has acres and acres of land to it, so no one is living right on top of each other. We have privacy. Each of us kids has our own house. Our parents all still live in the main house. It’s where they raised us when we were growing up.”

She picked up her wine and plate and walked over to the small table and chairs in the corner of her kitchen. I did the same. I hurried to set mine down so I could pull out her chair. She gave me a sweet smile and said thank you. Taking my seat, I got ready to taste her shepherd's pie.

"You all grew up in one big house? I read there are a lot of you. How big is the main house? Lord, I can't imagine growing up like that. I'm an only child. It was me and my dad from seven years old onward."

"It wasn't weird for us, since it was the only way we ever lived. My *daid* and *uncaili* are very close. They ran the family business together. They wanted everyone together where they'd be safe. With future growth in mind, in hopes their children would want to stay close too, they bought a huge property and had it walled in."

"Wow, that's amazing. And all of you did exactly that? I'd love to see it one day."

"You will. Now, let me try this pie and see how good we are as cooks."

She chuckled, then we took our first bites. It tasted different from what my *mam* made, but it was no less good. I gave an appreciative groan. "Damn, that's good, Miranda."

"I bet it's not as good as your mom's."

"It is. I'll admit, you use some different spices than she does, but it's still delicious. I hope you weren't expecting to have leftovers for lunch tomorrow, because I don't think you'll have any of this left."

She looked pleased. As we continued to eat, we talked more. It was just ordinary things people talked about when they were getting to know each other—favorite childhood memories, places visited, places we wanted to visit. We shared our majors in college. Boring to some, but I wanted to know all about her. She explained how she lost her mom when she was seven in a car crash. Her dad had been alone and had to raise her on his own. By the time we were finished with dinner and we talked more, sitting on her sofa, I felt like I had a better

understanding of her. It only fed my desire to know even more. I was praying she felt the same.

I saw her smother a yawn. As much as I wanted to stay and talk longer, I glanced at the clock on the wall and saw it was already after ten o'clock. We both had to work tomorrow. Smothering my disappointment, I gestured at the clock. "I didn't know it was this late. We both have to go to work in the morning. I think it's time for me to say goodnight. Why don't you walk me to the door?"

She didn't object. At the door, I opened it then turned to face her. "I had a great time tonight, Miranda. I hope I didn't bore you or overstay my welcome. I'd love to do this again soon. Would you consider going out to dinner with me this week? I'll be sure to call ahead of time."

"You didn't overstay your welcome, Cian, and I'd love to go out to dinner. Let me jot down my number." She grabbed a notepad out of the drawer of the small table by the door. She quickly wrote it down then handed it to me. I slid it into my pocket. I wanted to shout for joy that she'd agreed.

"Good night," I told her softly. I should've left but I couldn't without giving her a kiss. I held myself in control. When I was done, her pupils were dilated, which told me it had affected her as much as it did me. Before I tried to convince her to let me stay, I exited the door. I didn't go far. I waited to make sure she locked the door behind me. Hearing the deadbolt click, I continued to the parking lot.

Damn, I'd have to wait for Thomas to come and get me, but knowing him, it wouldn't take him long. He would've parked somewhere nearby. Reaching the lot, I shook my head. Sitting there was one of our cars with him behind the wheel. I got in and looked at him.

"Did you leave like I told you?"

"Nope, but I had a book to read. I'm gonna hazard a guess and say it went well since you've been there for almost four hours."

“It did. I’m going to be taking her out to dinner this week. Don’t plan on driving. I want to drive her myself.”

“You know I can’t leave you totally alone, Cian. There’s still a possibility of one of Ivo’s people coming after the family.”

“Fine, but you stay out of sight. She’s not used to having bodyguards around. I don’t want to scare her off. I’m working on getting her to come to the compound soon.”

On the drive home, he asked me about her and I shared a few things, but most of it I kept to myself. I wanted to savor getting to know her and not have anyone in my family know what I did. They could form their own opinions of her when they got to know her. Now, I had to work on my next move. Dinner wasn’t the only thing I wanted to do this week.



My good mood hadn’t disappeared by the next morning. I was still riding high from how well last night went with Miranda. I was whistling before I got into the car to head into work. Since many of us were all going to be in the main office in Jacksonville, we were riding together in one of our limos. For those going to businesses or having other places to visit during the day, they were going in separate cars.

I almost wished I’d driven alone when I got in the car and was immediately bombarded with questions about how last night went with Miranda. How in the hell did they even know I’d seen her? If Thomas had been running his mouth, I was going to kill him. Darragh, Ashlynn, Shane, Fallon, and Cathal were my interrogators. This must be what it was like when being interrogated by the IRA. I tried to play innocent. “Who said I saw her last night?”

“No one had to. That smile on your face and the way you were whistling told us that. Unless you were out with some other woman last night,” Cathal stated.

“Hell no, I wasn’t out with anyone but Miranda! I told you, I want to get to know her. I believe we can have a real relationship,” I snapped angrily at him.

He gave a satisfied smirk to the others. “I told you, he saw her. I saw Thomas bring him home after ten last night. By his reaction right now, I’d say we’ll be getting to meet her soon and she’ll be around a lot, if not all the time.”

I kicked him in the leg. He gave me the middle finger. “*Ceann cac*, you did that on purpose. If I do get her to come to the compound or let her meet the rest of you, you’d better be on your best fucking behavior. Yes, I was at her place last night and we had dinner. She’s agreed to go out to dinner with me this week.”

“Was dinner all you got last night?” Shane asked.

“That’s none of your business, asshole,” I told him.

“Were you all this bad with Darragh when he met me?” Ashlynn asked.

“They were nosy bastards. I was worried they’d run you off, so I know how Cian feels. If you don’t behave and he doesn’t hurt you, I will,” Darragh warned them.

He gave them steely-eyed looks. I gave him a fist bump. Ashlynn just shook her head and smiled. The rest of the ride into the office, they were on their best behavior. I knew it wouldn’t last. When they got me alone, they’d start the interrogation again.

I escaped to my office before they could corner me. I had work to do and not all of it pertained to Divine. I was working on another gift to send to her. Flowers had been a good start. They might seem cliché, but I’d found most women loved to get them. The next obvious choice would be to send her chocolates, however, I didn’t want to do that. It had to be something unexpected and unique, like her.

Based on our conversation and her interest in the things *Aintín* Maeve did with her extracts and elixirs, I decided to ask her for help. In addition to making her medicinal remedies, she also made skin care products—lotions, bath oils, body creams and other things that not only the women in our family loved, but numerous friends. They were always asking her to make

more. Knowing she was at home, I rang her. She picked up right away. “Cian, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong. I was calling to see if you’d do me a favor.”

“Of course I will. What do you need?”

“I’d like a basket of your girly creams and stuff that everyone raves about. Do you have anything that’s not too flowery but still has a hint of floral to it and maybe has a clean citrus smell?” I was thinking of what Miranda had smelled like the times I’d been close to her.

“I do. I’m assuming this is for Miranda.”

“It is. I want to send it to her house, so she has it when she gets home from work tonight. Is that enough time for you to get something together?”

“I have some stock set back. I can do it. You’re in Jacksonville today, all day, aren’t you?”

“I am.” Damn, if I’d thought of it, I’d have driven myself, so I could leave early and deliver it myself. I planned to resist seeing her tonight, but still surprise her with something.

“I’ll get it all together and wrapped up pretty, then I’ll drop it off, if you’re alright with that. Just send me her address. I promise, I’ll do it before she gets home from work, so it’s there when she gets home. I think that’s a great idea, by the way.”

“If I give you her address, promise not to give it to the others? I don’t want them bugging her. She’s still getting to know me.”

“Cian, I promise. We’re all eager to meet her, but we’re not going to stalk her at her house. Trust me. Text me her address. Do you want me to put any kind of note in it?”

I felt weird asking her to write a note for me.

“No, I’ll send her a text or call her after she’s home from work so she knows it was from me. We talked about your

remedies and skin care stuff last night. She's fascinated with all that and wants to pick your brain someday."

I heard her crow with glee. "Oh my, I can't wait to meet her. If she's into my kind of stuff, we'll have hours of stuff to talk about. Do whatever you need to do today and leave this to me. I'll make it beautiful for her. I'll see you later."

"Thank you, *Aintín. Mo ghrá thú.*"

"*Mo ghrá thú,*" she replied before hanging up. I knew she'd be running around on cloud nine today.

With that out of the way, I settled into work. I was looking into a new line of fine jewelry from a designer in Italy. I thought he would be a great addition to the ones we carried already in our Divine stores. The more I looked at his line the more I liked it. There were several pieces I could picture Miranda wearing. I knew it was too soon to give her jewelry, but I tucked that thought away for later. What was the use in owning jewelry stores if you didn't buy the woman in your life jewelry? To date, I've only given jewelry to the women in my family.

I ended up working steadily until lunchtime when I was called into the conference room. Wondering what we had to meet about, since nothing was on my schedule, I hurried to see what was wrong. When I entered, I saw all my family members working at the office gathered there. There were boxes of takeout food on the table. Good, I was starved. Sitting down, I grabbed a plate.

"Whoever ordered the food, thanks. So, what's this meeting about? Did something happen?"

"Nothing other than you've got yourself a woman and you're having *Mam* put together a gift basket of her best products for her. She has to be something else, because as far as any of us know, you've never given a woman any of her stuff," Rian piped up. He was one of Darragh's brothers.

"*Chríost,* are you serious? Damn it. Is there nothing secret or private in this family?" I complained. Had Maeve

texted the whole family as soon as I hung up?

“Why are you keeping it a secret? And no, *Mam* didn’t tell us. Siobhan went over to the house and saw her working on a basket. She asked her who it was for and she said Miranda,” he added before stuffing fried rice into his mouth.

“I just don’t want her to open her door and find my whole family there, trying to get a look at her or trying to talk to her before she’s ready. We’re not exactly a small bunch or the sanest people. She’s just getting to know me.”

“Does her dad know she’s seeing you?” Shane asked.

“No, not unless she tells him today. They’re not talking right now.”

This opened up a whole line of questioning about why they weren’t talking. I told them what I knew, which wasn’t much. I could tell they didn’t like the mention of the creepy man from the bank any more than I had. I spent the rest of lunch with them debating ways to find out who he was, what he was doing, and to scare him so he’d leave her alone. Sometimes, I did love them more than I wanted to strangle them. They would always have a loved one’s back, just the way a family should.

After we finished lunch, we got back to work. It was around four when I got a text from Maeve telling me she’d delivered the basket to Miranda’s apartment. I couldn’t wait until later when she was home. I was excited to call her and see if she liked the gift. Or maybe I might swing by after all. It hadn’t even been twenty-four hours, and I was dying to see her again.

Miranda: Chapter 6

I took one last look in the mirror to see how I looked. I was nervous as hell and kept second-guessing everything from my clothes to my hair to my makeup. The sexiest man I'd ever seen was arriving any minute to take me out to dinner. The past few days had been eye-opening and exciting when it came to Cian. He was nothing like what I expected a man like him to be.

I'd received gifts every day. That I hadn't been surprised about, although the gifts themselves, besides the flowers on day one, were not ordinary. Or I hadn't heard of them being sent to other women I knew by the men who wanted to date them. On Tuesday, when I got home from work, there was a huge gift basket waiting for me. It had no note on it.

I was almost certain it had to be from Cian, but a tiny piece of me wondered if it might be Keaton. Thankfully, he stopped by later and told me they were from him and who made them. I'd been touched that he'd thought of something like that and was impressed that his aunt made this kind of stuff. I loved the scents she'd given me.

On Wednesday, I got several texts from him. They were light ones asking how I was doing. Was I having a good day? Funny memes. Things like that. It seemed so normal. I guess I hadn't been prepared for how a rich man acted. That evening, when I got home, there was a heavy crate waiting on my doorstep along with Cian. He'd carried it inside. Opening it, I found several bottles of expensive wine. He explained that they were from his family's winery in California. I had to open a bottle. It was the best wine I'd ever tasted. He stayed and shared some with me and we talked for hours. That night, we'd brought in dinner rather than me cooking.

Last night, although there was a gift for me, I was disappointed, because he couldn't come by. He was working late and by the time he'd get off, it would be too late to come over. It had been a bottle of very expensive perfume and a silk scarf. How he knew what scents I'd like, I had no idea. But

just like with the skin care items, this one was to die for. The scarf had all my favorite colors on it in a geometric design—red, black, and turquoise. I had to text him and tell him how much I loved them. I wanted to call, but I didn't want to interrupt him if he was in a meeting. Later, before I went to sleep, he'd called to wish me sweet dreams and to ask me to go out for that promised dinner tonight.

That's what had me ready to jump out of my skin. All he'd told me was to dress nice. I took that to mean a cocktail dress. I had two of those, although they weren't ones up to the standards of what he was used to, I had no doubt. One I had worn to a policeman's dinner when my dad had taken me with him. It was black. The other one, a red one, I'd worn to my five-year class reunion. I'd wanted a boost to my confidence, since almost everyone I'd gone to school with had been mean to me. That one was sexier than the black one.

After a huge internal debate, I decided to go for the red one. It was sexy, yeah, but not indecent by any means. I paired it with a really nice pair of black slingbacks and a black clutch purse. Again, all recycled from my other two events. I could've gone out to shop for something else, but anything I thought would be suitable for dinner out with him was out of my income bracket. Either he took me as I was, or we wouldn't be going anywhere.

I'd curled my hair and swept it up in a waterfall of curls. My makeup was darker and a smidge heavier than what I typically wore during the day. I didn't have fancy jewelry, so I wore the small diamond studs and single diamond necklace that had been my mom's. Dad had given them to me when I got old enough to appreciate them and not lose them. A couple spritzes of my new perfume and I was ready to go. It didn't get real cold in Florida, not even in April, so I planned to take a light black wrap. We'd be inside most of the time anyway.

A sharp knock at the door made me jump. I gulped then headed to the door. It felt like there were a million butterflies in my stomach. Checking the peephole and verifying it was him, I opened the door. I soaked in the sight of him.

He was dressed in a suit, as he typically was on the days I'd seen him. This one was a dark gray and was paired with a crisp white dress shirt and a red tie. It looked like we had color-coordinated our outfits, which we hadn't. He looked good enough to lick, which wasn't the kind of thoughts I should be having. Not if I didn't want to embarrass myself. I fought to forget that crazy thought.

He didn't say a word. Before I could take my hungry eyes off him, he walked me backward into my apartment and shut the door. The next thing I knew, I was in his arms and he was kissing me like a starving man. His mouth took command of mine and I submitted. I had no idea how long we kissed before he let me go, but when he did, I felt faint.

"Fuck, you look so goddamn beautiful, I couldn't help it, Miranda. This dress was made for you. You almost stopped *mo chridhe*," he growled.

I assumed what he said in Irish meant his heart, which made me smile in happiness. I might have been checking out Irish words lately. I was glad it wasn't just one of us being knocked on our asses by the sight of the other.

"You look wonderful yourself, Cian. I'm glad you like the dress. I didn't have much to choose from. I hope this will be alright for dinner."

"*A stór*, you could be wearing a burlap sack and you'd still be the most beautiful woman in the whole place. Let's go before I forget I'm a gentleman."

"Give me a second to fix my lipstick. Someone seems to have messed it up," I told him with a grin. His smile of satisfaction was comical to see. Thankfully, I had a mirror right by the front door, over the small table. I dug out my lipstick and did a quick repair while he used a tissue to wipe his mouth. With him around, I might need to buy the kind that stayed on no matter what. When I was done, he took my keys from me and opened the door. After ensuring it was securely locked behind us, he took my arm and started walking toward the parking lot.

I wondered which of the guards would be driving him tonight. I'd been trying to wrap my head around the fact he always seemed to have a bodyguard with him. I understood why, but it would take getting used to. I wasn't shocked when he took me to the fanciest car in the lot. I didn't know much about cars, but I knew this racy convertible was expensive as hell. Way more than I probably made in five years or more.

It was a dark blue. He opened the door and helped me inside. It had leather seats, but they weren't anything like the leather seats I'd ever sat on. These felt soft as silk. I couldn't help but run my hand along the material. As he got into the driver's seat, I had to ask about his lack of a guard.

"I love this car, Cian. It's gorgeous and these seats are the softest ones I've ever felt. I'm kind of surprised though. Why don't you have any bodyguards with you tonight? Don't you always have them?"

He started the car and began driving before he answered me. "I do usually have them with me. It's a requirement, I'm afraid. However, they don't always have to be in the same vehicle as me. That gets old. Thomas is on duty tonight. He'll stay out of our way. I told him I wanted to be alone with you. I know it takes getting used to, being watched like that. Is it too much for you?"

I could hear an undertone of worry in his voice. Admittedly, it would take getting used to, but if I wanted to be with him, I'd have to. I found that I wanted to be with him more than having people watch us weirded me out.

"Cian, I know that's your life. If we're going to spend time together, I have to accept that. It may take me a little while, but I have no doubt I can. I want to spend what I call couple's time with you even though we're out in public. Let's talk about the important stuff. You haven't told me where we're going tonight."

He expertly weaved through traffic as he glanced at me and smiled. "That's a surprise. I hope you like where I picked. They have fantastic food and an atmosphere I love."

As he drove, we chatted about our day. Mine had been boring as usual. His last two days sounded much better than mine. He explained they were looking into possibly acquiring or opening another business and that was what he worked late on last night with his family.

I was intrigued to hear how they seemed to make decisions on things like that as a family. With as many members as he had, it had to be crazy getting people to agree. I didn't envy him. The drive seemed to go quickly with us so involved in talking. When he parked, I looked around and saw where we were.

It was a restaurant I'd seen and heard about several times. It was very expensive, and you had to get reservations sometimes a month or more in advance. It was called Kelly's. From what I recalled, it was a high-end steak and seafood place. Which being in Florida meant the fresh seafood would be super fresh. I loved seafood and was thankful I wasn't one of those people who was allergic to it. That would blow.

Instead of parking yourself, you left your car at the door to be taken by valets. They ran to our doors. As one helped me out, another opened Cian's door. Before my feet could do more than touch the ground and stand up, he was there, taking my hand out of the valet's and into his.

"M-Mr. O'Sheeran. It's good to see you again, sir. Please enjoy your dinner." The valet stuttered a bit as he looked at Cian with a slightly fearful look.

"Thank you. I'll take her from here," is all Cian said back to him. He wasn't rude, just not overly chatty. As he tucked my hand through his arm and walked me toward the entry, his car was driven away. I bet it was all those young guys acting as valets could do, not to race some of the cars they parked.

Inside, I was trying to take in everything at once. The place was spectacular. The decor was dark wood accented with light golden paint which had the appearance of aged parchment. Chandeliers and candles threw soft yellow light all

over the dining area. Paintings of landscapes and seascapes decorated the walls. Wonderful aromas filled the air.

A hostess, dressed in a sexy though classy dress came up to us. She had a huge smile on her face as she smiled at Cian. She didn't bother to look at me. I couldn't say I blamed her. He was rather striking to look at. I wasn't the only woman who could see that and be made breathless by him.

“Good evening, Mr. O'Sheeran. We have your table ready for you. If you need anything tonight, please let me know right away. I mean anything. I'll make sure your evening is perfect.” She was practically purring. I had an unusual and almost overwhelming desire to scratch her face. She was looking at him like he was on the menu.

“Thank you, Heidi. I'm sure it'll be wonderful. As long as I have this beautiful woman with me, there's no way I'll need anything else,” he said, as he looked at me and ran his eyes up and down my length. I fought not to shiver at the look of desire on his face. This had Heidi turning to finally look at me. She gave me a barely contained glare. For a second, I wondered how he knew her name but then I saw her name tag.

“Of course, sir, but if you change your mind, I'm always here,” she said sweetly. I heard the double meaning in her voice. She might as well offer herself up naked to him, the way she was almost panting after him.

“That's so sweet of you to offer, but I can promise you, I'll make sure Cian has everything he needs or wants,” I shot back. Two could play this game, even if it was one I'd never bothered to play before.

Her eyes narrowed on me as I raised my eyebrows and gave her a tiny smile. She must've realized she looked stupid standing there saying nothing, because she cleared her throat then turned to lead us through the dining room.

I knew this was a place where a lot of rich and influential people came to have dinner. I might not have been here personally, but I heard people talk. As we weaved our way through the tables, more and more heads turned to watch us pass. I guess being with an O'Sheeran warranted the looks.

Finally, she stopped beside a table that was set back in a private alcove. It was protected from being seen on all three sides by the pillars around it. She stood there waiting for him to take his seat, only he pulled out a chair for me first. As he did, he moved it so it was closer to the other one at the table, rather than across from each other. I sat down and let him scoot my chair closer to the table.

When he took his seat, she handed us our menus and a wine list before sashaying away. I watched her. She was swaying those hips enough that if she'd hit a table, she'd have sent everything on it crashing to the floor. I almost wished I could see that.

“Have you been here before, Miranda? I hope this is alright. I thought we couldn't go wrong with steak and seafood, although they do serve other things too.”

“No, I've never been fortunate enough to come here. I'm surprised you could get a reservation on such short notice. I heard this place can take weeks or more to get one. I love seafood and steak, so this is wonderful. I've always wondered about this place.” Maybe money talked like people said.

He gave me a smile. “I have my ways. Alright, I think I've had most things on the menu, so if you have any questions, just ask me. First, would you like to get a bottle of wine?” As he asked, he handed me the wine list. I didn't know shit about wine, not really, but I took it anyway and opened the list. As I ran my gaze over the daunting number of choices, and they weren't all wine, I noticed more than once that the O'Sheeran family winery, *Maeve's Cellars*, appeared several times.

“It looks like they like your family's winery. I think I'd prefer you to pick one of those for us. You know more than I do about them.”

He chuckled as he took the list back.

“What's so funny?”

“Sorry, I forget you're not one of those people who seem to know everything about my family. Or at least the

public stuff. They have so many of our wines because Kelly's is owned by us. We have restaurants in different towns and states all over the country. This one was started way back by my *uncail* Patrick, Darragh's *daid*. It's named after Maeve, his wife. Kelly was her maiden name."

"God, I feel stupid. I'm sorry. I really don't have a clue about what all your family owns. No wonder the staff seemed to know you."

He reached over to take my hand. He raised it to his lips, and he kissed my knuckles. As he did, his tongue slipped out to tease them. I shivered. "You don't ever have to apologize for not knowing something about me or my family, Miranda. It's refreshing as hell if I'm honest. I get so tired of people thinking they know me because they hear or read things about my family. More than half of that stuff isn't even correct. I promise to do better at telling you which businesses belong to us."

His words along with his sincere expression helped me to settle my embarrassment. With that said, we began to study the menu. Our waiter came to take drink orders and Cian ordered a bottle of red wine. They brought a basket with three different kinds of bread in it. He made me choose which one I wanted then buttered it for me before doing the same for himself. The more I was with him, the more I learned that he'd been raised with manners. Better ones than anyone I knew.

From there, I perused the menu and asked his advice on several entrées. There were too many that sounded fantastic for me to choose. By the time our wine came and had been poured, we knew what we wanted. Our waiter expertly took our orders and assured us our food would be out shortly.

I took a moment to look around the dining room again. The decor was even better the longer I was here. Soft music was playing in the background. Soft conversations were going on around us. The clink of silverware and dinnerware were the only things you could hear along with the murmurs. Cian had taken my hand back in his and sat there holding it. "I think by the expression on your face, you like this place. Hopefully, the food will live up to your expectations."

“I do like it. It’s so soothing here. I love the dark wood with the color on these walls. And I have no doubt the food will be excellent. I don’t see you or your family allowing anything less than that. Tell me about these other restaurants you own. You said they’re not all here in Florida or St. Augustine.”

This kicked off our conversation. Our evening flew by as he told me more about their various holdings. We stopped in between to sip our wine and to eat our beyond delicious food when it came. Some I wasn’t surprised about, others I was. Like the fact they had sex clubs. When he mentioned that, I almost choked.

“Y-you own what?”

He grinned. “I know what you’re thinking, but it’s not what you think. It’s not some place people pay to sleep with prostitutes. It’s a legitimate club.”

“So no one actually sleeps with other people there.”

“I didn’t say that. There is sex that happens, but it’s done only with consent, very strict rules and there are people who make sure it doesn’t go too far. People have fetishes and they can’t necessarily enjoy or explore those with others. They join one of our clubs where they can freely explore those fetishes safely and without anyone judging them.”

I wanted to ask him if he’d ever gone to any of them to have sex, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. Also, if he was used to going to one, how would he ever be interested in me, if we ever got to the stage of having sex? I was inexperienced, and I doubted I’d ever be up to his level. Everything about him shouted that he was a master of sex.

As my uneasiness grew and I got quiet, I could see he was about to ask me something. He was frowning at me. Thankfully, or maybe not, we were interrupted. A couple came up to the table. The man was much older, I’d say in his sixties. The woman hanging off his arm was maybe thirty. She was dressed in a skintight dress that left very little to the imagination. It was short enough that if she bent over, you’d be able to see her panties. The top of her dress was cut so low,

her breasts were barely contained. They were one deep breath away from falling out. Her ears, neck, fingers, and wrists were dripping in jewels. She made me feel dowdy.

“Cian, I didn’t expect to see you, you old bastard. How have you been and who is this gorgeous creature with you?” the man asked in an oily tone as he looked at me. I felt like I needed a bath. God, Cian was friends with this man?

I dared to glance at Cian. He gave the man a pleasant though vague look. He didn’t really smile broadly or anything. He nodded. “Hello, Denholm, Elsa, it has been a long time since we last saw each other. Just out for dinner or is it a special occasion? And to answer your question, this ravishing woman is Miranda.”

“It’s just dinner. What about you and the lovely Miranda? Is it just dinner or something more? I don’t recall seeing you before, Miranda,” Denholm said as he leaned closer to me. I was convinced it was so he could see if he could see down my dress, the disgusting toad. Elsa wasn’t paying any attention to me. She was too busy eating Cian up with her eyes and puffing out her substantial chest.

Cian leaned closer to me, for which I was thankful. It prevented Denholm from getting closer to me. “You haven’t seen her before and tonight’s our special night. Nothing I’m willing to share. I heard you were out of town.”

“We went to our place in Sweden for a few months. Change of scenery, you know, but now we’re back. If I’d known such a beautiful woman was on the loose, I’d have stayed. Just your luck to find her first. Miranda, when Cian is done with you, you need to look me up.” He winked at me. I wanted to throw up on his perfectly polished shoes.

“Denholm, that’s not going to happen, so I suggest you turn it down several notches,” Cian growled. He wasn’t smiling anymore. Denholm’s face showed his shock. Elsa’s face turned red and I swear, she was livid as she finally glanced at me.

“Who are you? Miranda who? Come on, Cian, darling, you can’t be insinuating you’re serious about a woman? And if

you are, there's plenty who are much more your speed. You can't expect us to believe you're serious about her?" The derision in her tone made me want to slap her. Who the hell did she think she was?

"Denholm, I think you should take your daughter and say goodnight. We want to finish our evening then go home to enjoy time alone. Plus, I don't like Elsa's tone or what she's implying. Elsa, don't be such a jealous bitch. I'm sure there are plenty of men who don't know you who you can sink your claws into. You just need to find one," he told her. Her gasp of outrage, along with her dad's huff of indignation, made me want to smile and cheer. Cian was standing up for me, although he didn't need to.

I was kind of shocked to find out Elsa was the man's daughter. As he opened and shut his mouth like a fish out of water gasping for air, her mouth was clamped together in a tight line. She was shooting darts of fire at me with her eyes. I sat there trying to give off the vibe of being totally at ease. Finally, her dad was able to speak.

"Sorry for the interruption. I'll see you some other time, Cian. No offense meant, I assure you. Enjoy the rest of your evening. Come along, Elsa. It's time to go." He nearly dragged her away from our table and out the door. Risking a glance at Cian, I caught him staring hard at me. I tried not to fidget. Was he mad at me? We'd just finished dessert when the conversation came up about the sex clubs, then Denholm and his daughter interrupted us. Cian gestured to the table.

"Are you ready to leave or would you like something else?"

"No, I'm full. We can leave."

Without delay, he pulled out my chair and helped me to stand, then placed my wrap around my shoulders. As he walked out, the staff all nodded and spoke to him respectfully. More than one diner nodded at him. I was in a daze. I still couldn't tell if he was mad at me. He wasn't saying anything. Outside, we didn't have to wait long before his car was

brought to him and he helped me inside then got in. He took off, roaring out of the parking lot.

“Cian, I’m sorry if—”

He cut me off. “I’d like to wait until we’re back at your place before we talk any more. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said softly. The rest of the drive was an uncomfortable one. I wondered if he was going to drop me off and drive away to never speak to me again. However, why would he do that? I hadn’t done anything wrong. Was he embarrassed we’d been seen by people he knew? If so, why take me to such a public place that was frequented by his kind of people? Maybe I was right. We were too far apart to ever be able to have any kind of relationship.

As the miles sped by, I steeled myself to maintain my dignity and not say anything. In fact, as soon as we got to my place, I’d save him the effort of telling me we were done. I’d get out and let him leave. That would be the end of it and I’d have to learn to forget about him. Rich people made no sense.

As he expertly drove through traffic, I took my keys out of my handbag. The drive back took longer than the drive to Kelly’s had, or at least it seemed to due to the silence. As he came to a stop in a parking spot he whipped into, I flung open my door and started walking briskly toward my place. A door slammed behind me. “Miranda, where are you going?” I heard him yell. I kept going.

I wasn’t more than ten feet or so away from his car when I was grabbed by the arm and swung around to face him. He gave me a disbelieving look. “What the fuck is wrong? Why did you jump out of the car like that and walk away from me? I thought we were going to talk.”

“I thought I’d save you the time and energy, Cian. I get it. No need to explain. This isn’t going to work between us. Please, don’t say anything. Just go,” I told him as I tried to get my arm free. He wasn’t letting go. His disbelieving look morphed to one of anger. The next thing I knew, I was swept up into his arms and he was stomping toward my apartment. I

was so caught off guard, I didn't know what to say or do. I just let him carry me.

Cian: Chapter 7

I was stunned to hear her say that. The whole way home, I tried to think about what I would say to her to make her feel less insulted by Denholm and Elsa's words and behaviors. I wasn't blind to how he'd been eating her up and lusting after her, while Elsa had been acting like a jealous bitch. As if she had any right to act like that.

On top of them, there was the whole sex club business, which I knew she wasn't comfortable with, that I hadn't had a chance to address more. By the look on her face, I knew she had been thinking about us. I needed to reassure her that nothing that may have happened at one of those clubs would ever affect me and her.

As fury over the whole fucked-up scenes took over, I couldn't stop myself from sweeping her up in my arms and heading for her apartment. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Thomas get out of his car. He'd done an excellent job remaining out of sight this evening. He was giving me a worried look as he watched me carry her.

At her door, I didn't waste time asking for her keys. I could see she had them in her hand. I set her down, took her keys, then I unlocked her door. As soon as it swung open, I ushered her inside, then slammed the door shut and locked it. She whirled around to look at me. "You have no right to manhandle me like that! I gave you your freedom to leave. There's no need to talk about it more. I'm tired and I want to go to bed. Goodbye, Cian."

She had her hands on her hips and she was glaring at me. Seeing her like this didn't intimidate me or make me want to leave. Seeing that display of temper made me burn even hotter for her. Saying the hell with it, I grabbed her again, swung her around to press her back to her front door, and I took her mouth.

As I kissed her almost savagely, she struggled for a couple of seconds then moaned as she relaxed and her hands came up to cup the back of my neck. I nipped at her lips with

my teeth in between thrusting my tongue inside her mouth to taste her and tease her tongue. It was her changing back to pressing repeatedly at my chest with her hands that made me eventually break our kiss. We were both breathing hard. My cock was so full, I thought it might tear through my pants. *Dia*, I wanted her so damn much I was almost insane. I rested my forehead on hers and stared into her passion-filled eyes.

“I don’t want an out. I want us to talk about what just happened and finish what we were talking about before we were so rudely interrupted. However, if you don’t want to do that, then we can keep kissing and find out where that leads us.”

I saw her warring with herself. It made me feel better that she was having as much difficulty as I was. Unfortunately, she must have more willpower than me because she pushed at me again. I moved and stepped away from her. I had to hold in my groan of disappointment, even if it was probably for the best. She walked to her living room with me right on her heels. Before she sat down, she turned to me.

“Oops, can I get you something to drink?”

“No, I’m fine. I want to talk.”

As she sat down on the sofa, I sat next to her. She was having a hard time looking me in the eyes. I gently gripped her chin and raised it so she had to. Uncertainty filled her expression. “Please wipe that look off your face, Miranda. I want you to listen to me. When I’m done, it’s your turn. Okay?”

She nodded. Letting go of her, I started to apologize. That had to come first. “I’m so damn sorry, *a stór*. Denholm is a pig, but I have to at least be cordial to him since we’re on different committees and boards together. He had no right to look at you like he did or say what he did. I could tell he made you very uncomfortable. As for Elsa, I’m sorry to say, she’s a stuck-up bitch. She thinks she can have any man she wants.”

I saw she wanted to ask me something, but I continued. “Hopefully, we won’t see them often, but if we do, I can promise you, he’ll be on his best behavior. I can’t say the same

for Elsa. If she becomes too much to bear, tell me. I'll find a way to shut her up. If I could protect you from people like them at all times, I would. Try to forget about them. I want to discuss what we were talking about before they interrupted us. We were talking about our sex clubs."

She glanced away. I knew what she was thinking. I'd seen it written on her face at Kelly's. "You were thinking whether I'd ever been to those sex clubs and if I had, what are my fetishes and how does that impact us? Am I right?"

She nodded slowly.

"First, yes I've been to them. I'll never lie or deny that I'm a normal man who's almost forty years old. I enjoy sex. However, it wasn't something I did often. It was more out of curiosity. I can assure you it was always consensual. I haven't been to one in over a year at least. I don't see myself as one of those people with a bunch of fetishes, nor are they ones that are dark and dangerous. I've never forced a woman I've had sex with to endure something they didn't fully agree to." I paused to let that sink in.

"In regard to you and me, if this progresses how I hope and pray it does, there is nothing for you to be afraid of. I'd never intentionally hurt you or force you to do something you don't want to do. That's true whether we're talking about sex or not. You can't be blind to the fact I'm very sexually attracted to you. I do want to sleep with you, but that's not all I want to do. As I've said repeatedly, I think we can have a real relationship." Getting this out there, I gestured for her to speak.

"Cian, thank you for telling me all that. It's true, Denholm made me feel dirty, the way he was looking at me and what he said. His daughter saw me as nothing more than a bug under her feet. She left me in no doubt she finds me terribly beneath your status, which goes back to what I've been saying all along. We're very different. Even if you and I can get past it, it's unlikely some of your peers and friends can. Maybe even your family might think the same."

I opened my mouth to object, but she stopped me. “You had your say, now it’s my turn. Them along with the sex club talk only highlights it. I’ve never been to a club like that. I don’t hold it against you that you have. Your past sexual conquests are none of my business. However, I’ll be blunt, even if it is embarrassing. I could never compete with the sexual experience you’re used to in women, Cian. Nor do I want to. I’m too old-fashioned for it, I guess. I’m not a virgin. I’m not that old-fashioned. I’ve had sex, but it’s been a while and it was with a man I thought I was in love with. That turned out to be a lie. He has been my only experience. If we were to get far enough to have sex, I fear it would be a huge disappointment for you. I’d rather we just part ways now than to do it later with hard feelings.”

I couldn’t stay silent a second longer. “Do you honestly think that I’m such an ass that the fact you’re relatively inexperienced would turn me away from you? Come on, give me more credit than that. Yes, the women I’ve been with were very experienced, but that was because I made sure to stick to those kinds. I didn’t want any of them getting ideas that we were doing more than having sex. It’s crude, but true that they were there for me to get off with, like they were using me to do the same. Sure, some probably had hopes it might turn into more, but not because of them wanting me. They wanted my money and name. They wanted prestige. They would’ve settled for any man who could give them that.

“Personally, call it a double standard if you want, but I love the fact you haven’t slept with half of Florida. As the woman I’m interested in for more than sex, I don’t want a whore. No man does. Not to say that women who’ve slept with more than one or two men are whores. That’s not what I mean. For me, I want someone who isn’t after my money or my name. I want a woman who wants me. And one who, if we do go all the way and get married, I can be sure wouldn’t cheat on me and try to pass off her lovers’ children as mine. I don’t think that’s too much to ask.”

“No, it’s not too much to ask. Have any of these women you mentioned ever gone from you to Denholm or men like him and vice versa?”

“Sadly, I have to say yes, although I’ve never been with a woman I’ve known to have been with him first.” As I answered her, I saw the question she wanted to ask, but wouldn’t. I answered it for her.

“And no, I’ve never slept with Elsa. She’s tried numerous times over the years to get me to do it and I always tell her no. She is one of those women who would do anything for more money and power. Her dad has money but not like my family does, and his name doesn’t carry the same power as mine does. She would be one who would have multiple lovers and lie about who her children’s father was.”

“God, I don’t want you to feel like you have to defend your choices before you met me, Cian. I’m sorry. This has all caught me off guard.”

“I get it, I do, but I don’t want it to derail what we’ve been building this past week. We’ve learned so much about each other. I can’t speak for you, but for me, it’s been wonderful. I love everything I’ve learned about you and I want to learn more. I want more nights of just talking, sharing a meal, watching a movie or whatever. Hell, I want you to see where I live and meet my family, as crazy as that makes me. Do you want to see more of me?”

I held my breath as I waited for her to answer. I wasn’t sure what I’d do if she said she didn’t. Her tiny nod and smile filled me with so much joy, I had to let it out. I would prefer to kiss her mouth, but my self-control was thin. Instead, I hugged her against me and kissed her hair. She snuggled into my arms.

“Thank God. Now, what would you think of coming out to the family compound and seeing my place? We could hang out, swim, watch movies, whatever you want. I do have to warn you, meeting all of my family will be a certainty. They’ll find out you’re there and they’ll descend on us to meet you.”

“Cian, I’d love to see your house and spend more time with you, but meeting the rest of your family is scary. What if they don’t like me? Heck, I don’t know if the ones I did meet like me. What have you told them about us?”

“The ones who’ve met you think you’re great and like my soon-to-be sister-in-law. They told the rest of the family about you and they’re jealous they haven’t gotten to meet you yet. They know that I want us to get better acquainted and I can see us more and more likely ending up in a relationship. It has them dying even more to meet you. I have zero doubt they’ll like you just as much as the others do. Ashlynn and her sister, Alexis, want more female power around. The guys still outnumber the women. We try to keep it that way since it’s the only way we can pretend we’re in charge.”

She laughed. “I doubt you guys have any trouble staying in charge. It’s more like they have to stop from beating you over the head when you try to dictate to them. I feel sorry for them and the other women in your family.”

“Damn, I was hoping you wouldn’t figure that out until much later,” I teased her.

After such a terrible turn of events and almost ruining our evening, it was a miracle that we ended up spending another hour or more just talking. By the time I dragged myself out the door, I’d gotten her promise to come to the compound the next day. It was Saturday and we could enjoy the sun. She did tell me that she’d have to come in the afternoon, since it was her Saturday to work. I refused her offer to drive herself to the compound. I wanted to take her. We agreed to meet at her place after work.

I returned home in a much better frame of mind. Before going to bed, I sent out a message to our cleaning manager to ask her to send someone to do a once-over of my house in the morning. I kept it pretty clean, but I wanted it to be perfect for her. I also submitted an order for groceries that would be delivered in the late morning. Since I wanted to get some sleep, I’d wait until morning before sending out a message to the family to let them know I was bringing her here tomorrow.



Within a couple of minutes after sending out the group text to the family to inform them of Miranda’s visit, I was treated to my front door opening and the first of my whole

family came barging in. I'd have to remember to be like Darragh. He'd started locking his door when he didn't want anyone to just walk in and interrupt him and Ashlynn. Which was smart, since we didn't have boundaries and they'd been caught a few times having sex. It was a miracle it had been by the women. If any of us guys had seen Ashlynn naked, Darragh would've killed us. I would be the same way with Miranda. She would be for my eyes only and I didn't see us sticking to the bedroom when the time came. More and more, I was certain we would end up in bed together and entwining our lives. I'd never been with anyone who made me feel so good or who I wanted to know everything about. Nothing was too small or boring to know about her.

The first wave included my *daid*, *mam*, and siblings. Not far behind them in three more groups came the rest. My living room was filled with bodies as they found a place to sit. All of them were talking over each other, trying to get me to answer their questions. I had to give a loud, shrill whistle to get them to shut up.

“*Dia*, it's like trying to calm down a bunch of insane chihuahuas in here. If you'll keep your mouths shut for five minutes, I'll tell you what you want to know.” This got them to settle, although a few were grumbling under their breath. I shot them looks that said, *shut up*. It was mainly my brothers.

“Yes, you read your messages right. Miranda has agreed to come over today and spend time here. I invited her to see my house and to hang out. I'm not sure what all we'll do but expect her by two. She has to work until noon. After that, I'll meet her at her house so she can change, then I'll bring her here. I've warned her, as much as we'd both like to avoid all of you, we can't. I need for all of you to be on your best behavior. If not, I'm going to have *mamó* punish all of you with her belt.”

I smiled at my grandmother. She was my *daid's mam* and almost ninety, but she was sharp as a tack and still a force we didn't mess with. Her belt had met all of our asses more than once over the years. Even as adults, she had the ability to make us cautious. In addition to the belt, she could come up

with some of the most inventive ways to punish us. Even my *daid* and *uncaili* didn't push it with her.

She gave me a serene smile before narrowing her blue-eyed gaze on the others. They all nodded and murmured their promises to be on their best behavior. I blew her a kiss. She winked at me and caught it. She was sitting on the couch in heaven, with Alexis next to her. She'd taken to both Alexis and Ashlynn like they were her own grandkids. Sometimes, I thought she might like them more than us.

"*Mac*, do you need us to do a quick wipe down of the house?" *Mam* asked.

"Thank you, but that's not necessary. I have one of the cleaners coming to do that. She should be here within the hour. It hasn't been a week since they were here. I've ordered food to be delivered, so if later Miranda's okay with it, we can maybe whip something up."

"Does she know how to cook?" Cathal asked.

"She does. I had her shepherd's pie earlier this week, and it was wonderful. It's something she likes to do, but not as much when it's only for one person," I admitted. She had told me that one night. Despite growing up without a mom, she'd taught herself to cook. She told me it was a good thing too, because her dad couldn't boil water without burning it. I'd laughed my ass off thinking of her capable dad not being able to do that.

"Man, how is it you and Darragh can luck out and we can't? I mean, we're as rich as you two. We're better looking. It adds insult to injury that both your women can cook too," Tiernan grumbled. I saw him fighting a wicked grin.

"I refute the better-looking part. As for being as rich, maybe, but we're just better men and our you know-whats are much bigger and we know how to use them," I slammed back. I watched my language with the older ladies in the room, not that they hadn't heard worse. This got a loud round of boos and hisses from around the room. Darragh and I grinned at each other. It took the patriarchs threatening to make us all eunuchs to quiet it down.

“Well, I think we have things to do in order to get ready for her too. I assume you’ll want time alone with her when she gets here. We’ll give you an hour,” Maeve said with a nod. The other women appeared to agree, if their head nodding was an indication. I didn’t say a word because an hour was more than I’d hoped for. It wasn’t long after that before they all dispersed and let me get on with my morning.

I spent time doing some work. I didn’t want to take the chance of anything taking my attention away from her. There were a couple of messages I’d gotten which I made sure to return. After those were taken care of and the cleaner had come and gone, I did a walkthrough to make sure nothing had been missed. As usual, it was spotless. When the groceries arrived, I put them away.

I had the wine refrigerator filled with bottles of red and white wine as well as champagne. Each had their own section since they were best at different degrees of chilledness. Before heading out to meet her at her place, I took a shower and changed my clothes.

I chose to drive myself in one of our Range Rovers. We had a big communal garage for those vehicles that were owned by the family. This was in addition to our personal garages where we kept our favorite vehicles. As I left the compound, I noted Thomas in one of the other cars following me.

By the time I got to her apartment, it was almost one o’clock. I’d resisted being there as soon as she got off work. Hastening to her door, I knocked. It didn’t take long for her to answer the door. When she did, I saw she seemed to be in a mild panic. Entering, I closed the door. “Miranda, what’s wrong, *leanbh*?” I asked in concern. When I texted to tell her I was on my way, she responded with a smiley face.

“Oh God, what was I thinking, Cian? I can’t meet your family today! I’m a mess. My hair won’t do anything I want it to. None of my clothes look right or feel good. Can’t we just stay here and relax?”

I took her in my arms and I gave her a kiss. It didn’t take her long to feel less stiff in my arms. As soon as she did, I

stopped. “*Leanbh*, you don’t have anything to be so stressed about. You look amazing, as always. Your clothes are more than fine. No one is going to be dressed up. I told you to dress for comfort. Look at what I have on.” I waved at my shorts, t-shirt, and flip-flops. She was similarly dressed.

“I’m sorry. I lost my mind there for a moment. I’m better, although I’m still terrified of meeting your whole family. Shouldn’t that happen after we’ve dated for like a year?”

I loved to hear her refer to us dating as inevitable, but the year remark made me chuckle. “No, we’re not going to wait a year. They won’t bite, I swear.”

“Okay, I can do this. You have plenty of alcohol at your place if I need it, right?”

“Yes, I do. We own a winery, remember?” I said chuckling. “Is there anything else you need to do before we head out? Did you pack your bathing suit and a change of clothes for later? If you didn’t pack a jacket, maybe add one of those. It’ll be cooler tonight.”

She pointed to a small bag by the door. “I’ve got everything, I think. Let’s get out of here before I chicken out again.”

Not wanting to take a chance she might, I picked up her bags and grabbed her keys by the door. She picked up her purse. I opened the door and let her step out, so I could close and lock the door behind us. As I did, I was reminded of a concern I’d had more than once. Why the hell didn’t her place have a security alarm? I couldn’t imagine her dad not insisting on one when she moved here. I knew I would feel much better if she had one. I’d have to talk to her about it later. Although, to be even more protected, she should be behind walls that had motion sensors and cameras all along it like we had at home.

She checked out the Range Rover as I opened her door. Catching sight of Thomas, she waved at him. He smiled and waved back at her. After getting her seated and secured, I got in and did the same. As I took off, she glanced at the interior. “How many cars do you have?”

“Personally, or collectively? Honestly, I’ve lost count of them in total for all of us. We have cars, trucks, SUVs, and motorcycles. My favorite and it’s all mine is the Jaguar you’ve ridden in with me.”

“I can’t imagine having so many. The insurance alone would be staggering, let alone the prices. I don’t know anything about luxury vehicles, but I recognize Jaguar. Do you really have motorcycles and know how to ride them? I’ve never been on one. My dad swears they’re death on wheels. I’ve always wondered what it was like to ride one.”

“I do and so do the rest of the guys in the family. Cara, Siobhan, and Aisling all enjoy riding with us, but they’ve never wanted to learn to ride alone. If you want, I’ll take you for a ride and you can see what it’s like. I love it. We can stick to the compound, which is safer and has no traffic.”

“Let me think about it. I just might take you up on that offer. I’m just happy to be done with my workday. I thought for a while, I might not get out of work on time.”

“Why? What happened?”

“The big boss was in today for some unknown reason. He never comes in on Saturdays. He kept watching what everyone was doing. He made us all feel uncomfortable. Usually, when he’s in the bank, he stays in his office and calls in people he wants to yell at. Thankfully, it’s not lowly tellers like me most of the time. He lets his manager do that.”

“You said he’s a friend of your dad’s. Surely he wouldn’t yell at you.”

“He would. I wish he ran our bank like the others in town are run. The first thing to go would be the rule that women can’t wear pants. Well, that would be the second thing right after banning pantyhose as mandatory. I’ve wanted to strangle him more than a few times with my pantyhose.”

Having never personally worn them, I couldn’t sympathize with her, although I’d heard my sister, *Aintini*, and *Mam* bitch about them when they were required to wear them. “Could you see your dad responding to a call at the bank, only

to find all the ladies had revolted and strangled your boss with their pantyhose? I'd pay to see that."

This got her to laugh and from there we joked and kidded around the entire way to my house. It made her loosen up, which is what I hoped it would do. She tightened up a bit when we came through the gates. She was checking out the armed guards we had stationed there in the guard house next to it.

"There's nothing to be worried about. They're only here in case of an emergency. It's not like we get people attacking us and we have to shoot them or anything," I assured her. It was mostly true. It had been a long time since anyone had enough balls to try and take our family on at the compound.

As we passed Darragh's, Rian's and the main houses, I pointed them out to her. I promised I'd drive her around later to point out where the rest of the family lived. As I parked in my garage, I felt the excitement for the day increase. I couldn't wait to have her in my house. It made our relationship seem even more real.

Assisting her out of the Rover and into the house, I watched her face as she got her first glimpse of it. I was proud of it. I'd had a lot of input on its design, just as the other members of the family had in theirs. We each had unique tastes and our houses reflected that. Although, I was more than willing to make changes to suit my future wife. Who, if I wasn't mistaken, was gazing around in awe.

Miranda: Chapter 8

Rolling through the gates of what Cian called the compound had made me anxious. I think it was a combination of the gates, the high stone wall, and the men at a guardhouse inside who I saw carrying guns. It was daunting and scary to think I was entering such a place and I had no way to leave except past them. If I insisted on leaving and Cian didn't want me to, would they let me?

Not that I was necessarily thinking he would hold me against my will. I hadn't been at all. It was just a weird thought that came to mind and then became stuck there. I had to fight myself not to have a panic attack and talked myself down. I was being ridiculous.

As we drove past a few of the numerous houses I saw, he pointed out which ones belonged to who. The first one we came to was Darragh's. Past it and almost directly behind it, although a distance away, was the main house. I knew that was where his parents and both sets of aunts and uncles lived. It was massive. We headed left and passed Rian's house before coming to Cian's.

The outside was stunning. The driveway swept past the double front doors. The entryway soared high and the exterior walls were made of a smooth stucco. The rooflines and windows were different heights which made them beautiful and interesting. There were two double garages on either side of the house. The stucco was a light cream color. Planted all around were a variety of trees, not just the typical palm trees you think of when people mention Florida. The flowers and other plants were blooming and made bright bursts of color everywhere.

We parked in one of the garages. I saw what looked like a room off it. I wondered if it was some kind of workshop or something. He took me inside. As he showed me around, my awe grew. The double entry doors opened into a foyer that had twenty-foot-high ceilings. Through the foyer was the living room. It had a large stone fireplace and access outside to a veranda. On either side of the living room was a formal

dining room and a study. I loved how big the study was and the french doors that led into it and the three windows overlooking the front courtyard. Everywhere I looked, the house was filled with light from outside.

The kitchen was massive and had a large center island. Cabinets were everywhere along with even more counter space. Someone could really cook up a feast in a kitchen like this. It even had double pantries. If that wasn't enough, it also had a wraparound breakfast bar and an adjoining breakfast room.

In addition to the living room, there was a huge family room with wall-to-wall windows. Off the kitchen and breakfast areas was a bedroom with an adjacent bathroom. I wasn't surprised to see it had a walk-in closet. On our way to see the master suite, he pointed out a half bath and the utility room.

The master suite was on the opposite side of the house. I could see how that would be great, since it gave him privacy from the other bedroom, if anyone stayed with him. It too had french doors to access it. There was an abundance of windows and private access to the veranda here as well. From what I could see, the veranda stretched the entire length of the house. When he showed me the master bath, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I loved to soak in a tub but mine in the apartment wasn't large or deep enough for that.

The garden tub was separate from a large shower which had a built-in bench. Dual vanities lined one wall. Inside the oversized walk-in closet, I got a shock. It wasn't the built-in cabinetry. I expected that after seeing what I had of the house. It was the exercise room that was a part of it.

As if this wasn't enough, he took me upstairs where there was a central entertainment slash game room with a french door leading to a balcony. On either side of the game room was a spacious bedroom suite with their own private baths and walk-in closets. The sheer size of it made me guess the house had to be close to five thousand square feet or more. What was one man doing living in such a big house? My view

of Darragh's and Rian's had shown me they were large houses as well.

Back downstairs in the kitchen, he got us glasses of lemonade then took me to the family room to sit. I was still too busy taking in everything I missed on the first pass through to say anything. It was him clearing his throat that snapped me back to paying attention to him. He was smiling at me. "So, should I take that look on your face and the way you haven't said a word, that you like the house? Or do you really hate it?"

"Cian, who in their right mind could hate this house? It's beyond beautiful and you have everything you could ever need and more. I mean seriously, an exercise room in your closet. If I told anyone that, they'd never believe it. You can have your whole family over and that's a lot of people. Although, I do have a question?"

"Go ahead, ask."

"I can see the big kitchen and family areas plus the dining room. I can even see how the game room upstairs would come in handy when having your family or friends over, but why four bedrooms and four and a half baths? It's only you living here."

"Because I've always intended to marry one day and wanted this to be my family home. However, if my future wife hates it, I'll have another one built. This could be passed on to one of our children."

I felt my mouth gape open at his casual dismissal of the house. To build another house comparable in size and amenities to this one would cost a fortune. "Cian, if your future wife turns her nose up at this house, you need to pick another woman. It's amazing and a to-die-for home. I can't think of anything it needs."

His smile grew. "Good, I'm glad you love it. That means I won't have to scrap it and start over."

"What do you mean? I was only giving you my viewpoint on it. Your wife might have something to say about it, you know."

“I think she already did.” His intense expression and the way his eyes were staring into mine made my breath catch. Surely, he wasn’t implying what it sounded like he’d said. As I tried to find my voice, he slid closer to me on the sofa. He took both of my hands in his.

“Miranda, I know this is insanely soon and we have a lot more to learn about each other, but I have to tell you. I can’t see any other woman living here with me other than you. Despite what you see as our differences, you and I fit together in so many ways. Our viewpoints on family, the things that we think are important in life. We have some interests in common and let’s not forget, the physical attraction. Tell me I’m not imagining that.”

“C-Cian, I don’t know what to say. Yes, we do seem to have more in common than I ever imagined when we first met. You’re very down-to-earth for such a wealthy man. However, we’ve barely started to get to know each other. People take months if not years to decide on their future spouse.”

“Some do, but not everyone. My parents didn’t. Darragh didn’t. He knew almost from the moment he met Ashlynn that she was the woman for him. She affected him like no other he told us. That’s the way I felt when I met you and it hasn’t abated. It’s only grown. You didn’t answer me about physical attraction. Are you attracted to me sexually, Miranda?”

I was scared to answer him. It wasn’t because I disagreed. It was because I was insanely attracted to him. Just looking at him made my body react. When he kissed me, I wanted to burst into flames and my whole body reacted. I’d never had that intense of a reaction, not even to my so-called boyfriend in college, Skyler. Deciding to be truthful with him then explain why I was so hesitant was what I finally landed on doing.

“Cian, I won’t lie and tell you that I’m not sexually attracted to you. You’re experienced enough to know if I did, I’m lying. You do make me forget my name when you kiss me and I’ve never felt anything like this.” He smiled wider and

moved even closer. Before he could kiss me, I stopped him by putting up a hand. He paused.

“However, that’s not the only thing I have to consider. I’ve not had any luck with men in the past. For the most part, they didn’t do anything which made me want to date them, let alone do more. The one time it did happen, it ended up being a terrible and traumatizing time in my life. I know everyone gets burned, but my burn event still haunts me. I can’t risk making a colossal mistake again.”

He was frowning now. “Tell me what the hell happened? Did he hit you? Cheat on you? What? And what’s his name?” The anger he was feeling was evident in his voice.

“He didn’t hit me or cheat on me. Those would’ve been easier to accept, I think. God, I hate even remembering it. To tell someone about it is worse. No one around here knows this story, not even my dad, especially not him.”

“It’ll stay between us, I promise, *Leannan*.”

“Okay. It happened when I was in college, but let me take you back a bit first. My dad has always been overprotective. He literally ran off every guy in high school who dared to ask me out. So, suffice to say, I was totally inexperienced in even dating when I went away to college. The only reason he let me go away and not stay here was the college gave me a full scholarship.

“It was my first real taste of freedom and although he would drop in unannounced, I got to have my first chance to date. I went out with a few guys. It never went beyond a few dates or kisses. I’m not sure if any of those could’ve been more, because as soon as I didn’t fall into bed with them almost immediately, they stopped asking me out and ignored me.”

“Except for the one guy.”

“Yes, except for the one guy. It was at the beginning of my junior year when he and I met. He asked me out and against my better judgment I said yes. I’d sworn off dating in my sophomore year because of how my dates always ended. I

think I was lonely when I accepted his date. Things didn't go as I thought they would. Instead of getting upset and dumping me after going out a few times, he didn't. Nor did he pressure me for sex. He said he was willing to wait until I was ready.

“I was over the moon about that and as we dated, I let myself believe I was in love with him and he felt the same. Finally, after about six months of dating, we had sex. I knew he was experienced. I'm not sure how good it was for him but for me, I thought it was okay.”

Cian let out a low rumbling sound. “I shouldn't be telling you this.” I said, as I tried to stand up.

He held onto me and wouldn't let me get up. He was shaking his head. “No, you should. Continue. You slept together. What happened after that?”

“We continued to see each other for a couple of weeks. We ended up having sex a couple more times, then nothing. He stopped calling, answering my calls, or stopping by. When I went to his frat house, I was told he didn't want to see me. I had no idea what had happened to change things so drastically between us. I was crying and so upset, it was pathetic. It was a week or so after he ghosted me that I heard the rumors.

“It seems he spent all that time with me not because he loved me. It was all in order to win a bet. The guys on campus who I'd dated and others who I found out had wanted to ask me out and didn't, because they had heard I wouldn't put out, had all been drunk one night at a party. They got to talking somehow and I came up. In their drunken minds, they thought it would be funny to place a bet and everyone pay into an ante. The guy who would accept the challenge and win the money had to get me to sleep with him more than once. The guy I considered my boyfriend had been the one to accept the challenge. All that time I thought we were building toward forever and that he loved me was a lie. It was all to win a filthy bet.”

The sound of rage that came tearing out of Cian sounded like an enraged beast. He shot to his feet and moved to stand by the fireplace. His fists were clenched and he was

breathing hard. The enraged expression on his face was scary. “Tell me that cocksucker’s name. I’m going to kill him. What kind of man does that to someone? Forget I said man, he’s not one. He’s a fucking weasel. I want his name, Miranda.”

“Cian, you’re sweet to be so upset for me, but there’s no need to hunt him down and kill him. Karma will pay him back one day.”

“At least tell me he got some kind of payback for doing that to you. Did you transfer schools?”

“He didn’t get off scot-free. It was all over campus and I became the butt of so many people’s jokes and was teased horribly. I was miserable, but I refused to let him or those assholes run me off. I didn’t transfer. I stuck it out. One night I heard his frat house was having a big party. Literally everyone was invited. I got dressed up and I went. You should’ve seen the looks I got. I wandered that party, listening to their shit talk until I found him with a bunch of his buddies. Several were guys who had been in on the bet. They were shocked to see me.”

“What did he say?”

“He started to run his mouth, asking if I was back for more of his big cock. I laughed in his face and said if his cock was big, I’d hate to see a miniature one. It pissed him off. He came toward me and I showed him what I was really made of. I punched him in the face then kicked him in the dick as hard as I could. He collapsed screaming and puking. While he was on the ground, I told the others if they wanted a piece of the same or worse, they just had to keep up the talk and the teasing. I assured them that what I just did to him was minor compared to what I would do to them. Once I said my peace, I walked out and went back to my room.”

Cian gave a bark of a laugh. His fists had relaxed a bit, and he had a tiny, satisfied smirk on his face. I grinned at him. “Did they stop? Did he?”

“Oh, a few would say something now and again but overall, they moved on to something else. They started to tease him about being beat up by a girl. He was so humiliated by it

and they were so merciless, that he was the one to transfer and not return senior year. I heard he'd moved to a college out of state. After that incident, I've never allowed a man to get close to me. I've gone on a couple of dates, but that's it. I know I shouldn't let one terrible experience influence me, but it does."

He came back to sit next to me. This time, he wasn't deterred from taking me in his arms. I didn't fight him either. Telling that story made me feel shaky. "Miranda, I hate that you were put through that. It kills me to hear anyone doing that to another person, but especially to you. Those morons have no idea how special you are. That particular dumbass ruined the best thing to happen to him. I hope he realized that, but I can promise you, I'll never treat you like that. I'll never do anything to hurt you or make you doubt me. You may think it's too soon for me to promise that, but it's not. And know this, I will defend you from anyone trying to hurt you with my last breath."

He ended his speech by kissing me. It was a kiss filled with such passion that I instantly lost control. We became two hungry animals trying to taste the other. Lips smashed together over and over, teeth nipped at lips and tongues, and our tongues twisted together. I didn't know where it might have gone, because we were interrupted by a loud knock at the front door. It took a few of them before he pulled away from me. He swore, or at least I think it was swearing. He did it in Irish.

"*Diabhal*, why the hell couldn't they be late? I know they said an hour, but it can't have been an hour already."

"An hour? What're you talking about?"

"My family. They told me when they found out you were coming that I had an hour before they planned to descend on us and demand to be introduced. Honestly, at the time I was surprised they were giving me an hour, but now, I'm not. *Leanbh*, I hate to say this, but can you hold that kiss until later? After they leave and we get more alone time, I want to explore that more."

I should have told him no, but my body was screaming at me to say yes. My mind was telling me to slow down. In the

end, I listened more to my body than my head. My heart was leaning toward what my body was saying, so it was no help. “Yes Cian, we can wait and see what happens later, although I’m not making any promises. I’m not going to go to bed with you tonight,” I warned him.

“I know that. As long as I get more time with you and more kisses like that, I’ll be happy.”

Louder knocks prevented him from saying more. Sighing like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders, he got up and went to answer the door. I ran my hands through my hair and wondered if I looked freshly kissed. My lips felt swollen. I bet they were red. Fidgeting, I waited for him to come back with his family. I sent up a prayer asking God to help me through this.

I knew when he opened the door due to the clamor of voices. They were all talking at once. It was impossible to understand them. A whistle tore through the noise. “If you quiet down and stop sounding like a crazy mob, I’ll introduce you to her. That is, if she didn’t run out the back in fear. I swear, you’re acting like you’ve never met anyone new before,” Cian growled at them.

“*Mac*, we’re sorry, but we’re all excited to meet her. You’ve never brought a woman home. We know that means you’re serious about her,” a deep masculine voice stated. I wondered who that was. I got my answer right away.

“*Daid*, I know you are and I’m excited to introduce her, but we’re a lot to handle, especially all at once. She’s not used to large families. Please, don’t make me regret introducing you so soon.”

“We’ll behave,” a female voice replied.

My only warning they were coming was the sound of dozens of feet moving closer. I jumped to my feet. I didn’t want to meet them sitting down. It would be even more intimidating for me. As Cian came into the family room, I caught a glimpse of the sea of people behind him. He was giving me an apologetic look. He didn’t waste time coming

straight over to me and wrapping his arms around me from behind. This left me facing them.

Their eyes roamed from my head to my toes and back. I couldn't help but wonder what they thought of my appearance. I wasn't what I'd call ugly, but I wasn't a drop-dead gorgeous woman either. I'd seen the women in those magazines and Elsa. They were, in my opinion, those sorts of women.

"Relax, they're going to love you," he whispered in my ear. Surprisingly, his words did make me untense a tad. I pasted on a smile. The first to approach was an older man and woman. The man looked a lot like Cian and his brother Ciaran. The man took my hands.

"Miranda, this is my dad, Sean, and my mom, Brenda. *Daid* and *Mam*, this is Miranda, *mo anamchara*."

I don't know what it was he called me. I'd have to ask him later. The indrawn air sounds coming from most of them told me it was something important. Damn it, if I was going to be with him, I needed to learn Irish or *Gaeilge* faster, whatever it was they were speaking.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miranda. Welcome," his dad said. He gently squeezed my hands. His mom took me by surprise as she pulled her husband's hands away from mine and she hugged me. Or as much as she could with Cian still having me wrapped in his arms. It was more like she hugged both of us.

"I'm so happy to meet you, Miranda. Welcome to *ár muintir*."

"Thank you both so much. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The next person to approach was a very elderly lady. "*Seanmháthair*, this is Miranda. *Leanbh*, this is *mo seanmháthair*, my grandmother, Saoirse O'Sheeran."

"Mrs. O'Sheeran, it's such a pleasure to meet you," I said as I held out my hand to her. She took it and smiled sweetly.

“No need to call me Mrs. O’Sheeran. It makes me feel old. You can call me Seerie or *mamó*, which means granny. Remind us when we use words you don’t understand to explain them. We forget that not everyone speaks Irish. And if my *garmhac*, grandson, gets out of line, just let me know. I have a belt that’ll fix that.”

This earned a laugh out of everyone, including Cian and me. I think I fell in love with his grandmother right then and there. I nodded then winked at her, since Cian couldn’t see my face. “I’ll remember that and I expect I’ll be seeing you soon to take you up on your wonderful offer of that belt.” This remark caused them to laugh again.

“Hey, no ganging up on me. *Mamó*, you didn’t tell Ashlynn this when she got with Darragh. Why me and not him?”

“Yes, I did. You just weren’t there to hear it,” was her swift reply.

“You didn’t tell me that, *Leanbh*,” A gruff and powerful man stated to the woman beside him.

She gave him a loving look. “No, I didn’t. I thought I should keep that to myself until I needed to use it, but seeing how it’s out now. Surprise. Let this be your warning.”

Ah, so this was Darragh and Ashlynn. His response to her threat was to kiss her. It wasn’t a light smack on her lips either. The others acted like it was no big deal to see him kiss her like that, so I assumed it wasn’t unusual for them. It reminded me of the kisses Cian and I had shared.

From there, it was a seemingly endless wave of introductions. I tried hard to memorize faces with names, but I knew I’d mess some of them up. I was hugged and kissed over and over. When everyone had been introduced, I felt like I’d been through a gauntlet. I think to give me a chance to catch my breath, Cian had everyone move to the kitchens, and they began to get drinks. It was nice to see that they all made themselves at home. They knew where the glasses were and had no problem opening his refrigerators to get out wine and

other drinks. I settled down to enjoy myself. The worst was over.

Cian: Chapter 9

As the afternoon progressed, I could see Miranda relax more and more. Even though they were loud and outrageous at times, overall my family was staying well behaved, for them. More than one had caught me alone to tell me how sweet she was and how much they liked her. Any fears that my family wouldn't like her were gone. Now, I had to make sure she was truly okay with them, then I was free to turn up the heat on my pursuit of her. With those out of the way, there was only one barrier to our romance left. I had to find a way to get her dad to stop hating my family. I was determined not to let him ruin what I was sure was my happily ever after and hers.

We'd moved out to the pool an hour after their introductions. The weather was warm enough that we didn't need to use the indoor one. Even if it had been, both pools were heated. In the summer, the outdoor one had a cooling pump to make it more bearable. At the moment, I was waiting for her to come back from getting into her swimming suit. She'd gone inside with the ladies to change.

"She seems like she's going to be perfect for you, Cian. Too bad she doesn't have any sisters. Does she have any friends other than Rosie and Evie?" Ciaran asked as he came up to me.

"I'll have to ask. I haven't met any other friends. If she has them and they're good women like her and if you meet them, no using them for sex then moving on," I warned him. I wanted to be clear about it, even if I didn't think he'd do that. I wanted nothing to cause hard feelings between her and any of my family members.

"Give me more credit than that, Cian. I wouldn't do that. I'm not doing anything to ruin my relationship with you, our cousins, or any of your women. Only an idiot would do that for some *púicín*."

He was right. It would be stupid to do that merely for pussy. As crude as it was, he could find that anywhere. A decent, loving woman you could love and have a life with was

too rare to ruin like that. “I didn’t think you would, but I had to say it. I think it’s going well, don’t you?”

“I do. She’s sort of like Ashlynn was when we met her. Like we’d known her already, and it was easy to have her join the family. I hope the rest of us meet someone similar to them soon.”

“I hope so too. I’ve waited so damn long. If anything or anyone messes this up, I’ll have to kill them.”

“What about her dad? He doesn’t know about you two yet, does he?” Cathal asked, as he joined us. He must’ve heard what I said.

“No, he doesn’t. I was shocked that Carruthers didn’t run right to him last weekend when we were at Sirens. He’s going to have to find out soon. I don’t plan to hide it. In fact, we went out to dinner last night at Kelly’s. I’m sure the more we’re out in public, someone will tell him, if she doesn’t.”

Cathal looked like he was going to say more, but I tuned him out because I saw Miranda coming toward me with the other women. I’d seen countless women in bathing suits, even some bathing nude on beaches in Europe or private homes. There had to have been many sexy ones, but at this moment, I couldn’t remember a single one. Miranda was all I could see.

She was wearing a two-piece bathing suit. The top was asymmetrical. One side had a wider shoulder band while the other had a thin strap and another thin strap ran diagonally from the thicker strap, across her chest and over her collar bone, to the thinner one. In the middle, between her breasts was a U-shaped cut out. The bottoms were high-waisted and cut into a slight V in the front at her waist. The top was black and the bottom white with black palm trees on it. Overall, it covered a whole lot more than many bikinis, but on her, it looked like a million bucks. Despite my whole family standing around, I started to get hard. I quickly tried to think of something else. My swimming trunks wouldn’t hide my condition worth a shit.

“Damn,” I heard someone mutter. It was a male voice, so I glared in their direction. I had to wait for her to come to me, so I could battle my erection away. When she reached me, I wasn’t able to resist taking her in my arms, even though it would likely make me hard again.

“You look so *álainn*. That means beautiful. You almost made me embarrass myself in front of the family.”

“How did I do that?” she asked innocently.

“From the erection you gave me. They’d never let me hear the end of it if they saw me with one. You’re a dangerous woman,” I whispered in her ear. Her whole face turned pink. She didn’t know what to say. I saw her trying not to glance down between us. I took pity on her. “Don’t worry, I’ve wrestled it into submission for now, but I make no guarantees it won’t come back.”

“Maybe I should stay away from you in that case,” she said in a teasing tone.

“Hell no, you stay right next to me. You’re too gorgeous and I don’t want any of my brothers or cousins thinking they can steal you from me.” She laughed at my remark, but I was half serious. She was the kind of woman men would fight over. How no one had shown her that so far, I had no idea, but it was my good fortune that they hadn’t.

Our intention to have a nice casual swim turned into a battle in no time. I should’ve known it would. My brothers and cousins could rarely get in the pool together without it becoming a competition. Typically, I’d be glad to join them, but I had hoped they wouldn’t this time. I was trying to spare Miranda that sight. Too bad, they hadn’t gotten the message when told to behave.

They wanted to play a game of chicken. There weren’t enough women, so they’d have to take turns. Each guy would get in and hold a woman on his shoulders and the ladies then would try to push the others off. Whoever was the last one on a guy’s shoulders was the winner.

“Come on you two, you have to play. Unless you’re gonna loan us Miranda, so she can ride on our shoulders,” Shane taunted me.

“Like hell she’s going to be on any of your shoulders. I’m not going to make her do this. We’ll sit and watch,” I argued back.

Miranda was sitting on the edge of the pool with my sister watching with interest. I couldn’t hear what Cara was whispering in her ear. The guys all started moaning and begging me to play. I was about to beat all their asses when Miranda called out to me. “Cian, if you want to play, I don’t mind playing too. Do I win a prize if I put them all in the water?”

Hoots of disbelief came from everywhere as they jeered her. The smack talk began. “Come on, you’re not that tough, Randi. You’ll be the first in the water,” Aidan yelled at her. She gave him a serene smile. I was surprised they’d already given her a nickname. She didn’t seem to mind it as far as I could see. I liked it, but I’d still call her Miranda. I thought it was a beautiful name.

“She’s bluffing,” Fallon called out next.

“I bet she’ll play one round then quit. You have to be tough to stand up to us,” Rory hollered.

There were a few more taunts. After every one, she’d just smile at them. By now Aisling and Siobhan, or Ais and Shiv as we liked to call them, Alexis and Ashlynn had joined her and Cara. They were all whispering together. There might only be six of them, but I thought they might get the best of us. Their uproarious laughter seemed to confirm it.

“Listen, can’t you morons tell they’re plotting something. Whatever it is, we’re going to be the losers,” I told them. They were too busy high-fiving each other to pay attention. Miranda waved me over. Giving into the inevitable, I went to her. “You don’t have to play,” I told her one more time.

“I want to. It’ll be fun. It’s been a long time since I’ve been in a pool. Unless you don’t want to play.”

“If you’re sure, then I’d love to play with you. Come on, let’s show them who is the best.” I held out my hand. She took it and we got into the water. Quickly the others decided who would do round one with which woman on his shoulders. Darragh of course had Ashlynn on his. Cara went with Cillian. Shiv paired up with Declan while Alexis joined Cathal. The final pairing was Ais and Aidan.

We scattered around the pool, leaving enough room for us to navigate. The parents and *mamó* gathered on the deck chairs to watch. Patrick was the one to yell “go.” From there it became chaos as we fought our way through the water. We stayed in the waist to chest high water. As we clashed, the ladies tried their hardest to grapple and knock each other off. I was pleased to see Miranda could hold her own. That was saying something against Ais, Shiv, and Cara, who had been roped into playing this game hundreds of times.

I’m not sure how long it was before the first person went into the water. It was Alexis, so her and Aidan had to get out. Next, after more tousing went Ashlynn and Darragh. The remaining women became more cautious and strategic in how they attacked. There was loads of screaming and laughing and cheering from the sidelines. I waited for us to be the next to go down. Only that’s not what happened. Somehow, Miranda was able to knock Cara off Cillian. As everyone gasped and they swam to the edge, I patted her thigh.

“You’re doing great, *a stôr*.”

“Thanks. I haven’t had this much fun in ages.”

As we circled Ais and Shiv, I saw the cunning looks in their eyes. They were up to something. Before I could warn Miranda, they both attacked her at the same time—one from the front and one came from the back. There was no way she could fight them both, and I wasn’t allowed to help. “Hold my thighs as tight as you can,” Miranda said. I squeezed them tighter.

Abruptly, Miranda reared back until she was practically laying her upper half on top of the water. At the same time her legs came up out of the water, her feet planted on Shiv's chest and she pushed hard. I couldn't see what she was doing behind me, but a hiss of amazement told me our audience was surprised. Right after that, I heard a splash behind me at the same time Shiv fell in front of me. As soon as they hit the water, Miranda sat back up.

I headed to the edge of the pool to where the others were waiting. She swung her leg around, so I could help her sit on the edge. Everyone was going on about her last move. "Damn, where did you learn to be that flexible and have balance like that? Even with Cian holding your thighs, I thought for sure you were a goner," Tiernan told her.

"What did she do to Ais? I couldn't see," I reminded them.

"She laid out across the water on her back and shoved her right in the stomach. At the same time, she shoved Shiv with her feet. The extra force of both those combined and the splash, and they were done," Rian told me.

"The flexibility I have from my days taking acrobatics and tumbling classes. As for that move, I might have done it before," she confessed coyly.

"When? Where? With whom?" the exclamations came. I wanted to know that myself. What man had she been playing chicken in the pool with, her ex?

"Swimming was one of the few things my dad liked when I was growing up. He was too alpha to just sedately swim around. Once he taught me how to swim well enough, he showed me this game. I started out playing against other kids and then as I got older, my competition did too. He showed me some moves and the rest, like this one, I developed myself. People often underestimated me. I hope I didn't hurt either of you." There was concern in her tone as she addressed that last bit to my cousins.

"It wasn't anything terrible. Man, you have to let us practice that move. I want to learn how to do it," Ais told her

eagerly.

From there, we had more rounds. By the time we quit to go make something for dinner, she was firmly accepted into the family. I couldn't be happier. She was laughing and joking with all of them. My parents and the others kept giving me thumbs-up and enthusiastic nods. Now all I needed to do was win over Chief Tremblay.

Miranda:

I couldn't recall the last time I had as much fun as I did with Cian and his family. They were loud, crazy, and irreverent at times, but they were also so kind and welcoming that it didn't take me long to be at ease and to feel like I'd known them for a long time. It had been amazing to watch all of them pitch in and help make dinner. Some were on prep duty, others made the entrées and dessert, while the rest got dinnerware and stuff together.

It was amazingly delicious food, and I was stuffed afterward. Mainly, it was items you'd eat at a barbeque. They promised next time, they'd fix me several Irish dishes for me to try. After dinner and cleaning up, the others began to leave after getting my promise to come back again soon. I was given a ton of hugs and kisses. Even his brothers and male cousins had kissed me on the cheek. He'd tried to run them off when they did that.

It was now after nine and we were sitting in his game room watching a movie on the huge television he had up there. I was snuggled into his chest. I was having a hard time concentrating on the movie because having him this close was causing havoc with my body. I wanted so much to resume that kiss that had been interrupted hours ago. My attraction to him kept growing by the hour.

My nipples were hard and my panties were slightly damp from the naughty thoughts I was having. I could hear his heart beating underneath my ear. To me, it sounded like it was speeding up. I was about to break and ask if we could stop the movie when he gave a deep growl then spit out, "screw this."

I lifted my head to look at him at the same time as the television went off and his head lowered to bring his lips crashing down on mine. I moaned in pleasure. Like before, it was a mad clash of lips, teeth, and tongues. In addition, my hands were running up and down his hard chest as his hands ran up and down my back.

He hoisted me up and over, so I ended up straddling his thighs. When that happened, his hands cupped both of my ass cheeks and he kneaded them. My core temperature shot to over a hundred degrees, I think. As we continued to kiss, those hands of his slipped from my ass and up underneath the back of my shirt. I shivered at the sensation of his fingers on my bare skin. Abruptly, he tore his mouth away from mine.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered, as I tried to regain my breath. He was breathing hard too.

“Nothing, I just need to take a break before I do something to frighten you. I’m trying like hell not to go too fast or too far, Miranda, but you make me forget my own damn name with how much you turn me on. I promised we’d take things slow, and I meant it. Give me a few minutes to calm down. Talk to me about something else. Help me get my mind off you.”

I could hear the strain in his voice. As much as I wanted to tell him stopping wasn’t necessary, I knew deep down it was probably for the best. I didn’t feel like I was thinking very clearly. If I did what I felt like doing at this instant, I’d be begging him to remove my clothes and take me. Which was insane thoughts for a woman like me. We hadn’t known each other for more than two weeks.

“Okay, let me move. That’ll help.” I went to get off him. His hands clamped down on my hips and he shook his head.

“No, not that. Not yet. Just talk.”

Casting around for something to say, I remembered what I wanted to ask him about from earlier. “I have a question. It’s about something you called me earlier today. You said *mo anamchara*. What does that mean? Your family acted like it was something unusual.” I knew I had butchered saying it the way he had.

“You really wanna know what that means?”

“Yes, or I wouldn’t have asked.”

“It means my soulmate. That’s what they reacted to.”

I was taken back and stared at him stunned. Did soulmate in Irish mean what it did in English? He was intently watching my face. After a minute or so, I found my voice. “Does soulmate mean something different in Ireland than it does here?”

“No, it means the same thing all over the world, I believe.”

“Why would you call me that, Cian?”

“Because that’s how I see you. I’m sorry, I’m trying like hell not to rush you or put pressure on you, but I can’t help what I feel and think. I’ve told you how attracted I am to you. I’ve told you how I believe it’s more than likely we’re destined to have a relationship. I haven’t been lying. It’s not some game to get you in my bed. I mean it. It’s too fast for you and I accept that. I can wait for you to feel the same, but I can’t hide it. You’re the woman who I intend to marry and have a family with. It’s fate that we met. Just like it was fate for the others in my family who’ve married. All of them are love matches. I told you that. I already have more feelings for you than any other woman I’ve ever met. I’m well on my way to loving you, Miranda.” His declaration knocked me for a loop. I didn’t know what to say. My mind was whirling with my own thoughts and feelings.

“I don’t expect you to say you feel the same. I know it’ll take you longer, but I do believe you will come to feel the same way about me. All I’m asking is that you keep spending time with me. Don’t let anything or anyone come between us.”

“God Cian, I don’t know what to say. It’s true, you make me feel things I’ve never felt too, and it’s like I’ve known you in some ways forever. The more I get to know you, the more I see we’re not that different in a lot of ways. The physical attraction is there for me too. I want to spend more time with you and see if we are soulmates like you believe. However, you know there’s going to be at least one person who’ll lose his mind over us.”

“I know. I have to win your dad’s approval. I don’t know yet how I’ll do that, but I will. All I’m asking is that you

don't let him talk you into walking away from me. You know he's going to try that. When it doesn't work, he might try to make threats. Not against you, but against me and my family. No matter what, you have to believe that we won't be harmed by anything he does. He might even arrest us for no good reason. We'll get out of it."

"I promise. I don't want to let anyone ruin this."

This earned me another kiss. Before it could get as hot as the others, he pulled back. "I'd love to do nothing more than to keep kissing you, but if I do, I'll lose my control. Let's finish the movie then I'll take you home. I'm not quite ready to let you go."

So that's how we ended up finishing a movie that I couldn't even tell you what we watched and then I was taken home to my lonely bed. His goodnight kiss at the door had started to light the flame again, but he tore himself away before it could get out of control. He'd said goodbye and that he'd call me tomorrow before he left. When I burrowed under the covers in my bed, I couldn't turn off my brain. I went to sleep thinking of us and how I'd approach this with my dad. One thing I knew for certain was I'd have to tell him soon, but not yet. After all, he wasn't even talking to me right now. He still thought I was a liar.



I was dragging this morning. After a restless night of sleep, trying to figure out how to deal with my dad, I was exhausted. Since I wasn't meeting him for brunch, I decided I'd do some "me" time. I turned off my phone after sending Cian a good morning message and receiving his back. I told him what I planned to do. He promised he'd stop by in the late afternoon. I was looking forward to that.

I spent my typical brunch time giving myself an at home spa day. I couldn't really afford to go do it for real, so when I could, I'd do my version at home. It consisted of a long soak in my tub with a scented bath bomb. Those always left my skin super soft and smelling yummy. While I soaked, I put a facial mask that I bought at the drugstore on my face. Two eye patches soaked in moisturizing cream covered my eyes.

They were supposed to brighten my eyes and eliminate any puffiness or dark circles.

As I soaked, I enjoyed a glass of the wine Cian had brought me. It was by far my favorite kind now. Before I started to turn into a prune, I got out. In the shower, I shaved and washed my hair then left a conditioning treatment in my hair for a while. Once that was done and I was dried off and dressed, I got out my tools to give myself a pedicure and manicure. I couldn't put polish on my fingernails, since the bank owner wouldn't allow us to wear it, but I could do my toes. I ended up painting them a bright shimmery hot pink color.

When I was done, I realized it was almost one in the afternoon. I was hungry. Going into the kitchen, I took out some things to make myself a salad. I had canned chicken that I would put with it. When I made a salad, it was more than just lettuce. I filled it with vegetables and some meat and cheese.

I sat down at the table to enjoy it. Just as I took my first bite, there was a loud knocking at my door. Wondering who it could be, I got up to go see. Cian shouldn't be here yet. Or had he decided to come early? Shit, I'd forgotten to turn my phone back on. Rushing to the door, I didn't bother to see who it was first. I swung the door open with an apology on the tip of my tongue. That died away when I saw it wasn't Cian. It was my dad. He looked furious.

“D-dad, what're you doing here?”

“Did you forget something? And why the hell is your phone turned off? I've been trying to reach you for hours.” He snapped as he all but pushed his way into my apartment. I stepped back to let him enter then shut the door. He headed straight to my sofa.

“Can I get you anything? I was just about to eat a salad.” I said, as I kept going to the kitchen. I wasn't going to let him disrupt my lunch. I was hungry. I retook my seat and took another bite. He came in and yanked a chair out at the table to drop into. He was glaring at me.

“Don’t ignore me, Miranda. I want to know why you stood me up for brunch and I had to hunt you down. I’ve been calling and calling you.”

We typically had brunch at ten. It took him three hours to come check on me. He must not have been that worried. “I didn’t stand you up. I assumed it was off since last Sunday, you accused me of being an attention seeking liar. I haven’t heard a word from you all week, Dad. What else was I to think?”

“Stop acting like a child. Just because you were called on your inappropriate behavior is no reason to stop talking to me or stop coming to brunch. I’ve been busy at work this week.” He had the audacity to huff.

“I’m not acting like a child nor am I a liar. Keaton Hill has been following me and he made unwanted remarks and waited for me after work. I should be upset. You believed a complete stranger over your daughter. Who does that?” I asked him angrily. I laid down my fork, so I wouldn’t get madder and stab him with it.

“A man wouldn’t calmly sit there and wait for the father of the woman he’s stalking to come over and confront him, Miranda. He’d have to be a psychopath or something to be able to do that. Admit it, you were into him and he turned you down and you thought you’d get back at him,” he said condescendingly.

What in the world had gotten into my dad? He had never acted like this before. Sure, he could be a little overbearing and old-fashioned at times. He was a borderline chauvinist even, but he’d never not believed me. I was always able to depend on him if I was in need.

“No, I didn’t. I can’t stand the man! He makes my skin crawl the way he stares at me. I’ve been dealing with him for almost a year. Now that he thinks my dad is siding with him, God knows what he’ll do. You should’ve been on my side, not his. I’ve never lied to you.” I almost shouted at him.

“Oh really? What about that boyfriend in college? The one you told me that you and he just broke up. That was a lie.

Did you think I wouldn't find out that you slept with him and then he dumped you for being loose? People were talking all about you on campus. I almost died of embarrassment. If I could've paid for it, I'd have made you come home to finish your degree."

I gasped and shot to my feet. "That's a goddamn lie! He didn't dump me because he thought I was loose. He only dated me to win a fucking bet because I wouldn't sleep around. He took my virginity and then bailed on me. How the hell could you think that and how did you find out?" I screamed at him.

"Don't scream at me, young lady! And don't cuss. It's not ladylike. I had people keeping an eye on you. The only reason I let you date him was because he was a good boy. I couldn't believe it when I found out you ruined it. I thought for sure you two would get married and he'd take care of you," he huffed back at me.

Trying to vent my frustration and anger, I grabbed the first thing I could reach. It was a glass vase he'd given me when I moved into my apartment. I smashed it to the ground. He jumped back in shock. "Get out! I can't deal with you right now. You need to leave," I shouted at him. I felt like I was in an alternate universe. My dad had never acted like this.

"I'm not going..." He was interrupted by a loud pounding at the door.

Great, that's all I needed. It had to be one of my neighbors coming to see what all the racket was about. Stomping to the door, I went to look out the peephole. As I did, a male voice filled with worry called out. "Miranda, *Leanbh*, open the door! What's wrong?" Cian's deep voice yelled from the other side.

I silently groaned. This was the last thing I needed. However, I knew he wouldn't leave without me answering him and my dad wouldn't let me answer the door alone. Deciding what the hell, I might as well get it all over with today, I tore the door open. Cian came rushing inside. He wrapped me in

his arms as he checked me over with his eyes. A roar of outrage came from behind me.

“What the fuck is an O’Sheeran doing in your apartment? How the hell do you even know him?” My dad hollered. I glanced over my shoulder to see him barreling toward us like a bull. In a flash, Cian had me behind him and he was standing between me and my dad. They faced off like two bulls about to do battle. I closed my eyes for a moment and prayed that this was all a nightmare.

Cian: Chapter 10

When I decided to go to Miranda's place early, because I couldn't wait a second longer to see her, I never imagined running into her dad. However, when I came to the door and heard her yelling, fear had shot through me. I wondered if that creep from the bank had somehow gotten into her apartment. If she hadn't answered the door, I would've kicked it in.

Facing Tremblay, I prepared myself to not only defend myself but her. I didn't know what they were arguing about, but he looked furious and she was flushed. Choosing to be the one to speak first, I gave him a curt nod. "Chief Tremblay, good afternoon."

"Don't you dare speak to me, you hoodlum. How dare you enter my daughter's apartment? Get the fuck out and don't let me hear of you coming around here or her again. If I do, you'll regret the day you ever met me."

"Sir, your daughter is the only one who can make me leave or not see her again. As long as she wants me, I'll be any damn place I want. This isn't the way we wanted to tell you about us, but it seems fate had other plans."

"Tell me about you! What's the meaning of this, Miranda? You can't expect me to believe you're willingly seeing this man. Don't you know who he is? He's one of those criminal O'Sheerans I've told you about. He and his whole family are mobsters. It'll be a cold day in hell before I let my daughter associate with one of your kind," he shouted, as he came toward me with his fists clenched.

Before I knew what she was doing, Miranda darted in front of me and held up her hands. I tried to tug her back, but she resisted and I didn't want to hurt her, so I stopped pulling on her. "Dad, stop it right this instant. I know exactly who Cian is and I've met his family. They're not the people you think they are. It's true that several decades ago their family wasn't as clean as they are now. He told me all about it. And in case you forgot, I'm an adult. I decide who I share my time with, not you."

He reared back and gave her a stunned look. Then his face darkened again, and he snarled at her. “So, my daughter is nothing but a common slut, who’ll spread her legs for any man who will give her the time of day. Skyler was right to break up with you. And poor Keaton, he must hate you chasing after him. Do you have no shame or pride?”

Her cry of pain was the last straw. He could say whatever he wanted about me and my family, but I’d be damned if he’d say shit like that about his own daughter. Stepping around her, I got in his face. He was dressed in street clothes, so I knew he wasn’t on duty. He always wore his uniform when he was.

“If you say one more ugly word to her, I’ll knock your teeth down your goddamn throat. She’s no slut. She’s a gorgeous, smart, sweet, and loving person who doesn’t deserve to be spoken to like this. She’s not sleeping with me. Although, let me be clear, if I have my way, she will be and not as my whore. She’ll be my wife.”

His roar of rage echoed around her tiny apartment before he charged me. Miranda screamed. I blocked his charge. He was a big man, but not as tall as me and I had a bit more muscle than him. Plus, I was younger. We grappled together. He took several swings at me. One or two connected. I didn’t hit him back. After several minutes of that, I got him subdued in a submission hold. He was still struggling and swearing at me. I could hear her sobbing. Glancing around, I saw Thomas standing there. He was frowning.

“Tremblay, I’m going to let you go, but if you come at me again, this time I will knock your ass out. You need to leave. You’ve got your daughter crying her eyes out.”

“Let go of me. I’ll have your ass thrown in jail for breaking and entering and assaulting a police officer,” he snarled.

“No you won’t because I was let in by Miranda and I never hit you. You were the one hitting me and I merely subdued you.”

“Who do you think they’ll believe, you or me?” he asked with a smirk.

“Him. I have the proof right here,” Thomas stated calmly, as he held up his phone. “I recorded it. I came in when I heard more yelling. I was right outside the door. I recorded the whole altercation. If you file that report, you’ll be making a false police report. I don’t think police officers are allowed to make false reports any more than the rest of us.”

The rage on her dad’s face was terrible to see. He gave me another ugly look then cast a sneering one at her, before he marched to the open door and slammed it shut behind him. As he did, Miranda collapsed to the floor crying. I hurried over to pick her up and carried her to the sofa. As she sobbed against my chest, I spoke to Thomas. “Thanks for the backup. Why don’t you go wait outside? I need to get her calmed down. If you see him or any of his men coming, text me.”

“Sure thing, Cian. Let me know if she needs anything,” he replied as he cast her a worried look. I watched him leave before I started to talk softly to her.

“Please, *a stór*, stop crying. I need you to calm down so we can talk.”

It took her a couple of minutes to finally calm down enough to talk. The whole time I waited, I fought the urge to go find her dad and kick his ass. The only thing that stopped me was knowing that it would upset her more. She lifted her face to look at me. Her eyes were red and swollen. “Here, let me get rid of those pesky tears,” I told her, as I wiped them away gently with the bottom of my t-shirt.

“Don’t. I’ve already made a mess of your shirt. Don’t make it worse.”

“My shirt will wash. Are you able to tell me what happened before I showed up? I could hear you yelling when I got to the door.”

“He showed up mad because he thought I stood him up for brunch. I didn’t think he’d want me there after last week. I told him that and how upset I was that he believed Keaton

over me. He babbled about no man being able to stay calm in the face of the dad of a woman he was stalking and that I must have been the one lying. I told him I wasn't. Then he hit me with the news that he knew about why Skyler and I broke up in college. Or at least he thought he did. He heard it was because I slept with Skyler and he didn't want a loose woman as his girlfriend. My dad had people watching me while I was away at school. I told him the bare facts of what happened. He didn't seem to believe me and we were arguing. That's what you heard."

Hearing this made me want to hit him even more. Although I knew the first names of the bank creep and her ex, maybe she'd spill the rest and I could have Cody track them down for me. I wouldn't mind having a heart-to-heart with them. One that involved my fists. "Has he ever acted like this before?"

"No, that's what's so crazy about it. Sure, he could be bullheaded and sort of chauvinistic at times, but he's never accused me of anything like that nor sided with anyone against me. He's not acting like himself, Cian. As mad at him as I am, I'm even more worried. I know dropping us on top of it didn't help, but it's not like we could hide it when you were standing right there."

"No, we couldn't, but maybe I shouldn't have lost my cool and told him we'd be sleeping together and getting married. It's true, that's what I pray happens, but I should've waited to tell him that."

"I don't think it would matter if you did or not. He's convinced you and your family are a bunch of mobsters who lie, cheat, steal, and kill anyone who gets in your way."

It was true, we didn't lie, cheat, or steal anymore. As for killing, only those who really deserved it and were a threat we couldn't resolve any other way. That would be something I'd have to tell her later. Right now, it might send her running from me which was the last thing I wanted. "Why don't we get out of here and go somewhere? We can go for a drive, to my house or anywhere you want. It'll help get your mind off this whole mess."

“I’d like that. Let me put my salad away and get cleaned up a bit then we can go.” She said as she stood up.

“You haven’t eaten lunch yet? Well, why don’t we go eat somewhere?”

“I’m not up to eating out, Cian.”

“We don’t need to. We can go to my place and eat.”

“That sounds nice. Can you give me a ride on your motorcycle too? I’ve been thinking about it since yesterday and I think I’ve gotten my nerve up enough to try it at the compound. At least that way, if I freak out, the only possible people to see me are your family and the guards, not all of St. Augustine.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at her. I shooed her off to get ready while I took care of her salad. It didn’t take her too long to get ready, then we were on our way. Like most days anymore, she and I rode together and Thomas was in another car behind us. We arrived at the compound in no time.

Inside the house, I sent her to the kitchen to see what might interest her for lunch while I sent off a group text to the family letting them know we were there and a brief heads up that she and I had a run-in with her dad. Hopefully, they’d give us space for a while. I doubted they’d be able to stand to give us all day. My phone almost exploded with the replies. They were all worried about her and pissed at her dad.

In the end, we settled on fixing a salad similar to what she had at home. Later, we could make something more substantial for dinner. I wasn’t that hungry since I had a huge breakfast with the family. One that I’d wished she had been there to enjoy. Next Sunday I’d get her here for it.

Next, I took her to get my bike out of the second garage. She’d only been in the one at the house. I kept an extra helmet in there in case someone wanted to ride. It fit her well enough to be safe. I helped her put it on and explained the safety rules. When we took off, I started out slow. She was so tense I was afraid to scare her more. After the first huge loop around the houses, she was less tense and even laughing. I

sped up. In no time we were riding as fast as I would inside the grounds. I could see the guards glancing at us from time to time. Several of my family members were outside and watching us too. By the time we took a rest, she was smiling and vibrating with joy. I'd been successful at getting her mind focused on something else.

Miranda:

The past five days since the big blow up with my dad had been quiet as far as him. He hadn't reached out to me and I didn't contact him. I was still too hurt by what he said to forgive him yet. All week I'd worried that he'd do something to Cian or his family in retaliation for us seeing each other. So far, he hadn't. Or if he did, Cian had lied about it. I asked him every day if he'd seen or heard anything from my dad. He told me no every time.

When he and I weren't at work, we spent time together. We went out to dinner again, we cooked one night at his place. Another night he took me to a street fair downtown. Several of his family joined us that night. They were a riot to go out with. His cousins were trying to convince me that we needed to go back to Sirens again. I wasn't sure if I wanted to or not. I told them I'd think about it.

I was grateful today was Friday, and I'd have the weekend off. All I had to do was survive the day, and I was free. Kim and Iris had been after me all week asking what was wrong. They said I wasn't my normal self. I didn't want to have the gossipy people all over town talking about me and my dad, so all I told them was I was tired. As much as I liked them, they were the world's biggest gossips. I was surprised my dad hadn't known about me and Cian already.

I glanced at the clock. It was almost my lunch break. I was looking forward to getting away from my window. It had been a slow day for a Friday. Five minutes before I was to close my window, the front door opened and in walked one of the last people I wanted to see, stinking Dwight Carruthers. If I could've hidden, I would have. He saw me immediately and made a beeline for me.

"Hello Officer Carruthers, how may I help you?" I said nicely, even though it almost killed me to do it. Why couldn't he go to someone else's window and bother them?

"You and I need to talk. Take a break," he ordered.

“I still have nearly five minutes until I get my thirty-minute lunch. I’m sorry but I barely have time to eat as it is. I can’t meet with you.”

“Miranda, don’t make me have this discussion in front of the whole bank. You won’t like it if we do,” he threatened.

If it wasn’t my intent not to give the nosy people around me something to spread around, I’d have told him to go fuck himself. However, since I didn’t want that, I nodded and closed my window. My boss wouldn’t get mad knowing a police officer had wanted to talk to me. Rather than going into the break room, we went outside. He tried to get me to get into his squad car, but I refused. Seeing he’d have to force me to do it, he backed off and sat down at a picnic table that was on the small lawn behind the bank. It was still part of the property and some of us would go out here and eat when the weather was nice.

“What was so urgent you had to disturb me at work?”

“I’m here to talk some sense into you, Miranda. You’ve obviously lost your mind. All week, I knew something was wrong with your dad. It wasn’t until today I got him to confide in me. He told me all about what went down on Sunday. I warned you to stay away from those O’Sheerans. I should’ve told your dad like I threatened then none of this would’ve happened. How the hell did he get his hooks into you? Is he threatening you in some way to be with him? Why does he want to hurt your dad so much?”

“Cian doesn’t have his hooks in me as you said. He’s not threatening me nor is he doing it to get back at Dad. It’s simple. We like each other. We’re dating and seeing where it’ll go. Why is that so hard for you guys to understand?” I asked, as I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t be stupid! O’Sheerans don’t date. And if they did, it wouldn’t be a little nobody like you. They go for sophisticated, wealthy women with no morals just like them. Not the daughter of a police chief. He’s lying to you. There’s another reason he’s pretending to like you. What you need to do is get as far away from him as you can. I can help you.”

I was furious at him calling me stupid, but I held onto my tongue. I wanted to hear what he thought he could do to help me escape. “What can you do to help me?” I poured on the sweet, innocent act. He ate it up. His chest puffed out.

“You and I need to get engaged and be seen out with each other. If he knows you’ve seen through his lies and accepted the man who has been your match all along, he’ll move on to other women.” He announced it like it was so obvious and logical. I wanted to gag. He was one of the last men I’d ever date let alone marry. The only one ahead of him was Keaton.

“Carruthers, I don’t see you like that. I could never pretend.”

“It’s what your dad wants. You can learn to love me. It’s your duty as a daughter to do what your dad thinks is best for you. Marrying one of his officers is that.”

“Well, if all it takes is me marrying one of his officers, then I’ll see if Flint wants to get married this weekend. Will I get medical care through his insurance?”

His growl of anger made me smirk. He came to his feet. “Goddamn it, this isn’t a joke! You’ll marry me or else.”

I knew telling him I’d marry the force’s K-9, a seventy-five-pound male Belgian Malinois, would piss him off more but I was over this shit. I had to fight hard not to laugh in his face at my joke.

I got up. “This ridiculous discussion is over with. I need to grab a bite before my break is over. Go home.” I turned away to walk back inside. I was startled when he grabbed my arm and swung me around. The angry expression on his face worried me for a moment. I ripped my arm out of his grip and prepared to defend myself. He was bigger than me, trained, and stronger, but I had some moves I could try.

I was saved from finding out by the back door opening and one of my coworkers coming out. He cast us a quizzical look. Carruthers stepped away from me. I didn’t waste time reentering the bank. In the break area, I sat down and had a

shaking fit. Things were getting out of control. All because I decided to date a man others thought was wrong for me. The more they tried to make me leave him the more I wanted to stick with him. I had to prove to them they were wrong about Cian and his family.

I had to return to work before I was completely settled, but I had no choice. For the remainder of the afternoon, I went back and forth with myself on whether I should tell Cian or not. I'd promised him that I would if there were any more issues with Carruthers or Keaton. I had almost convinced myself not to tell him when in the door right before closing time came my other headache, Keaton-goddamn-Hill. What was it today? Was there a sign on the highway telling all assholes to come to my bank? I wanted to bare my teeth at him and growl like an animal. Naturally, he came right up to my window. As if he'd go to one of the other two that were open. I wasn't able to generate a smile for him. I kept my expression flat as I greeted him as cordially as I could.

"Hello Mr. Hill. What can I do for you this week? Another transfer?" The part I didn't utter was, *like you can do at home, asshole.*

"I'd like to withdraw four hundred dollars from my checking please." Something else I'd tried to get him to do. Use an ATM. As I took care of his transaction, I did not need to even look up his account number anymore. I had the damn thing memorized, I quickly got his money. I handed it to him with a receipt.

"Have a pleasant weekend." He didn't leave. Rather, he stood there looking at me. I was gritting my teeth so hard, I was about to pulverize some. "Is there something else you need?"

"I'd like to talk to you about the other Sunday."

"There's nothing to talk about. You lied to my dad."

"That's not exactly true. I panicked. If you'd just let me explain, you'd see that we would do well together."

Everyone was closing their windows. It was mere minutes until five o'clock. There were no other customers in the bank. All of that combined with my outrage at him and my anger at Carruthers, pushed me over the edge.

“Listen, I don't know what else I can say or do to get it through your thick skull, but here goes. I don't like you. You creep me out. I'd never date a man like you in a million years. Coming in here every week and making me wait on you is creepy, but not as creepy as you watching me all over town. I have a boyfriend and if I tell him your name, you won't like it,” I practically yelled. My peers all froze and were staring at me in shock.

“No need to tell me, *mo chroí*. I'm right here and I can see him for myself,” came a gruff voice from the door. I glanced up, not believing my ears to find Cian standing in the doorway. He didn't look happy.

I swear I heard the squeak of air as it left Keaton's body. He looked like a terrified mouse when he saw Cian. He was so scared and maybe confused that he tried to rush out the door, except he couldn't because Cian was blocking it. Keaton bounced off Cian's chest and landed on his ass on the floor.

“Get up, little man. You want to challenge me for my woman, then stand on your feet when you do it. I believe she's told you more than once she's not interested. I heard about your stunt with her dad. Do you know who I am?”

Keaton remained on the floor, although he did nod his head so hard it was a wonder it didn't snap off at the neck. I hurried over to them. I might dislike the man, but I didn't want Cian to hurt him and get into trouble for it.

“Answer me!” Cian ordered.

“Y-y-you're one of the O'Sheerans. I don't know all your names. I'm sorry. I didn't know she was your woman.”

“Really? Do you mean to tell me you haven't been watching her these past few weeks?” The answer was written on Keaton's face. He had seen me with Cian.

“You’re a liar. You have seen her with me. That should’ve told you right there she’s mine. I suggest you find a new bank for your accounts. And if you want to remain healthy, don’t follow her or spy on her again. If I find out you don’t do those things, we’ll have another talk.”

Keaton scrambled to his knees then to his feet and ran out the door. As he did, I swear I caught a whiff of piss odor. Looking down, I saw a wet spot on the floor. My colleagues started to clap and cheer. I was ecstatic because the boss had already left for the day. Cian came to me and engulfed me in those strong arms of his. He gave me a kiss which left no doubt he and I were seeing each other.

“Are you ready to get out of here? I have plans for us tonight and maybe the whole weekend if you say yes,” he told me after he let me breathe.

“I thought you’d never ask. Give me a few minutes to cash out my drawer and get my stuff in the back.”

“I’m parked in the back by your car. I’ll meet you out there. Unless I need to stay inside to prevent more men coming in here looking for you?” His eyebrow over his left eye raised up.

“No, the other one was already here,” Kim called out. I could’ve killed her. He gave me a hard look.

“I’ll tell you about it when we’re alone.”

“Damn right, you will. Hurry up,” he said, as he lightly pushed me toward the counter. I watched him leave before getting to work. I hissed at Kim when I got close to her.

“Why did you say that?”

“Just to watch him go even more alpha. God, that man is hot. Why couldn’t he be interested in me?” she sighed.

“Don’t you have a boyfriend?”

“I do, but compared to an O’Sheeran, he’s chopped liver. I’d dump his ass in a heartbeat for one of them. Do you think you could introduce me to his brothers or cousins?”

“No, I’m not. Jeez, what am I, a dating service?”

She pouted and stomped off. Slowly, the others finished up and went to the back. I rushed through my work as Alfie locked the front door. He came over to me. "I'll hang and walk out with you, Miranda. It sure hasn't been your day. I'm glad Mr. O'Sheeran came in when he did. Knowing you're his girl will stop those other bozos from bothering you."

"Alfie, how do you know Cian? I saw him talk to you the first time he came in here. You looked like you knew each other."

"This isn't my only guard job. I do this full time and pick up extra work at Sirens. They pay great and I wish I could get on there full time. It's more fun than here, but they don't lose many people."

"Hang in there. You never know when that might change. Thanks for walking me out," I said, as we exited the back door. He stopped long enough to arm the alarm before the door shut and locked automatically behind us. Seeing Cian, he waved at him then walked off to his car. I kept going and met him by our cars.

"Where are we going? My place?"

"Let's start there then if you agree with my proposal, we'll go somewhere else. I want to hear what the hell happened earlier today and why you didn't text or call me?"

I didn't argue with him. I was too tired. Seeing Thomas in his car, I waved at him and got his smile and a wave back as I was helped into my car. On the drive to my apartment, I wished it was a longer drive. I wasn't looking forward to how Cian would react to finding out Carruthers' drama today.

Cian: Chapter 11

Upon entering her apartment, I didn't wait to question her about what Kim had meant. I steered her to the sofa and sat her down. She tried to avoid my gaze, but I wouldn't let her. At last, she sighed and met my gaze.

“Tell me what happened earlier today. That woman said another man came to visit you. Was it your dad or Carruthers? Or do you have more men in your life I don't know about?”

“Cian, don't get so worked up. I knew if you found out about it, you'd be upset. Try and keep your cool, please.”

“Just tell me and I'll do my best to keep my cool. Who was it? What was said or done?”

“It wasn't Dad. It was Carruthers. He came in right before I went on my lunch break. He insisted on speaking to me, so we went outside and talked. I didn't want him going off inside where my colleagues could hear him and gossip all over town about it. I guess that wish is wasted. Anyway, he said he was there to talk sense into me. That I'd lost my mind. He told me that Dad had told him what happened last weekend. He babbled about warning me about the O'Sheeran family and asked me how you got your hooks into me. Were you threatening me in some way or trying to hurt my dad? I told him you weren't threatening me or my dad. That we like each other and we're dating.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He accused me of being stupid because everyone knows you wouldn't date a nobody like me. You're into sophisticated and wealthy women who have no morals. He said I needed to get far away from you and that he could help me.”

“What did you say to that?”

“I acted innocent and asked him what he could do to help me. That's when he dropped the bomb that we should get engaged and start seeing each other. He thinks you'll realize I

saw through your lies and will accept me being with a man who's been my match all along. You'll move on to other women." The fury on Cian's face grew, but he kept quiet. I hastened to tell him the rest.

"I explained I don't see him that way and couldn't pretend. He spouted something about as a daughter, I needed to do what my dad wanted and it's my duty to do as he sees fit. Apparently, he thinks I can learn to love him. He pissed me off so to get back at him, I said if marrying one of my dad's officers was all Dad wanted then I'd marry Flint."

"Who the fuck is Flint?"

I giggled. "He's the Belgian Malinois K-9 officer they have on the force. To his credit, he is one sexy, good-looking dog. Carruthers wasn't amused and ordered me to marry him or else. I told him the whole discussion was ridiculous and started to go inside." I hesitated, not wanting to tell him the rest. He did partially grin at my description of Flint.

"Miranda, what aren't you telling me? I can tell there's more than that."

"Fine, I'll tell you, but promise you won't go off half-cocked," I pleaded.

"I can't do that."

Knowing he wouldn't let it go until I told him, I told him the rest of it. "He grabbed my arm and swung me around. I tore my arm away and got ready to defend myself if he did more. Only I was saved from doing anything because one of my coworkers came outside and he left in a hurry. There, that's all of it. I'm fine, Cian."

The bellow of fury bursting out of him made me jump. He clenched his fists and was working not to explode, I think. Unlike with Carruthers, I wasn't a bit afraid he'd take his anger out on me. I knew this was all for Carruthers. I ran my hands up his tense arms and rubbed his shoulders.

"Cian, please, don't. It's over with. He knows I'm not going to do as he says. He has to believe I'd tell you. Whatever fantasy he's built in his head about us will die. I can

tell you want to go after him, but don't. He'll have you arrested and find some trumped-up charges to bring against you. I'm more worried about a man like that being on the force than anything."

His arms crept around me and he brought me close. "*Leannán*, you don't know if he will leave you alone or not. I'm not willing to leave it to chance. If I did and he ends up hurting you, I'll never forgive myself. I need to go see him man-to-man."

"No, that's what he's waiting for. I think he was partially acting more upset than he was. I think he wanted me to tell you and have you go after him. Unless he's completely crazy, there's no way he could imagine I'd leave you for him and marry him just to please my dad. This isn't the Dark Ages. He talked like arranged marriages were still a thing."

"I hate to tell you, but they are in some cultures. Remember what I told you about my family? Marriages made for money and business reasons, not love."

"I know that, but not in poor families. I can see that if we had a lot of money or big businesses like you have, but we don't."

"True, but if he could get you that way, why not? You alone are more than enough to tempt a man to do whatever he has to in order to get you to be his."

I shook my head. "You're the one sounding crazy now. I'm not anything special. Maybe he thinks if he's married to me he'll gain something at work, like a promotion or more responsibility."

"Oh, you have no idea what you can do to a man, Miranda. Right now, I could easily kill him and Keaton for coming near you. If I thought I could get away with stealing you away and marrying you without you hating me, I would do it. If I had to pay millions to win your hand, I would. The only thing I can't see myself doing to win you is killing innocents."

Her astonishment at hearing me say this truly was startling. If she didn't recognize her worth and what she could do to a man who wanted her, I needed to do more to show her. After not saying a word for a minute or more, she spoke again. "I don't see those things as really possible, Cian. I'm not calling you a liar. I just think they're not realistic. If I was a princess or the head of a multimillion-dollar company or an heiress, then maybe. However, I don't want to argue the point. I need you to promise me you won't go pick a fight with Carruthers that ends up landing you in trouble nor will you seek out Keaton."

"I can't very well go after Keaton can I? You haven't told me his last name, although I bet your chatty coworker could tell me."

"Don't you dare ask Kim about him! She'll spread gossip all around the bank and to every customer if you do."

"Give me his last name and I'll promise not to go near him unless he comes near you again. Deal?"

She intently looked at my face then sighed heavily. "I'm taking you at your word, Cian. Don't break it. His last name is Hill."

"Thank you. As for Carruthers, his behavior needs to be addressed. What he did today is unacceptable. If one of your coworkers hadn't come outside when they did, who knows what he might have done to you. He's the one in need of a clear message. He can take it back to your dad, so he knows we're serious about what we told him. I promise, I won't lay a finger on him." I wasn't lying. In this case, I wouldn't touch him. That didn't mean someone else in the family or one of our enforcers or bodyguards wouldn't. I wasn't above splitting hairs in a situation like this.

"Cian, you'd better not be planning something. If you touch him, he'll throw your ass in jail."

"I know. I won't, although he does need to be warned."

After a little more debate, she settled on agreeing with me talking to him. With that out of the way, I told her about

my thoughts for the weekend and our time together. Having a talk with Carruthers could wait until later. Let him stew a bit. “Let’s talk about something much more pleasant. I want you to pack a bag for the weekend.”

“A bag? Why? Where are we going?”

“I want you to come to the compound and spend the whole weekend with me. Yes, you’ll have to endure my family, but I swear they won’t be with us every minute. We can swim, ride my bike, or go out to Sirens if you want. You didn’t get a chance last time to meet the horses. Do you ride?”

“No, I’ve never gotten an opportunity to ride. I’d love to see your horses. As for the rest, it all sounds fun. Are you sure it’s wise for me to stay at your house?”

“Afraid of some gossip? My family won’t say anything.”

“No, I’m afraid of what if we get carried away. Neither of us seems to have much control over our feelings for the other. I don’t want to rush into anything we might regret later.”

“How about we agree that if you do anything short of stripping naked in front of me, that your answer to us having sex is still not yet. Just be warned, if you do get naked I will take that as your green light to go all the way.”

I knew she was right. Our desire for each other was growing. It was hard not to press for more, but I could be a gentleman with her. She surprised me by laughing. “Wow, okay, agreed. If I tear off my clothes and offer myself to you naked, then you have my permission to do what you will. But it has to be all my clothes, not just some.”

“You drive a hard bargain, but it’s a deal. Let’s get you packed and us on our way to a relaxing and fun weekend. You go get your things and I’ll hang here.”

She happily went off to her bedroom. I sat on the sofa and spent my time sending texts. First, I informed the family that she was coming for the weekend and not to be in our way all the time. Second, I told them about what happened in abbreviated detail with Hill and Carruthers. The responses

back were dark and filled with the need to confront Carruthers. I assured them we would do that soon.

Lastly, I sent off a message to Cody to look into both Hill and Carruthers. He'd find any dirt if it existed. His background check on Miranda had been very thorough. The only thing I didn't have was the full name of her college boyfriend. I added the name Skyler to his message and explained what I needed. He might be able to find something now since Skyler wasn't a common name.

It took her maybe twenty minutes to pack everything she thought she might need. After she was done, zooming down the road to home, I was more than thrilled with the fact she'd be mine until Sunday night or if I was lucky, Monday morning. It was getting harder and harder to leave her at night. Even if we weren't having sex, I wanted her by my side.

Tonight, I was going to recommend we hole up at my house, have dinner and maybe watch television or a movie. We'd had a long week and going out didn't sound appealing. If she was up to it, maybe we could go out to dinner tomorrow or stop into Sirens for a bit. It was all going to depend on what she wanted to do.



Friday night went like I planned. We ended up making dinner together then watching movies. In between we talked and had more than a light make out session. It made both of us even more desperate for each other, but we couldn't seem to resist. In order to save herself, she had called it a night. I had to escort her to her bedroom and leave her to sleep alone. I placed her in the suite downstairs with mine. It was clear across the house, which I hated, but it was better than on a whole other floor. It was a very restless night for me.

Today, after we had breakfast, I took her out to see the stable and our horses. We had eight horses—four stallions and four mares. The stable was state-of-the-art. I'd fallen asleep in the stables more than once and spent a comfortable night. She was enthralled with them as I introduced her to them and she petted each one and gave them a bit of apple.

“This side contains the stallions. Here’s Ransom, Conquest, Phantom and Fuego.” I explained as she patted each one and gave them their apple. I’d prepped her on holding her hand flat when she fed them. As soon as we were done with them, I took her to the other side and introduced the mares.

“These are our mares—Skyfire, Spitfire, Wildfire and Hellfire.”

“They’re so beautiful, Cian. What kind of horses are they?”

“Irish thoroughbreds of course. How could we have any other kind?”

“Not biased much, are you?” she stated with a chuckle.

“It had nothing to do with being biased because we’re Irish. It’s all about having the best. It’s known throughout the world that Irish thoroughbreds are one of the best horse breeds in the world. They have been perfected over the last two hundred and fifty years or more. They produce winners in the racing world. Having a foal from them is always desired. They have speed, elegance, and endurance that’s almost impossible to beat. The fact they come from Ireland too is just a plus.”

“I bet they cost a pretty dollar. Do you breed them?”

“We have. Even when we don’t do it for outsiders, there’s a waiting list of people wanting a foal.”

“Do you race them?”

“Not these, no. They’re purely riding horses and for breeding. A few like Ransom, Spitfire, Hellfire and Conquest did race once upon a time. Tiernan oversees our racing horses. O’Sheeran Stables is in Ocala. If you’d like to see them one day, we’ll go over and he can give you the official tour. All of us ride, but Tiernan has been crazy about horses and riding since he could walk. It was natural for him to be the one to oversee our stables.”

“I’d love to see them. I’ve never been this close to a horse and they’re absolutely awe-inspiring and a little frightening.”

“I’ll go over the rules. If you stick to those, then you have nothing to fear. They’re not wild horses. They tend to love people and attention. For today, let me teach you about the best ways to approach them. You should walk and never run toward them. Approach their front side near their shoulders. Speak to them and hold out your hand. Don’t come at them from straight ahead or the rear. They can’t see you. After you let them know you’re here by talking and letting them see you, pat them gently. If they try to move away, then stop and wait for them to settle then try again. Always pay attention to their ears, neck, head, and body. These indicate how they feel and what they’re thinking. For example, if we came up to Phantom here, and he had his ears laid back against his neck, his neck arched or tensed up, was bobbing his head, or tucking his hind end under, we’d back off. These can mean he might act aggressively.”

Trepidation filled her face. Before she could chicken out, I moved her to the next horse and demonstrated what I’d told her while bringing her with me. Fuego whinnied for joy. After touching him more, she began to smile again. “Would you like to ride one?”

“Oh no, I couldn’t. I’d fall on my head.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen. You can ride with me. We’ll keep it to a walk and inside the corral. We have helmets if that makes you feel safer.”

She warred with herself. I didn’t interfere. I let her decide. Eventually, she nodded. “I’d love to try it but only with you. There’s no way I can get on one of these alone. I’d die of a heart attack.”

Not wanting to give her time to change her mind, I led her to where we had the helmets. Our lead groom, Harold, came over to us. “Can I saddle anyone for you, Mr. Cian?”

“Thank you, Harold, but I’ve got it. I’d like to introduce you to someone. Miranda, this is Harold, our groom here at the compound. He’s been with us since before I was born. His family has always taken care of our horses.”

“Harold, this is Miranda Tremblay. She’s my girlfriend. I thought I’d let her explore more of the family compound.”

She held out her hand, and he took it. “Hello, Harold, it’s very nice to meet you. I’ve never been around horses but they are majestic and wonderful, aren’t they? Cian is taking me for a ride with him.”

“It’s my pleasure, Miss. They are all those things and more. It’s nice to see Mr. Cian bring someone to see me and the horses. Tell me, are you from St. Augustine?” As they chatted, I saddled Conquest. He had spirit but he wouldn’t scare her to death, I hoped. I could’ve ridden one of the mares, but with both of us, it would be too much weight. When I had him ready, I went to get her.

“I hate to interrupt, but Conquest is ready. We’ll be sticking to the corral, Harold. I just want to give her a taste, so she hopefully gets addicted to riding like the rest of us.”

“She asked really good questions, so I think you have nothing to worry about. I’ll be around if you need me. It was an absolute pleasure to meet you. Come see me any time, my dear.” He told her as he took her hand and kissed it. To me, he gave his standard handshake then left.

“I see you made another conquest. It’s apropos we’re riding this horse. You charmed the hell out of Harold.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He extended an open invitation to come see him any time, and he kissed your hand. I’ll have to keep my eyes on him. He just might decide to run off with you.” This got her to laugh. While she was, I struck. Quickly, I settled a helmet on her head and secured it. As soon as it was in place, I gave her verbal instructions.

“Put your left foot in this stirrup, your left hand here on the horn, then try to hop and lift yourself as you grip the saddle horn. I’ll help you. Once you’re on, I’ll get on behind you and take the reins. All you need to do is sit still.”

She looked terrified, but I was proud of her. She did as I instructed. With me lifting her by the waist, she made it into

the saddle. She was gazing down at the distance to the ground in fright as I swung up behind her. I took his reins. She gasped as I gently nudged him with my heels.

I kept my promise. We never went faster than a walk. As we rode, I explained more about horses, the saddle and how to handle them. She got into what I was saying and forgot to be afraid of the ride. I kept it short, since she'd never been on a horse and I didn't want her to get sore. When we returned him to the stable, she seemed sad for it to end. Harold was there waiting for us. He insisted on unsaddling Conquest and rubbing him down. I let him. He was in his sixties, but still more than capable of doing the work. I didn't want to make him feel like he couldn't.

The whole walk back to my house, she chattered excitedly about the ride. Yeah, I was right. She'd be up on a horse on her own in no time. At the house, we washed our hands then changed into bathing suits. It was nice outside and a swim would feel good. Hopefully, this time I might get her all to myself in the pool. I could only hope.

Miranda:

After the day I'd just spent with Cian, I should be exhausted and wanting to stay in for the night. That was the last thing I was feeling. The ride and swimming followed by us just exploring more of the compound had given me endless energy. It was the need to wear off some of that energy and not to be tempted to strip naked, which made me agree to go to Sirens with him and the rest of his family. The only ones not going were the three sets of parents and his *mamó*.

After agreeing to go, I found myself stressing over what to wear. I almost told Cian that I changed my mind. I knew we'd be on the top floor in the VIP section. Everyone up there dressed to the nines. I didn't want to feel frumpy or to embarrass him and his family. Which was why I was grateful when his sister and the other young ladies came to get me. They told him the women were all getting ready together and that we'd meet him and the others at the cars.

I barely had a chance to give him a quick peck on the mouth before they hustled me away. We ended up at Ais' house. Her bathroom was huge, like Cian's and there was plenty of counter space for every imaginable beauty tool and makeup. In her bedroom, the bed was covered in stacks of clothing. As they excitedly talked, I found out the other women had brought their clothing selection to Ais' so they could get dressed there. That's when I realized the one outfit I had been planning to wear was still at Cian's house.

"I need to go back to Cian's. My outfit is there."

"Don't be offended, but we brought you here for two reasons, Miranda. One is so we get to spend time with you without any of the guys. We need girl time. It's so much more fun to get ready together. The second reason is we assumed you probably didn't have clubbing clothes or if you have any, they're still at home. We wanted to offer you a selection of clothes to choose from. We want you to feel like the gorgeous woman you are. We know all of us need armor once in a while," Ais explained. The other women were all nodding and murmuring their agreement with everything she said.

I could've gotten offended that they thought my stuff wouldn't be good enough, but I didn't. Instead, I felt nothing but gratitude. To think women who looked as beautiful as them felt the need for such armor made me feel a hundred times better. I threw my arms around Ais and Cara's necks, since they were the ones closest to me.

"Thank you, thank you. I can't tell you how much this means to me. I was panicking about not having anything suitable to wear and I was about to tell Cian I didn't want to go when you showed up to kidnap me."

They laughed at my kidnapping remark. "That's us. With family like us, you never have to worry about others whisking you away against your will. So, in keeping with that theme, you're going to sit back and let us work. We want to create your whole look for tonight from top to bottom. Do you trust us?" Shiv asked with a smirk.

"No, but I'm game. Do your worst. Only remember, if he hates it and makes me stay home, it's your fault."

"You could never look awful. My brother adores you, Miranda. All you have to do is look at him when he sees you or your name is mentioned. You could go out looking like Attila the Hun and he wouldn't care or think you less dazzling," Cara uttered. I hugged her compliment to me.

That was how a couple of hours later, when all of us were painted, groomed, and dressed, I stood in front of Ais' full-length mirror and stared at myself in wonder. My hair had been left all the way down and curled to lay in soft waves on either side of my face and down my back. My makeup was suitably darker than daytime makeup. My eyes and lips were painted dark. My smoky eye made my light gray eyes pop. It was all done in grays and black with a tad amount of silver eyeshadow. Black eyeliner and mascara completed the look. My lips were lined and filled with a dark wine-colored lipstick. I hadn't ever worn a color that dark with my pale complexion. I thought it would look terrible, but it didn't. It made me look sexy and mysterious, I thought.

As if the hair and makeup weren't enough, my outfit had my head spinning. I wasn't comfortable wearing a barely there dress or skirt. Luckily for me, they had other options. They had chosen a black jumpsuit for me. It wasn't a boring one though. This one had a high waist that left my upper abs bare before becoming a wider halter top. It more than covered my breasts while leaving a decent amount of cleavage bare. Around the waist of the bottom half, were straps lining the top of the pants section, running up the center of my abdomen and between each breast before it crisscrossed a couple of times over my upper chest and around my neck. Those straps were covered in shiny silver beads.

The jumpsuit showed enough skin to be considered sexy without being slutty. It was one of Shiv's. They completed my look with silver three-inch heels and long chandelier silver and what looked like diamond earrings. I was afraid to ask what they cost. I told myself they were rhinestones. My toenails were still nice from my home pedicure and my fingernails were buffed and covered in a clear coat from my manicure.

The others were decked out in more outfits that made them eye-catching. Some were dresses or skirts and like me, Ashlynn wore pants. They'd done their hair and makeup in various styles. All of which suited them and their clothes perfectly.

"What do you think?" Ashlynn asked me with a smile. She'd come to stand beside me in front of the mirror.

"I think I'm in a dream and I'm a princess. I hope Cian finds this as breathtaking as I do."

"Believe me, my brother is going to lose his mind. However, we don't want him to see the full effect until we get to Sirens. So you need to wear this long coat and keep it buttoned. If he asks to see what you have on, just tell him it's a surprise."

"Why don't you want him to see it? Is he going to hate it?"

“No, he’ll love it and hate any other men seeing you in it. In case you haven’t had time to learn it yet, the men in our family can be a tad overprotective and possessive. You’ll understand what I mean when you see Darragh with Ashlynn and Cian with you tonight.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t dress in this then.”

“If you dare to take it off, we’ll kick your ass. It does them good to believe they have to defend you and be at their absolute best at romancing you in order to keep you,” Ais stated firmly.

“Plus, they’ll be so busy keeping men away from you two, it’ll lessen our other guys trying to scare off men from us. We want to dance and not just with each other or our family members,” Shiv added.

I stopped second-guessing them and kept on the jumpsuit. My gut told me they wouldn’t leave me open to ridicule or anger over my clothes. Taking the long, thin coat they handed me, I slipped it on and secured it. While I did that, Shiv informed me she texted Cian to bring my purse so we could get what I needed out of it. They had even provided me with a small evening purse to match my outfit. It was a shiny silver one.

It wasn’t long before we heard knocking at the door. We all crowded at it as Ais opened it. Outside waiting for us was the largest limo I’d ever seen in my life. Standing beside it with the doors open was a driver and several bodyguards. Behind them were two SUVs. One had more men in it while the other sat empty. That must be for the guards by the limo. On her porch were twelve devastatingly handsome men all dressed in dark pants and pullover shirts with blazers over them. They were in various hues of gray, black and dark blue. They looked like men on a sexy calendar. Even though their clothes weren’t formal wear, they screamed money and success.

As we stepped outside, we were each claimed by a man. In my case and Ash, we were instantly in Cian and Darragh’s arms. The others were claimed by one of the

remaining guys. As we walked down the stairs, Cian whispered in my ear.

“You look magnificent, Miranda. Show me your outfit.”

“I can’t. It’s a surprise. I promise, as soon as we get to Sirens, I’ll let you see it. I think you’ll like it.”

“Oh, I have no doubt I will. On you, rags would look beautiful. Here, let me help you in the car,” he said, as we made it to the limo. He helped me in, then got in himself. Amazingly, as it filled, it held all eighteen of us. It made me think that when some of the others found their soulmates, they’d have to bring two limos for nights like this.

The drive into town was smooth. Light, soothing instrumental music played over the speakers. I was amazed to see three television screens and a full bar. It was stocked with all kinds of drinks, not all were alcoholic and crystal decanters. Between us and the driver was a privacy divider. Lights ran in a strip down the center of the limo. Everyone was chatting about the night ahead. Excitement filled the air. I was nervous yet excited too. I felt this night would be memorable for more reasons than my jumpsuit.

Miranda: Chapter 12

Entering Sirens on Cian's arm and bypassing the line of people outside seemed surreal. People stared at us. I could tell many of them recognized the O'Sheeran family. They whispered as we passed. The security at the front door greeted them and waved us inside along with our bodyguards.

"Do people always stare at you like this when you come here?" I whispered to Cian.

"They do, although we usually come in the back way and avoid the crowd. Inside, we can't avoid them. Stay with me and you'll be fine."

"Why did you come in the front if you usually enter through the back door?"

"So we could show off the beauties on our arms, of course," he replied with a wicked smile.

"You're such a smooth-talker, aren't you? Flattering the ladies and making them feel like they're the only ones you see," I teased him.

His smile fell away. "Miranda, I'm not just trying to flatter you. You are the only woman I see and I mean every damn word I say. You're beyond stunning to me and all I need and want. Don't ever doubt that."

Seeing how serious he was, I knew he meant every word he said. Not caring who was watching us, I stopped walking. He stopped too. When he did, I reached up and pulled his head down so I could kiss him. He responded by greedily kissing me back. Thank goodness this lipstick the girls put on me was smudge and kiss proof.

As we kissed I heard chuckles, gasps, and murmurs all around us before flashes of light had me opening my eyes and reluctantly ending the kiss. Gazing around, I noticed people staring and some of them held cameras. Shit, had I done something wrong? I started to panic, but Cian just smiled and started walking again, with me firmly tucked underneath his shoulder.

“Don’t pay any attention to them, *a stór*. You just made those reporters’ day. Our picture will be all over the place by morning.”

“God, I’m sorry. I didn’t think of that. Shit.”

“It’s no big deal. We always have someone trying to get a picture, especially when we go out in full force. I don’t give a damn who knows we’re together. In fact, I prefer everyone to know it. Maybe this will drive it home in some dumbasses’ brains that we’re real,” he stated. I knew he was thinking of Carruthers and Hill and maybe even my dad.

The bodyguards helped to make a path through the crowds as we moved up to the third floor. It was much quieter and less insane up there. People still stared at us, but they weren’t trying to yell and ask who I was to Cian or snapping photos. We were instantly taken to two big tables next to each other. Our guards were shown to a nearby table like the last time I was up here. Before sitting down, we ladies took off our coats. When my outfit was revealed, hands clutched my hips and Cian pressed closer. I met his fervent gaze.

“Jesus Christ Miranda, I can’t believe your outfit,” he growled.

“Don’t you like it? The girls said it was appropriate for tonight. Were they wrong?” I asked fearfully. I went to grab my coat again to put it on. He stopped me.

“*Dia* no, that’s not what I meant, *mo grá*. You look out of this world and I’m just concerned about how many men I’ll have to beat to keep them away from you tonight. I love your outfit. It suits you utterly.” As he admitted that and I saw the knowing smiles of the other women, he kissed me. This time we weren’t interrupted by camera lights, so the kiss went on until his family told him he either needed to stop or get a room. He drew away from me reluctantly.

“They’re right. Much more of that and I’ll lose my control, forget my promise, and try to persuade you to let me make love to you,” he whispered urgently in my ear.

As he did, he pressed himself against me. I could feel what could only be his hard cock pressing against my stomach. He'd never done that before. As I gasped, he winked at me then pulled out a chair for me. I sat down because my legs were weak. He sat down and took my hand in one of his. As a waitress came over to greet us, I thought of what I'd just felt.

My emotions were in turmoil. I was hard pressed not to tell him to take me home and make love to me. I was becoming more and more unable to fight my ever-growing attraction to him. Add to it the fact that I was almost sure I was falling in love with him. The way I felt about him already outweighed what I'd felt for Skyler. On top of all that, the feel of his cock against me had me eager to see what he looked like naked. If his erection was anything to go by, he was more than an average-sized man. Wanting to calm myself, I ended up ordering an alcoholic drink. It was going to be a long night.

It wasn't long before the ladies got up to dance and insisted I join them. Cian encouraged me to go. As we found a spot on the dance floor, Cara asked me a question, so the others could hear her. "So, did my brother say he hated your outfit?"

I laughed. "No, as you saw, he almost kissed me to death. He assures me he loves it. Thank you for helping me to get ready tonight. I couldn't have done it without you."

"Don't worry, you're family. We'd never let you go out and feel inadequate or embarrassed. Besides, we love shoving it in all the whores faces that you have Cian and they don't. He and the others are all considered the most eligible bachelors. When Ash captured Darragh, there were a lot of pissed off women. The same will be true with you and Cian. I will warn you. It's more than likely we'll run into some of his past conquests tonight. They might be ugly toward you or try to see if they can get his attention away from you. Be prepared and don't let them see you sweat. You're more than capable of besting any of them and you're his choice, not them. They can go fuck themselves," Cara practically snarled. By the looks on the other's faces, they were in agreement. None of them liked

the way women were toward the men in their family. I couldn't blame them.

“I won't. Now that he's convinced me that he truly wants me and I know I want him, no one is going to say something to make me give him up. The only thing to make me do that is him telling me he doesn't want me anymore or if he cheats on me.”

“He'll never cheat on you, Miranda. I can promise you that. If the unthinkable happens and he finds himself wanting someone else, which I don't believe will ever happen in a million years, then he'd tell you first before being with her,” Shiv assured me.

Trying not to think of such a terrible thing, I pressed that thought to the back of my mind and smiled. This got them all to relax and we let the music take us away. As we danced, we laughed and had so much fun. I had no idea how long we were up on the floor before Cara suggested we take a break and get a drink. I was all for it. As we approached the tables, I saw a woman in a skintight black leather catsuit sit down beside Cian and run her hands up his arm. I saw red.

Cian:

I loved watching Miranda having so much fun. She was dancing her heart out and laughing with my sister and the rest of the women. The guys and I were talking about cars and about our plans for upcoming trips. Darragh was impatient for his wedding to get here. It was only six and a half weeks away. Afterward, they were going to go to our estate in Ireland for their honeymoon. It had been a good while since I'd been there. Maybe that would be a good place to take Miranda for our honeymoon. I made the mistake of saying it out loud.

“Damn, you’re just like Darragh. Ready to pop the question before you’ve even known her a month. Don’t get me wrong, I think she’s great. You’d be crazy not to want to marry her, but don’t you think you should give it more time? It would suck if these feelings wear off and you’re stuck married to someone you don’t want or love,” Rory stated.

“What if I am like Darragh? When you know you’ve found your *anamchara*, why the hell wait? Life isn’t guaranteed. We could drop dead or be killed tomorrow. I’m going to claim her as soon as I know she’s ready to be claimed,” I told him. I couldn’t help but be angry with him.

“Cian’s right. I feel the same way. You’ll understand what we mean when you meet the one, *deartháir beag*,” Darragh told him.

“You had to throw that little brother in there didn’t you? I swear, I’m not trying to be an asshole. I just don’t want anyone to get hurt. That includes your women. As long as you’re a hundred percent sure, then so be it.”

I was about to tell him I was when the seat beside me was filled by a woman in a leather catsuit. I swear it was so tight, that when she sat down, I could hear it creaking. I looked up at her face to tell her she had the wrong table. I groaned when I realized it was Elsa Lindgren. Just my luck that this alley cat was out on the prowl here on the night I brought Miranda. She ran her hand up my arm. Shaking it to get rid of her touch, I glared at her.

“Elsa, I don’t know what the fuck you think you’re doing, but no one invited you to sit with us and I sure as fuck didn’t invite you to touch me. Get up and go back to wherever you came from. That’s Miranda’s chair.”

“Oh, don’t be like that, Cian. You know you’re happy to see me. Miranda’s too busy making a spectacle of herself on the dance floor. I came over to invite you to keep me company. I’m much more fun and I can promise you the night of your life, if you do.” She gave me what I think she thought was a sexy, suggestive smile.

“Sluts aren’t welcome. Get lost, Elsa,” Fallon told her.

She opened her mouth to say something back, but she never got the chance. Miranda came up behind her. I saw her out of the corner of my eye. I turned toward her to tell her that I hadn’t invited Elsa to join us. Her words stopped me cold.

“You’re in my chair. I suggest you move your bony ass before you lose it. Not only don’t I like other people to sit uninvited in my chair, but I really hate them touching my man. Keep your hands off him before you lose them, Elsa. Why don’t you run along and play with a man stupid enough to buy into your lame bullshit?”

Hoots of laughter and derision toward Elsa rang out around the table. I couldn’t help but laugh too. Elsa’s face turned almost purple with rage. She shot to her feet. I stood up in case she got the bright idea to take a swing at Miranda.

“How dare you speak to me like that? Who do you think you are? You’re a nobody. You stand there thinking you’re something just because Cian happens to be fucking you at the moment. Well, it won’t last. He sleeps with women constantly and there’s no way, if he’s ready to settle down, it’ll be with a pathetic loser like you. He’s just slumming it. He needs a woman like me. I know his world. You don’t.”

“That’s enough, Elsa! You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. Miranda isn’t just some hookup to get my rocks off with. She’s my woman and soon, everyone will know it. I’ve never slept with you and I never will, even if Miranda isn’t in the picture,” I warned her. I was tired of her

endless pursuit of me and more than pissed about how she was acting toward Miranda.

“Yeah, he never wanted his dick to fall off from whatever he would surely catch off you,” Miranda told her.

An almost ear-splitting shriek came out of Elsa. I was so busy being shocked at what Miranda had said, that I wasn't fast enough to get between them before she flew at Miranda with her claws up. She had wicked talons that she painted blood red all the time. My family shouted warnings. I launched myself toward them, although I knew I was too late. A loud smacking sound brought me to an abrupt halt. All the talk around us died down to barely a whisper. Elsa stood there holding her mouth and crying half in pain and half in rage. Miranda was standing there cool as can be without a mark on her. She was watching Elsa like a wolf watching its prey.

“I don't know who you're used to using your claws on, but news flash, some of us know how to protect ourselves and fight back. Let this be a lesson to you. Come at me again or bother Cian, and I will give you more than a busted mouth. Go away before I decide you need more of a lesson.”

Elsa turned to me. Tears streamed down her face, making her makeup run in black streaks. “Cian, you can't let her treat me this way! Tell her.”

“You attacked her first. All she did was protect herself. I suggest you listen to her.”

“You'll regret this. Wait until my father hears what you let her do to me.”

“Elsa, I've never been afraid of your father. Tell him whatever you want. I told you to leave and not to touch me. You should've listened. It's time you left.” I gestured to the club's security staff who'd approached when the commotion started.

“Make sure Ms. Lindgren makes it to her car safely. If she's with a party, please escort them out too. We don't want any more problems tonight,” Aidan informed his staff.

As the guards came up and waved for Elsa to proceed them down the stairs, she glared at us. “I’ll have you all arrested for assault.”

“See where that gets you. We have countless witnesses and the security cameras will have caught everything. You have no grounds to have the police arrest us,” I informed her coldly.

Hearing that, she whipped around and stomped off. On the way to the stairs, the guards stopped at a nearby table and the three women sitting there got up to go with them. As they went down the steps, I heard Miranda mutter, “Who let the bitch off her leash? Her father should keep her on it at all times. Well, maybe not him. He’s as big of a dog as she is.” This broke the silence. All of my siblings and cousins broke out laughing again. I even had to join them.

“Damn, Randi, remind us not to make you mad. Hey, the next time I pick on Cian, are you gonna kick my ass?” Shane asked with a big grin on his face.

“No, I figure little boys should handle their squabbles on their own. I’m here for the big lifting kind of stuff. So, if you need help running off unwanted skanks or stuff like that, then I’ve got your back,” she told him as she winked.

This made them laugh even harder. By now, the ladies had rejoined us and were asking what happened. I let the others tell them while I took Miranda in my arms. She gave me a bashful look.

“Did I go too far? Is this going to mess anything up with those committees and boards you’re on with her father? I didn’t think of that until now. God, I’m sorry, Cian.”

“*Milseán*, don’t worry about Denholm. I always kept it cordial with him, just to eliminate any bullshit attitude. In this case, after how he acted when he met you and both times with Elsa, I don’t give a damn about that anymore. I’m sorry. I should’ve been closer so you didn’t need to defend yourself. Honestly, I didn’t know she’d actually attack you physically.”

“Cian, I don’t expect you to protect me from people like that. I do know how to do that myself. My dad taught me all about how to while I was growing up. It was always one of his fears that I might end up in a situation where I would need to protect myself and he wanted me capable of doing it. I know self-defense and even how to use a gun if that makes you feel better. Maybe I should apply to be on your security team,” she stated, with a grin.

I hugged her tightly. “Like hell you will. You’re so much more than bodyguard material. Why don’t we talk about that more when we get home? I think I can show you one of the ways you can be so much more to me.”

Her mischievous smile hit me right before she kissed me. That kiss left no doubt that she was officially laying her claim to me out there for all to see. Miranda Tremblay and Cian O’Sheeran were without a doubt a couple. My family, the nuts they were, cheered as we kissed. After we were done kissing, her and the other women all sat down and ordered fresh drinks. I could feel the various sets of eyes on us from those on the VIP level. I wondered who would be brave enough to approach us. I didn’t have to wait long.

I nodded as Christopher Brynes came to a halt next to our table. I didn’t know he or any of his family would be here tonight. I glanced at Aidan. He nodded, which told me Christopher had asked permission to be here. As a member of one of the six Irish families, even though we were technically on good terms with all but the Doyles now, we still asked permission before entering each other’s territories or establishments. To not do so, could end up in misunderstandings and someone getting hurt or killed. Our bloody history might be behind us, but it would never be forgotten. He greeted Darragh first, as he should.

“Hello Darragh. It’s so good to see you. I was hoping I might run into some of you tonight. Aidan was so gracious as to grant me permission to come and relax at your fine establishment.”

Darragh took Christopher’s held out hand. “Hello to you, Christopher. What a lovely surprise. I hope you’re

enjoying yourself.”

“Oh, I am. And your entertainment over here only made it better. Would you mind introducing me to the three lovely ladies I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting? I believe one of them is your fiancée, right?” He smiled at Ashlynn. As if he didn’t know who she was. Who else would be practically sitting on Darragh’s lap?

“Certainly. You’re correct, this is my *álainn fianca*, Ashlynn. And next to her is her sister, Alexis.”

“Charmed, ladies. Your beauty only makes this place even better. And this lovely Maeve reincarnate?” He asked, as he stared at Miranda.

He was paying her a compliment by referring to her as Maeve. In our ancient history, Maeve was a famous warrior queen. I’d explain that to her later. Right now, I wanted to get him away from our table as soon as possible. I didn’t like the way he was eyeing any of the women, but especially Miranda and my sister.

“This is Miranda. She’s my woman. Ladies, let me introduce you to Christopher Brynes.” Miranda, Ash, and Alexis all nodded and greeted him cordially.

“I couldn’t help but see the altercation that went on over here. I hope it wasn’t anything serious. I’m at your disposal if it is. Who was that woman and why would she try and hurt your woman?”

“She was just a woman who couldn’t take no for an answer and touched someone she shouldn’t. What brings you here? Are you in town on business or pleasure?” Darragh asked him. As head of the family, I let him take the lead.

“It’s a bit of both. I told you that when I sent word last month, I might be in the area.”

“You did, but then when you didn’t show up or contact me again, I thought you’d changed your mind. Please, let us send you a bottle of wine to your table. We hope you enjoy your stay. Any idea how long your trip will be?”

“Merely two more days, I’m afraid. I need to get back home. Tell me, why aren’t your sister, Cara, and Aisling here with dates tonight? I would’ve thought they’d be the first to be snatched up before any of you. After all, you’ve been on the market as eligible bachelors for so long, I think most people never expected any of you to settle down,” he said with a smirk. His eyes weren’t moving off of Cara. Darragh looked at me then back at him.

“My sister hasn’t found a man worthy of her yet,” Darragh told him.

“The same here,” Aidan said of Ais. As the oldest, it was his responsibility to speak. Christopher glanced at me.

“Cara is too strong for most men to handle. She’ll settle one day when she finds a man able to allow her to be strong and not be intimidated about it. He’ll have to be a very confident man to do that,” I informed him. Cara sent me a smile.

“Well, I hope you’ll allow me to dance with your sisters tonight. I promise to be on my best behavior. I’d ask for a dance with your two lovely women, but I don’t think that would be wise.”

“You’re right. It wouldn’t. Of course, Cara, Ais, and Shiv are more than welcome to dance with you, if they desire to do so. I don’t mean to be rude, but we’re kind of celebrating,” Darragh informed him.

“May I ask what you’re celebrating?”

“Cian finding such a wonderful woman as Miranda. She’s his absolute match, and he’s lucky as hell to have her,” Darragh added.

“Congratulations. You are indeed a very lucky man from what I see. The same goes for Darragh. Ladies, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to my party, but I hope in a bit you’ll honor me with a dance.”

“Of course, all you need to do is come ask,” Shiv told him. Ais and Cara merely nodded at him. He sauntered off to join his table. There were no women with him, just three other

men and what looked like a bodyguard. How the hell had he slipped in here and I hadn't noticed? Turning to Aidan, I frowned.

“Why didn't you tell us he'd be here?”

“Because I wasn't sure if he would be. He only asked that while he was in town if he could stop by. I told him yes. He knows the rules. He's never stepped out of bounds before. I informed the staff to watch for him. I saw him come up here, but we were in the middle of you dealing with Elsa then Miranda came over and gave us a show. It slipped my mind.”

“Forget about him. Out of the other families, Christopher might come across a bit pompous, but he's one of the more well-behaved ones,” Darragh reminded us.

“He is, but I don't like how he was looking at our women. He especially seems fascinated with Miranda and Cara,” I stated.

“Well, he knows Miranda is taken,” Rian said.

“And I can take care of myself, brother. Christopher is a playboy and you know I steer clear of those. I'll dance with him, but don't worry, his charm won't work on me,” Cara assured me.

Even with her assurance, I couldn't help but keep an eye on him as the night progressed. He did return a few times, each time asking one of the unattached women to dance. All of them did, even Alexis. I was a little more tense when he danced with Cara. They seemed to be in an intense discussion. When she came back to the table, I questioned her. “What were the two of you so intently talking about on the dance floor?”

“Nothing much, just catching up on the people we both know. You know, the latest gossip.” She answered, before taking a sip of her drink and looking back at the dance floor. I knew it was more than that, but I didn't press her. If I did, she'd clam up even more. I trusted her to tell me if it was anything I had to worry about.

Miranda distracted me by begging me to dance with her. I couldn't tell her no, so I got up and took her to the dance floor. The rest of the evening passed with all of us having more fun. By the time we headed home for the night, I was more than ready to have alone time with her and forget everyone else, including Christopher.

Cian: Chapter 13

After an amazing weekend with Miranda at my house, I hated to let her return to her apartment, but I had to on Monday. After making sure she got to work safely, I went to Divine to check on how things were going. I was reluctant to go to Jacksonville with Carruthers still out there. He hadn't received his visit from me yet. I was planning to do that tomorrow. Today, I was taking care of business and waiting to meet Cody. He called me first thing this morning to tell me he had information on Hill and Carruthers and also the mystery man, Skyler. He was to meet me at Bella Capri for lunch.

Abbot and I sat down to discuss the Italian jewelry house, Abbagliante Jewelry. Abbagliante was Italian for dazzling which was apt. Looking at their stuff, I had to agree. With this added to our selection, we'd certainly increase our bottom line.

"I love their stuff, Cian, but they don't seem to want to sign a contract with us, unless they can meet with you personally. They want you to come to their headquarters in Vicenza, Italy. I tried to tell them you were too busy, but they didn't seem to care."

"It's alright. I was getting the feeling they'd want to insist on a visit first. I can see about clearing my schedule for a few days and hop over there to see them. Let them know I'll be in contact. However, none of this shit where I stay for weeks in Italy. I'm not going to be there forever with them. I have too much to do here."

"Would a certain blonde beauty be one of those things here you have to do?" he asked with a smile.

"If you mean is my relationship and moving it to the next level a priority, then yes, I mean her. Besides that, I have her dad to win over and two other bastards who seem to think she should be with them and not me. I can't leave her alone with them."

"Why don't you take her with you?"

Why hadn't I thought of that? It was a great idea. I wondered if she would do it. "Damn, I knew there was a reason I kept you around and put up with you," I mockingly told him.

"Cian, I do this with nothing but love in my heart," he responded before he gave me the middle finger.

This caused both of us to burst out laughing. We spent a few minutes hurling insults at each other. He knew I couldn't do it without him. He'd been with us for years. He knew the business inside and out. If I could duplicate him, I'd open up more stores. We'd talked about doing it, but we wouldn't unless we found people to run them like him. That wasn't easy to do.

After we got caught up on work stuff, it was time for me to meet Cody for lunch. He picked Bella Capri because it was the best Italian food in town. You'd think we'd get enough of it at home since it was a family favorite, but we didn't. Despite what people might think, we didn't only eat Irish food. The women in our family were well versed in lots of different cuisines.

He was already there and at our table when I arrived. Thomas came in to join us. There was no need to leave him in the car or to stand guard while we ate. I had nothing to hide from him nor was I too proud to be seen eating with my bodyguard. We took our seats.

"About time you guys got here. I almost ate a whole loaf of bread on my own. They're giving me looks. With you here, I can eat more," Cody griped, as he tore another huge chunk of bread off the loaf on the table.

He dipped it in the oil and vinegar and sighed when he took a bite. For such a fit guy, he could eat more than anyone I knew. Seeing him without a shirt made people wonder how such a computer nerd stayed in that kind of shape. Anyone making the mistake of thinking he was a wimp who couldn't defend himself would regret it. He was more than just deadly with computers.

“Are you sure we can have some, or will we lose an arm?” Thomas asked as he pretended to hesitate over the loaf of bread.

“Live dangerously and find out,” Cody mumbled around his mouthful of bread. Giving him a mock snarl, Thomas took a piece of bread. I grabbed the rest.

“Okay, now that we’ve gotten the all-important bread figured out, I suggest we place our orders then get down to business. You said you had information for me, Cody.”

“Oh, I do. I think you’ll be very interested in it too.”

“If it was so interesting, why make me wait until lunch? You could have sent it to me in an email.”

“Sure, but then I wouldn’t get this great lunch. I’m not stupid.”

This earned him punches to his arms. He barely stopped eating long enough to acknowledge we did it. A waitress hurried over to get our drink orders. We’d been in here enough times to know what we each wanted, so we gave her our orders at the same time. Once she left, he got down to business. He slid a folder toward me.

“This is everything I’ve found so far. You can read it later. I’ll give you the highlights. Let’s start with this guy Skyler you wanted me to find. It took some digging, but I found him. His name is Skyler Mayes. He’s a year older than Miranda which makes him twenty-six. He lives in Cape Coral, Florida near Fort Myers. He settled there after college. He’s single, lives quite the single guy’s life. No serious relationships I can find since he dated Miranda. He works in real estate as a broker. I found no dirt on him. He’s pretty boring. Owns his house, a small boat, and a nice car.”

“After what he did to her, he should be careful. Those nice things might just go up in smoke one day,” I growled. Both of them smirked. “Okay, next, tell me about Keaton Hill.”

“Hill is an oddball. He’s thirty-three. No history of ever dating that I can find. He’s not super wealthy, but he has

enough money not to have to work. He lived with his widow mother until a year ago when she died. Since then he's lived alone in the family home. He has no debt, no habits that could be used against him. Honestly, I think his trip to the bank every week to see Miranda is the highlight of his week. He's an odd, weird man. No criminal or mental history. There's nothing in his background that suggests he would hurt her. He's never even had a speeding ticket."

"Shit, I was hoping you might find something I could use as leverage to get him to stay away from her, if my confrontation with him at the bank doesn't stick."

"I tried, but if there is anything, it's buried too deep to find. It was hard to find anything online since he literally doesn't have any social media accounts and next to no digital footprint."

"It's not your fault. You can only find what's there to be found. Tell me about Carruthers. He's my biggest worry."

"As he should be. Not only does he seem to have her father's ear and he's thought to be one of his most trusted cops, but he's something of a dark horse."

"How so?"

"He goes to a strip club, not one of the family's, every week. He spends hours there but doesn't spend a lot of money. It's one of the ones that runs the strippers out of the back to provide other services. I doubt all the women are there willingly. No one has openly accused him of hurting any of them, but after his visits, it's not uncommon for one of the women to turn up badly beaten. No one has ever called the cops. I think it's due to him being the culprit and them knowing to accuse him would be bad for them. He's never been married. He's thirty-five and over the years he's had more than one girlfriend. They all moved away after he dumped them. It's always him who has ended the relationships, never them. Several have histories of more than one trip to the ER for broken bones and other injuries. Again, he's never been a suspect. Just knowing this, it's a good thing

Miranda's coworker came out and interrupted him the other day. There's no telling what he might have done to her."

The rage in my gut boiled and threatened to explode out of me. I hated men who hurt those weaker than him. It was terrible to think of all those women he'd likely hurt over the years. If it was the last thing I did, he'd be exposed as the animal he was and he'd be punished for all the pain he caused. However, before I did that, I had to make sure he stayed away from Miranda. I'd be meeting him for sure tomorrow.

"I want you to find me proof, Cody. Anything or anyone willing to testify on him or swear out an official statement. He has to be exposed and Chief Tremblay has to know without a doubt the man he's trusted for years is nothing but an abusive prick. I want him to know what kind of man he wants his daughter to marry."

"Do you know for sure Tremblay really does want her with Carruthers? Maybe he's lying," Thomas added.

"Even if he doesn't want them together, he needs to know so he can protect the public from him. A man like that should never be in a protect and serve position," I growled.

"I thought you might say something like that, so I've already started working on getting proof. You said you plan to confront him. Make it soon and after you do, you might want to get Miranda out of town for a few days. A man like him is volatile. You don't want her around when he goes off," Cody warned me.

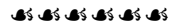
"I hear you and Abbot suggested the perfect way for me to get her out of town."

"How?" They both asked at the same time.

I promptly filled them in on his idea to take her to Italy with me. They thought it was an excellent idea. We spent the remainder of the hour eating and talking about this and that. I'd make my own plans on how to confront Carruthers tomorrow.

Later, after we parted ways, I had Thomas take me back to Divine. I planned to hang out there until Miranda got

off work. When she did, I'd pick her up and go back to her place. I wanted to talk to her about taking a few days off to go to Italy with me. I was praying she'd say yes.



I was at the bank right at five o'clock. I parked in the back. I'd brought her to work this morning, even though she tried to insist she could drive herself. I'd brought her home early this morning to get ready. She'd stayed last night with me as well.

Although we hadn't moved on to having sex yet, we had several intense make-out sessions, which made me even more insane to have her. I was hoping she'd want to take that final step and give me the go ahead soon. If not, I'd be rubbed raw and have pneumonia from all the masturbating and cold showers I was taking. I could stay away from her, but that would only add more stress to me. When she was within sight, I knew she was safe.

When the back door opened and she came out smiling, my whole world felt lighter. I met her halfway across the parking lot. I knew people were watching as I kissed her, but I didn't give a damn. It had been too many hours without the taste and feel of her. I couldn't wait a second longer. She melted into me and put as much passion as I did into our kiss. Tearing myself away from her was hard, but not as hard as my cock.

"I missed you, *a stór*. How was your day?" I asked, as I helped her into my car.

Getting in after her, she answered me. "It was as boring as ever. On second thought, no I swear it's getting worse, Cian. I need to find a new job. If I stay at this one much longer, I'm going to lose my mind."

"Have you thought about what kind of place you'd like to work in or what you'd like to do? You said your degree is in business. What about any hobbies or something you like to do outside of work that you might be able to turn into a job?"

She was quiet for several minutes. I let her think. I wanted to hear her true thoughts. She lived so close to the

bank that we were almost to her place before she answered me. “Don’t laugh, but there is something I do for fun that I love and I’ve always wished I could do professionally. Or at least use it in my work, but my dad said it was worthless as anything other than for fun.”

“Tell me.”

“I’ve always drawn and even painted since I was a kid. My teachers always told me I had talent, even in college. If I could find something which allowed me to utilize that, I’d feel like I found the ideal job for me.”

“You need to show me some of your stuff. Do you have examples at your apartment?”

“I do. Promise not to laugh when you see them. They might not be what most people think of as good,” she warned me. I gave her a reproachful look.

At her place, I didn’t waste time ushering her inside and asking to see her work. I wasn’t going to let it drop. Even if she wasn’t great at it, she might still be able to find a job using some of her skills.

Giving me a shy look, she pointed to the wall in her living room. The only thing on it were two seascapes. I’d seen them every time I’d come here and had meant to ask her where she got them. Despite what people might think, my family and I didn’t just buy art from famous artists. We loved finding and promoting new artists. It was what had us open art galleries up. Shiv was the artist in the family and oversaw them. The two paintings she pointed out were bewitching. You could almost hear the crashing of the ocean waves. The sky looked stormy, and the sea was angry in both paintings. I gave her an incredulous look.

“Miranda, you painted these?”

She nodded shyly.

“*Dia, leanbh*, you should be painting full time. These are absolutely exquisite. I’ve been meaning to ask where you got them. Do you have more?”

“I have a sketchbook. Most of my paintings I have in storage at my dad’s house. My apartment is too small for them. Do you really think they’re okay?” I could hear the disbelief mixed with hope in her tone.

“They’re way more than okay. Go get your sketchbook and then I’ll tell you about one of our businesses.”

She quickly left the room. In no time she was back with three books. We sat down and I opened the first one. Page after page of unbelievable pieces of art jumped out at me. Not all were seascapes or landscapes. Some were black and white while others she’d done in colored chalk or pencil. There were pictures of people, animals and even some abstracts. When I was done, I closed the last cover and looked at her.

“Miranda, they’re all amazing. You can’t keep talent like this locked away. I know I’ve told you about several of the businesses we have in the family. One I haven’t mentioned is our art galleries. Shiv oversees them and we all look for new and talented people to feature in them. You have to let her see these sketches and your paintings. She’ll sign you up in a heartbeat to display in one of them.”

Her mouth fell open and her eyes widened in shock. “Cian, are you messing with me?”

“I’d never do that about something this important to you. Nor am I just saying it because you’re mine. I’m serious. Show her and she’ll have you set up with your own showing in no time.”

“Oh my God, you’re honest to God telling the truth. I can’t believe it. I mean, even a chance to have a one time showing, even if I can’t do it as a profession would be a dream come true. See, if I could put my creative side to use along with my business side that would be ideal. Banking doesn’t allow me to do that. I only took the job as a temporary thing until I found one I loved. That was three years ago.”

“You should do whatever makes you happy. If it’s painting and drawing all day, then do it.”

“I have to be realistic though. Whatever I do has to pay the bills and keep a roof over my head and food in my stomach,” she reminded me.

“What if you didn’t have to worry about that?”

“If I didn’t, then I’d already be doing it.”

“See, even more reason to be mine. I can give you the life you want and deserve.”

“What happens if you change your mind about me?”

“You know that’s not going to happen. I’m all in. All I need is for you to be the same and nothing will stop us. I’ll let you think about that, but I’m not going to let you procrastinate on showing your stuff to Shiv. I’m going to take some pictures to send to her. Be prepared for her to be knocking on your door by morning.”

Despite her protests, I took several pictures and sent them off. In no time I was getting message after message from Shiv asking where they came from. When I informed her they were Miranda’s, she insisted on coming over to see her right then. That’s what prevented me from talking to her about Italy. It was worth it when I watched her excitement grow as Shiv talked to her about her work and doing a show in the near future.

Miranda:

It was a day later, and I was still walking on air about last night's talk with Shiv. When Cian had sent off pics of my paintings and drawings, I hadn't expected Shiv to insist on coming over right away to talk. We'd spent hours discussing my work, her galleries, and what she wanted to do with my work. Cian had been right. She loved it and wanted to see more. We ordered pizza and the three of us spent the evening talking and planning.

Bidding them both goodnight had been hard, but it was hardest for me to do it to him. I wanted him to stay, but I was too shy to ask. I knew I was on the edge of taking that final step. If he stayed, I would've ended up sleeping with him, however I wanted it to be special when we did.

When I got up this morning for work, it was almost impossible to motivate myself to do it. I wanted to call off. Having my dream close to a possible reality made it harder for me to want to go in and act like I was happy with my job. Only the sensible side of me made me do it. I had to eat and nothing for sure had happened. Even after a show, I might not gain any interest or sell anything.

Cian messaged me early to tell me he couldn't take me to work, but he'd see me afterward. I reassured him that I was more than capable of getting to work on my own. He made me promise to stay alert and to call if there were any issues with Hill or Carruthers showing their faces. The same thing he told me yesterday. I promised him I would. I didn't want him worrying. I could take care of myself.

Being a Tuesday, the bank was dead. Our peak days were usually Monday, Friday, and Saturday, so to be this slow wasn't unusual. Maybe everyone had partied too hard over the weekend or something and would decide to stay at home all week. I wish I had the same choice.

It was after one o'clock and I'd already had my lunch when I was called into the boss's office. He'd come strolling in at eleven o'clock. Keeping banker's hours I guess. He didn't

bother to even speak to any of us when he did. That too wasn't unusual. He didn't see most of us as worth his time or energy. How he and my dad were friends, I had no idea.

Thinking of my dad and the differences between him and my boss made me think of his recent behavior. Until recently my dad had been a loving father. He'd never been overly touchy feely, but I'd known he loved me. Now, I wasn't so sure. He hadn't replied to any of my messages since he had confronted Cian at my apartment. I assumed he was licking his wounded pride or whatever. As much as I loved him, I wasn't going to let him dictate my life. I was a grown woman and could make my own decisions.

Knocking on the office door, I put on my most pleasant face and greeted the pretentious blowhard. "Hello Mr. Chalmers. You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, I did. Come in Miranda and have a seat. Close the door behind you," he said with an air of impatience. I did as he asked and took a seat on one of the chairs in front of his big desk. I knew he liked to sit behind it, so he could intimidate people with how important he thought he was.

"I needed to speak to you about some disturbing news I heard. I'd hoped it wasn't true but others have confirmed it. It seems that last Friday you got into two altercations with customers. As if that wasn't bad enough, a male friend of yours showed up and made threats to the second customer."

"That's not exactly the whole story. It's true I did have words with two customers. The first one wasn't done inside around any of the other customers. I was on my break. It was one of the officers who works for my dad. He was upset about the man I'm seeing and was trying to talk me into being with him. When I refused, he grabbed me and if one of my coworkers didn't come outside, I'm not sure what he would've done." I paused to let what I said sink in. He just stared at me with a frown on his face.

"The other man is a customer who has been coming into the bank for almost a year finding excuses to talk to me. He asked me out months ago, and I said no. Recently he's

taken to talking more to me and insisting we would suit each other. He's been following me. I did have words with him, but there were no other customers in the bank. It was my boyfriend who came in and witnessed it. He warned the man to stay away from me."

"Your quarrels with your various lovers aren't my concern. The integrity and reputation of this bank are. You're setting a bad example for others. And even if no customers witnessed your behavior, they could have. I gave you this job as a favor to your father, since he's an important man and I consider him a friend. However, that friendship only goes so far. Unless you can guarantee me there will be no more of your lovelorn lovers in here and your boyfriend doesn't show his face here again, I'm afraid I'll have to let you go."

Indignation burned through me at his attitude. All he cared about was his stupid bank, not if one of his employees was being harassed or even hurt by one of his customers. The more I thought of what he just said, the angrier I got. It was that anger along with my months of unhappiness which led me to say my next words.

"Well Mr. Chalmers, I can't promise that, since to do so would be like saying I can stop the sun from rising. I guess my answer is I can't and won't promise such a thing. I have no control over how your customers act. If I am threatened or feel harassed, I have the right to speak up and defend myself. If that's grounds for dismissal, then fire me."

"Ms. Tremblay, you forget yourself! How dare you take that tone with me?" he said indignantly, as he came to his feet. I swear I heard a groan from the buttons on his too small vest which was stretched across his massive stomach like a skintight piece of paper as he swelled up.

"I dare the same way you dared to verbalize your thoughts about what happened without even waiting to find out my side of the story. You should be more concerned about your employees and not just how things might be perceived by customers and town gossips. If you'll excuse me, I'll go clock out and get my things. Good luck finding someone willing to work in this miserable place." I stood up and turned to walk to

the door. I was over this shit. I hadn't wanted to come in here today anyway.

"You can't just quit! What will your father say? He'll be so ashamed of you. Don't you think he's dealing with enough, knowing his daughter is cavorting with not one but three men. It's disgraceful," he said self-righteously.

"What's disgraceful is your arrogant attitude. You know nothing about who I'm with. I'm with one man, not three. You can tell my dad whatever you want. I'm over his biased attitude too. Oh and one more thing, that customer you just banned from here, I think you'll regret it."

"Why? Do you plan to have him come in and make threats to me too?" he sneered.

"No, but I'd be prepared to lose a whole lot of money if I were you. I believe the O'Sheeran family does a lot of banking here. The man you just banned is Cian O'Sheeran. I'd be prepared to find a lot of new customers fast, or your precious bank might just fold," I said spitefully as I yanked the door open and walked out.

I could hear him puffing as he chased after me. He was babbling about me lying then he started to whine when all I did was clock out. As it happened, Kim and Iris were in the breakroom where the time clock was. They stared at us with rabid curiosity.

"You two, tell me who the man is she's seeing," he ordered them.

"She's dating Cian O'Sheeran, sir," Iris told him.

I got the satisfaction of watching all the color in his face drain away. A look of horror filled his fat face. While he stood there trying to find his words, I got my few possessions from my locker and headed to the back door.

"Miranda, Ms. Tremblay, please, come back and we can talk about this. I was hasty in my decision. I see that. I should've given you a chance to explain. Those two men bothering you won't be tolerated, I promise. I'll speak to your father about his officer and ban the other man from the bank."

He promised as he huffed and puffed behind me. The terror in his voice was evident. It made me feel better. Served the asshole right for being the way he was.

“Too late. You had your chance to act like a human being and you blew it. People only work here because they don’t have a choice. If they did, I can promise you, no one would. This place sucks.”

“If you quit, I won’t give you a reference. The past three years will be a stain on your resume. No one will hire you,” he shouted.

“I think most people in this town know what a blowhard you are. They’ll know you did it out of spite. Besides, according to Cian, I never have to work again if I don’t want to. Call it one of the perks of dating a multimillionaire.”

He was still standing in the back parking lot yelling after me as I took off in my car. The sense of lightness I felt leaving that place for the last time was indescribable. The fact I had no job didn’t even scare me. I’d work anywhere if it meant not working there anymore. I’d wait tables if I had to.

Not wanting to hang at my place alone, I headed downtown. I decided to go get a coffee then I’d message Cian to let him know I was out of a job and we could meet early if he could get away. Maybe I’d let Shiv know we could plan a showing earlier than planned since I had time on my hands now.

Cian: Chapter 14

I clicked off my phone. Miranda's words were still ringing in my ears. She'd been fired because of Hill and Carruthers, although I apparently had a part in it too. I'd apologized to her, but she kept insisting it wasn't my fault and there was nothing to be sorry about. She seemed to be in remarkably good spirits for someone who'd just been fired. Well, it might not do anything for her spirits, but it would mine. I'd already planned to pay Carruthers a visit. I had more to hold against him now.

I dropped my cell phone on my desk. I'd gone to Divine again today then back to the compound to work from there until it was time to see Miranda. It was an early morning meeting that kept me from driving her to work this morning. If I had, I could've picked her up. I offered to come right over and see her, but she told me to handle my business first. The only business I had left was with a woman beater cop. Picking up my phone again, I called Thomas. He answered immediately.

"What's up boss man? Are you ready for our visit to the cop?"

"Damn right I am. Come pick me up. After we're done, you can drop me off at Miranda's. I'll call you later to come get me. I'm afraid if I drive right now, I might kill someone."

"Why? What happened?"

I hastily filled him in on my call from Miranda. By the time I finished, I was standing outside my house and he was stopping in front of me, in a car I didn't recognize. It wasn't one of ours. Honestly, it had seen better days. He looked about as pleased as I did. I got in the front seat with him.

"Do you know where he'll be right now? How're we supposed to find him?"

"There was another interesting bit of information in that file Cody gave me about him. It seems that he never works on Tuesday afternoons. His cover story is that he has

volunteer work he does. In reality, he goes to his favorite strip club outside of town and spends time with one of the dancers in the back. I guess he needs more than the weekend to get his need for inflicting pain out. He's there from two until five. Hopefully, we'll save someone a beating today. When I'm done with him, he won't be able to hit anyone else."

"I wanted to be prepared, so this vehicle isn't registered to anyone who works for you. The windows are tinted so no one can see us. I've asked Kendric and Reggie to join us. They'll help me keep any curious bystanders away while you have your talk," he informed me as we passed the gate and another car pulled out behind us.

I had been so focused on talking to Carruthers, I hadn't thought to bring others with us, which wasn't like me. I'd always been one to protect my back and the family. Falling in love with Miranda had me acting out of character.

Yes, I was ready to fully admit to anyone and everyone that I was madly in love with her. Sure, I'd called her my love a few times, and told her I was falling for her, but I hadn't come right out and confessed that I was no longer falling. I was there. After this confrontation and in light of her quitting her job, I had even more reason to whisk her off to Italy with me. We'd go, and I'd meet with the people at Abbagliante and show her the country. While we were there, I'd confess my love for her and pray that she felt the same or at least was getting there.

The drive took us over a half hour with the traffic. When we pulled into the parking lot of the derelict strip club, there were only a few cars in the lot. Those I figured belonged to the few staff working this time of day. Most wouldn't be in until after dark. The car carrying Kendric and Reggie parked with us behind the building.

They got out of the car looking like the kind of men they were. Reggie was one of what we called our foot soldiers. He did whatever was needed of him, up to and including defending the family. Kendric was more. He was one of our enforcers. It was true that job description had changed from the old days when enforcers would be the ones sent out to

rough people up when they didn't pay or to exact punishment when it was called for. That included torture and killing. Today, they'd kill in defense of the family but not to force people to pay us or as payment for their transgressions. Kendric had been a Navy SEAL. We'd snapped him up when the chance came to add him to our security forces.

"Cian, we'll go in first and bring him out. You shouldn't chance being seen with him," Kendric informed me.

"Kendric, you know that's not going to happen. I'm going in and you can stand watch. Cody is waiting for our call and he'll take care of any cameras or recording equipment in there. He said he can fry their whole system. They'll lose a couple of nights of business but that's it. What I need you to do is to keep any nosy customers and staff away from us."

"Sir, I'd feel better if you'd at least let us go first," he argued.

"You might, but I won't. You can enter in front of me, but that's it. Understood?"

He gave me a dissatisfied look, but he didn't argue. "Understood. Ready?"

"Ready. Let's get this done. I have a woman to see."

This did earn a tiny quirk of his lips. All the men who regularly guarded the compound and us had all seen Miranda. They knew who she was to me. Many of them had met her over the weekend at the compound.

"Sent the text to Cody. He said give him sixty seconds and then we can go inside," Thomas informed us.

I waited impatiently. Finally, when Kendric opened the club's back door, which no one seemed to bother to lock, I had to hold myself back from pushing past him. I knew better than to make their work harder. Because of intel from Cody, we knew he'd be in one of two rooms. A detailed map of the place had been in the file as well. I'd learned not to ask how he found shit like this out. I just went with it and was thankful he worked for us. The first room was empty. At the door of the second one, we didn't bother to knock. We just barged right in.

One quick glance told me we had the right room. A cowering woman was on the bed crying and begging him to stop. Carruthers was enjoying himself as he beat the hell out of her with a whip. When the door came crashing open, he turned around to glare at the door. “Who the fuck are you? Get out. This room is occupied,” he shouted.

He hadn't seen me yet. When Reggie and Kendrick parted and he saw me, he cursed. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I came because we need to talk. Sweetheart, why don't you go with this man right here? He'll make sure you're safe and if you need medical help, he'll get it for you,” I told the woman calmly. She looked scared but I guess the four of us looked safer than Carruthers. She moved slowly off the bed.

“Get back here, bitch, I'm not done with you yet. The rest of you better leave before I have you arrested for trespassing,” he snarled. She hesitated when he said that.

“He's not going to do anything. Go,” I told her reassuringly.

This time, she went to Thomas, and he took her out of the room. Carruthers was dressed in jeans and boots. His shirt was on a chair. He started to come at me. Kendrick and Reggie stopped him. Slamming him against the wall, they took away the whip and patted him down. When they didn't find another weapon on him, they checked his shirt. Lying underneath it was his gun. They picked it up.

“Hey, I'm a cop. I'll have you arrested. That's my service weapon. You can't touch that.”

Nodding to me, they left the room and closed the door without a word. His gun went with them. He faced me. I knew he was a hair trigger away from charging me again. I placed myself in the best defensive position. I knew before we were done, he'd be unable not to try and take me down and beat the hell out of me or even kill me. I had news for him. I was fucking hard to kill.

“Have a seat, Carruthers. We have shit to talk about. I want you to listen and once we understand each other, I’ll leave.”

“Fuck you, O’Sheeran. You know this whole place is wired. They have cameras and bugs everywhere. Touch me and I’ll have no trouble showing you provoked me.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t count on that. See, I have a wizard who knows how to make things like that go on the fritz. They’re all fried. This is just between us.”

He glanced around as if he could see if I was telling him the truth. Finally, he sneered at me. “Tell me what you came here to say then get the hell out. You’re interfering with my afternoon.”

“Oh, I know all about your fun afternoons and nights. How you love to beat on defenseless women and you have them too scared to report you because you’re a cop. How you’ve sent more than one woman to the ER with broken bones and other injuries. How you’ve got some delusional problem that Miranda Tremblay is going to be yours and her father is going to help you get her.”

“I should’ve known she’d go crying to her lover. She’s stupid. How can she not see you’re only using her for sex and to get back at her dad? He hates you and your family. He’ll do anything to keep her away from you. Once I tell him I’ve seen her with you again, he’ll convince her to accept me or else he’ll be out of her life for good. She’ll never let that happen, so why don’t you run back home and leave me the hell alone?” he snarled at me.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. I’m not playing a game with Miranda. I love her and I plan on marrying her as soon as I get a ring on her finger. What I want to do is ensure you stay as far away from her as possible. If you don’t, not only will you be spending time in the hospital, but your boss will get a file detailing every one of your various sins.”

He laughed mockingly. “Do you really expect me to believe you’ll marry her? At most, she’s a pawn to hurt her

dad. You'll dump her as soon as you're tired of her. Don't lie to me."

"I don't lie. How about I show you the ring I have picked out for her? You can tell me if she'll like it or not, since you think you know so much about her."

I'd come here to warn him as well as to play with his head. I knew he'd go off on me sooner or later. I just had to push his buttons enough. I wasn't confident that even if he did agree to stay away from her that he'd mean it. That's why when the moment was right, all the evidence Cody found on him to prove his guilt would be sent to the police department anonymously. He'd never work in law enforcement again. After that happened, if he kept coming around Miranda, he'd disappear. I held up my phone with a picture of a dazzling engagement ring. It was aptly from the Abbagliante line I was looking to acquire in Italy. His face filled with rage when he saw it.

"You're lying. It's a trick to piss me off or something you showed her to make her believe you'll marry her. Well, it's not going to work. She's mine."

"How can she be yours? You've never even kissed her let alone been in bed naked with her. Been deep inside of her. You're not the one who knows what she looks like when she reaches an orgasm and begs you for more. It's not your name she cries out," I taunted him. Even if she hadn't done all those things with me yet, she would. I knew it in my soul.

His roar of fury echoed around the room as he came charging at me. He had murder in his eyes. I was ready for him. I'll give him credit. He was a fighter, only he wasn't as big of a fighter as me. Many make the mistake that since I'm rich, I'm soft. That was so far from the truth, it was laughable. I'd been trained since I could walk in self-defense. Every kind you could imagine, me and my family had been given.

I avoided the blows I could and when he landed one, I made sure to return the blow, only harder. I hit him in the face, the ribs, the kidneys, and the stomach. I alternated my punches with kicks. By the time he was hunched over trying to regain

his breath and was wincing in pain, I barely had a scratch on me. My fists had seen better days, but they'd heal.

“Cocksucker, I'll kill you,” he wheezed.

“You'd do well to forget you ever met me or Miranda. This was your warning, Carruthers. Come near her again and I'll end you.” I walked out without a backward glance. All three of my men were waiting in the hall. I didn't see anyone else around. I allowed them to lead the way back outside. Once there, we got in our cars and sedately drove off.

“Did you get the woman some help?” I asked Thomas.

“I did. She's at the ER by now, I expect. I paid someone to take her.”

“Will anyone recognize you?”

“If they do, I'll just say I came to visit and found her like that. How did it go with you? Sounded like you were having fun in there.”

“I didn't have nearly as much fun as I wanted, but all I can hope is, it was enough to make him leave her alone. I couldn't let go too much or he'd be on his way to the morgue. Fucker makes me sick.”

“We'll make sure she's safe. Have you asked her to go to Italy with you yet?”

“Nosy fucker, no I haven't yet but I plan to ask her. She doesn't have to worry about work now, so I'm hoping she'll say yes.”

“I do too. You're pissy when you're sexually frustrated.”

I hit him on the arm. All he did was laugh. I was in a better frame of mind when he dropped me off at her place. I had high hopes she'd agree to go with me.



My talk with Miranda went better than I expected. After reassuring her the abrasions on my knuckles weren't anything to worry about, I told her about Italy. At first she tried to tell me she couldn't go. I knew that wasn't true. The

only thing to prevent her from going was if she didn't have a passport, but she had one. Cody had noted that in his handy report too. It was like he had ESP or something.

When she said it was too late to get a plane ticket, I reminded her I had a private plane. For every one of her flimsy excuses, I had a solution. I wore her down within an hour. As soon as she made up her mind to go, she became excited. When I left later that evening, after another frustrating though oddly satisfying make-out session, she had plans to go shopping the next day. I told her not to buy too much. We'd go shopping in Italy. I was planning to get her into some designer dresses. She'd need them as my fiancée and eventually my wife.

That's how we found ourselves on one of our planes headed to Italy Thursday morning. We left at eight a.m. The trip to Verona, Italy took about eight hours at top speed, which got us there around ten at night. Our stay was booked in Vicenza at a luxury hotel. My family didn't own a hotel close to our destination which was too bad.

We planned to meet the next day with the owner of Abbagliante to see his jewelry line in person and if I was lucky, to agree to a contract. After that, we were going to spend three days enjoying ourselves and then fly back home the following Tuesday.

I was still smiling over how in awe Miranda had been of our plane. She couldn't believe there were real planes with actual bedrooms on them. We spent most of the flight relaxing there. Some of it was spent making out while the rest of the time we napped or watched a movie. That might explain why when we landed, we were both wide awake when most people were getting ready to go to bed.

It was a forty-five-minute drive from the airport in Verona to our hotel in Vicenza at that time of night. Our driver who met us was a typical Italian driver which meant he drove like a nut but somehow avoided death. It was a skill. At the hotel, we were greeted by the manager and shown to our suite within minutes of walking through the door.

Even in Italy, I couldn't travel without bodyguards. Thomas came with us and Darragh had insisted we take Kendrick too. The other guards were busy with their usual charges and he felt a foot soldier wasn't enough. They had their own suite next door which had an adjoining door to ours. Before we left, I warned them that I wanted to be alone with Miranda as much as possible. They promised they wouldn't get in the way. Once we were securely locked in our suite, they wouldn't bother us unless they were called.

She spun in a circle taking in the architecture and decor of our suite. The guys had excused themselves to go to their suite after making sure the room was secure. "Oh my God, I can't believe this place, Cian. I thought suites like this, hotels like this only existed in the movies. They're just like your unbelievable plane. No one will believe me if I don't take pictures."

"*Leanbh*, I'm glad you find all of this so wonderful. I admit, it's lost some of its awe for me since I've been exposed to it all my life. I'm loving seeing it through your eyes. I can see you're not tired. What do you want to do? We can order room service if you're hungry or we can watch television or a movie. Unless there's something you'd like to talk about."

We'd eaten a couple of hours before the plane landed, but if she was still hungry, I would make sure she got whatever she wanted.

"I want to go out on that balcony and look at the lights. After that, I'll let you know." I didn't waste time in giving her what she wanted. The whole city was lit up with lights. It looked so magical. I pointed out the few landmarks that were visible in the dark. We spent at least a half hour or more out there. After she had her fill, we went back inside. Our luggage had been brought in and left by the door. I gestured toward it.

"If you want to change into your pajamas, I'll put your bag in your room. Which bedroom do you want?"

The suite had two identical en suite bedrooms. I had made sure of it. I didn't want to presume she'd sleep with me,

even though I was dying to have her do so. Even without her and I having sex, I wanted her in my arms.

She gave me a shy, hesitant look. “Which room do you want?”

“I’ll take whatever one you don’t.”

“What if I want to share a room with you? Would that be okay?”

My heart leaped at her question. I wanted to shout hell yeah, but I controlled myself. She was merely asking to sleep in the same bed as me, not to have sex, I reminded myself. “If you want to share the bed with me, I’d love that. I’ve been dreaming of falling asleep with you in my arms.”

“Then you pick the room.”

Pointing to the one on the right, I picked up our luggage and took it into that room. She followed me. I placed her luggage on the padded bench, so she could easily open it without having to lift it. I put my bag on a ledge by the window.

“Do you mind if I take a bath? After traveling all day, I feel grungy. I’d like to wash off the travel dirt and get into something comfy,” she stated.

“You can do anything you want. While you take your bath, I’ll use the bathroom in the other en suite to take a shower. When you’re done, I’ll be in the living room. Take your time. There’s no rush. Other than our meeting tomorrow for lunch at Abbagliante, we have nowhere to be on a schedule.”

“That sounds so heavenly, Cian. I can’t tell you how much I needed to get away. I didn’t realize it until now. I haven’t taken a real vacation since I started working at the bank. I promise, I won’t stay in the bathroom all night, but it might take me a while to admire everything in there.”

I laughed. They were state-of-the-art bathrooms, even nicer than what I had at home. Seeing them had given me ideas for upgrades at home. “I don’t blame you. I promise the same. See you soon.” Before leaving her, I grabbed my

sleeping bottoms and my toiletry bag. She was rummaging in her bag. I gave her a kiss. I made sure not to get too lost in it, or I'd never leave her to enjoy her bath.

Closing my bathroom door, I started the shower. I needed to get clean and to work off some of my sexual frustration. If I wanted to keep my sanity and not jump her as soon as she climbed into bed with me, I needed to take care of my aching cock. Just thinking of being in bed with her had me hard and dying to be inside of her.

Stepping into the hot water, I didn't waste time washing my hair then my body. Once I felt clean again, I let the hot water pound on my tense neck and shoulders. It took several minutes for the coiled tension to ease. After it did, I filled my hand with shower gel then closed my eyes and started to imagine she was here with me.

I could so easily picture her with me. She was standing there in what I imagined was her naked glory. Water running down the slopes of her breasts after beading up on the tips of her nipples. They were hard and begged for my mouth and hands. Her body was filled with enough curves to tempt any man to explore more. I tugged harder on my cock.

What felt like only a few more minutes of picturing her and trying to imagine what she truly looked like made me blow. As I fought down my gasps of pleasure and worked not to cry out in relief, over the pounding of the water I heard a knock. "Cian, are you alright? You've been in there longer than I was in the bath."

Worry was evident in her voice. It took me a couple of tries before I could speak. "I'm fine, Miranda. I just was zoning out. I'll be out in a few minutes. I just need to rinse and dry off."

"Okay."

I laid my head against the tile and fought to regain control. Getting off hadn't brought the relief I'd hoped for. I had to get these urges tamed down or I might just jump her. The last thing I wanted was to scare her that way.

Miranda: Chapter 15

Getting into bed, I wondered what was up with Cian. His voice sounded different like he had trouble talking. Was he having second thoughts about us sleeping together? I sure hoped not, because now that I'd gotten my courage up, I didn't want to stop. Who knows how long it might take for me to get it again?

I tucked the covers up underneath my arms. This trip to Italy had been a surprise for me. A chance of a lifetime. At first, I'd tried to say no, not because I didn't want to go, but because I thought I shouldn't rush into this. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized something huge.

It didn't matter how long I'd known Cian. I trusted him more than people I'd known for years. These past weeks had been filled with hours of us learning about each other. Sometimes it was in person, but a lot of it had been through text messages, and phone calls. He wasn't what I thought an uber-rich man would be like. Sure, he had arrogance, but who could blame him? He rightfully had reason to be. He was kind and generous. He loved his family and was super close to them. His need to protect me from Carruthers and Hill was sweet even if I didn't think he needed to do it. Although, it hadn't stopped him from confronting Carruthers. He admitted as much to me. I prayed it wouldn't come back to haunt him.

The opening of the bathroom door got me out of my head. I watched him walk confidently toward me. His hair was still damp and was slicked back. His ever present five-o'clock shadow was there. His killer blue eyes were staring at me. They looked like they were lit from within by fire.

I had to stop myself from drooling. His chest was bare, and I was taking in the sight of him. I knew his chest was sculpted with muscles from seeing it the day we were in the pool, but I hadn't been able to focus on them. Now I studied those muscles, the hair on his chest and his tattoos. I wasn't surprised to see he had some. They only made me want to touch his skin even more.

On his hips, he wore a low-slung pair of thin gray lounge pants. They molded his body and left very little to the imagination. I tried hard not to stare at where his cock pressed against the fabric. The quick glimpse I did get told me he was packing more than his fair share. It had been enough to make my nipples grow taut and my pussy start to get wet.

My nights alone had been filled with dreams of him and what he'd look like. I wasn't ashamed to admit to myself that he turned me on more than any man ever had in my life. More than once I'd had to pleasure myself in order to get some sleep. Even after those sessions, I'd been left feeling like something was missing.

Not that I really knew what that was. My few times with Skyler hadn't been the most enjoyable. He'd been in a hurry each time and while he got off, I hadn't. I thought it was just how it was for women. Only since then, I'd heard several women talk as if sex was the greatest thing in the world. I was left wondering if they were right or was I? Could something be lacking in me and that was why I hadn't enjoyed sex? I wanted to find out, but I was terrified if I tried and it was me, that Cian wouldn't stay with me.

He lifted the covers and slid in beside me. It was a huge bed, but as soon as he joined me in it, it felt like it had shrunk to a single sized one. "Are you alright, Miranda? You're staring at me and not saying a word."

He was frowning. Not wanting the mood to be ruined or for me to lose my courage, I launched myself at him. His oomph of surprise was cut off by my mouth landing on his. In the past, he had been the one taking the lead when it came to most of our kissing. He could kiss me sweetly or with hunger, but no matter which kind it was, it had always felt like it was filled with passion. This time I was the aggressor. I wanted to show him how much I hungered for him.

He let me take the lead. While he did respond back to me enthusiastically, he didn't take control. He let me direct this kiss. I grew even slicker and starved for his taste. Eventually, I heard whimpering sounds and faint growls. Concentrating on them, I discovered I was the one

whimpering, and he was the one growling. Both sounded needy. Reluctantly, I lifted my mouth away from his. I had to take a break before I went up in flames and tore off both our clothes. Deep inside I ached for something to fill me, no, not something. I ached to have his cock inside of me. A wild part of me wanted him to take me rough and fast. Where this crazy part was coming from, I had no idea.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have attacked you like that, Cian.” I attempted to move further away from him, but his grip on my shoulders prevented me.

“Don’t ever apologize for kissing me or anything else, *mo grá*. If that’s an example of you attacking me, feel free to do that every damn day.” His voice was hoarse as he said it. His eyes were bluer than before.

“I don’t know what came over me. All I can say is I had to have a kiss and all other rational thoughts flew out of my head. I’ve never been like this before.”

“That’s the same way you make me feel every damn time I’m with you. I’m scared to death of doing something to make you run from me. It’s the last thing I want to do. This kiss shows me you’re just as far gone as me. I’m not asking for more than this, but *Dia*, if we could kiss like this some more tonight, I’ll feel less like a beast with you.”

“A beast? Why would you see yourself like that? You’ve never done anything to make me see you like that.”

“That’s because I’ve kept those feelings on a tight leash. I’m wild for you. There is nothing I want more than to strip you naked, feast on your beautiful, sexy body then make love to you over and over again. I have this burning need to taste every part of you. Shit, maybe this isn’t such a good idea. My control is so damn thin, Miranda. It might be better if you go to the other bedroom. Lock the door and don’t open it until morning.”

He moved away from me. Seeing the pain on his face and hearing the stress in his voice broke me. I couldn’t let him suffer like this. It made my own worse. Saying the hell with

caution, I flung myself toward him. He caught me in his strong arms and immediately began to feed on my mouth.

As he did, the covers were kicked to the bottom of the bed. His hands touched my body. His groan of satisfaction told me he liked what I had on. I'd brought with me the sexist pajamas I owned. They had been an impulse buy when Iris at work had a lingerie and sleepwear party. I'd spent way too much, but the outfit had made me feel sexy. It was emerald-green satin edged in soft black lace. It was a simple camisole top and short shorts. With my pale skin, it stood out. His hand was on my thigh then it ran up underneath the back of my shorts to cup my ass cheek. He gave it a squeeze.

Needing to feel him, I ran my hands up and down his chest, touching his hot skin and feeling his surprisingly soft hair rake across my palms. As my hands made another swipe down his torso, when I got to the waist of his pants, I hesitated. I wanted to feel more, but I wasn't sure if I should. He took the decision out of my hands.

The hand that wasn't kneading my ass, came down to grab mine. He moved my hand down until I was cupping his erection through the fabric of his pants. He was hard, thick, and burning hot. I gasped which broke our kiss.

"Is this alright?" he groaned.

"Yes, yes it's alright," I whispered back.

"Tell me to stop. Tell me now, because if you don't, I'm afraid I'm gonna have you stripped and underneath me in a second, Miranda. I'm not strong enough to do this tonight and not make love to you. You have to stop us." He sounded like he was in actual pain.

To answer him, I gently squeezed his cock. His groan became a growl. In an instant, he rolled me over onto my back and he was hovering over me. My legs had fallen apart, and he was lying between them. He pressed his raging cock into my pussy. I moaned and squirmed, trying to get closer to him.

"Fuck, don't wiggle. If you do, I'm gonna blow in my pants. If we're going to do this, I want to do it right. I want to

see all of you and taste you before I get inside of you. Are you sure about this? Last chance.”

“I’m sure. Make love to me, Cian. Make me yours.”

“*Go raibh mait agat Dia,*” he muttered.

“What?”

“I said thank you God.”

I couldn’t help but giggle. He grinned at me. “Oh, so you think it’s funny that I’m dying here? Let’s see how you feel when I’m done torturing you, woman,” he growled before he went on the attack.

I became consumed by the sensations he evoked in me. His hands, mouth and body were everywhere. As soon as I’d get used to him being at my mouth, he’d move. My breasts were so swollen by the time he left them to touch and taste the next part of my body, I was sobbing. I barely knew he’d taken off my camisole and shorts until he reared back to look down at me. His eyes ran head to toe over me. He paused in several spots and licked his lips. Besides my swollen breasts, my pussy was weeping with my cream. I’d never been this slick before, not even when I played with myself.

“Fuck, you’re so goddamn gorgeous I can’t stand it. I thought I knew what you’d look like, but I didn’t even come close.” he muttered.

I whimpered when he slipped a hand underneath the waist of his pants and gripped his cock. “Show me. I want to see you. You’re seeing all of me, it’s only fair,” I begged.

His look of hunger somehow grew. In a blink, he had his pants down and was kicking them off. As he straightened back up, I got my first look at his bare cock. He had to let go of it to remove his pants. It was long, thick, and standing tall, reaching his belly button. It bobbed with each movement of his body. The head was a ruddy red color, and it was covered in precum. I longed to taste it. I never tasted cum or had a cock in my mouth. I reached out and ran a finger down his length. His cock jerked, and he groaned like he was in pain.

“*Dia*, don’t or I’m gonna come. I promise, you can explore to your heart’s content later, but right now, I have to taste you then I’m going to take you. Once I do, there’s no going back, Miranda. You’ll be mine and it’s forever.”

“I’m yours,” I told him mindlessly.

He made a guttural sound then he was lying flat between my legs. He pushed my thighs wider apart and stared up at me as he lifted me toward his mouth. I held my breath as he stuck out his tongue and swiped it from my entrance to my clit. I cried out. At my clit, he paused and sucked it into his mouth and batted it around with his tongue. I arched my back and screamed as bolts of awareness and bliss shot throughout my whole body.

Seeing and feeling my reaction, it was like that was a signal to him. He went wild. He licked, sucked, nibbled, and touched every inch of my pussy. He used his lips, teeth, and tongue to drive me crazy. As if those weren’t enough, after he’d pushed me to a fever pitch, he added his fingers. He sank two inside of me. All it took was a couple of thrusts of his fingers combined with his mouth to send me careening into space. I screamed out my release. I thought he’d stop as soon as I came, but I was wrong.

My cries only spurred him on to keep going. One orgasm washed into the next. I lost contact with reality. I became nothing but a quivering mass of pure sensation. I couldn’t count how many times I came. I was on the brink of begging him to stop before I lost my mind when he wiped his face on the sheet and sat up. His hand went to his cock. I swear it looked even bigger than before. It was intimidating as hell.

“I can’t wait any longer, Miranda. I’ve got to be inside of you. I don’t want anything between us. Tell me you’re on something. If you’re not, I’ll use a condom but I don’t want one or need it. I want kids and I know you do too.”

I could hardly keep up with what he was saying. I wanted him so badly I didn’t care what he did. However, some iota of sanity must have remained, and it made me stop and

think. As I did, I had to ask. “Is going uncovered how you usually have sex? I’m not comfortable doing that. Not until you’ve been tested. We should’ve thought of this sooner. I’m on birth control and I’m clean. As much as I want nothing between us too, I can’t do that. Not until I’m sure you’re clean too. I’m sorry.”

I hoped he wouldn’t get mad at me. Instead of anger, I saw understanding on his face. He lowered himself to kiss me. It was weird to smell and taste myself on him, but surprisingly, I didn’t find it offensive.

“I’d never endanger you. I’ve never gone without protection, even if the woman was on birth control. I didn’t trust anyone like that. You, I trust and I want kids with you, so even if you aren’t protected, I’d still want you bare. As for me getting tested, it’s not necessary. I went a few weeks ago and had one done. It came back clear. I haven’t been with anyone.”

“You haven’t? Why did you get tested? Were you worried you had caught something?” I was worried this was killing the mood, but I had to know.

“No, as soon as I saw you, I knew what I wanted. And I was hopeful that eventually we’d have sex. For some reason, I kept imagining us going bare. So, I got tested. It’s your choice. As long as I get to make love to you, I’m happy.” He tugged on his cock again. Apparently this hadn’t ruined his ardor. As insane as it was, I believed him and I trusted him not to lie to me.

“Then why don’t we leave the condoms wherever they are and get back to what we were doing? I don’t want to wait another minute to feel you inside of me, Cian.”

He groaned then placed the head of his cock to my entrance. As he slowly began to push inside, I fought not to tense up. Even with just the head inside, I could tell he was going to stretch me to my max limits. As bad as it was to think of it at this moment, Skyler hadn’t come close to packing what Cian was. I’d seen enough pornos to know he wasn’t average sized. He worked himself in and out of me. He didn’t rush it but he didn’t pause either. Each thrust had him sinking deeper

into me. I moaned and gripped his back. He was panting lightly.

“Am I going too fast? Am I hurting you?” he muttered through gritted teeth.

“No, you’re not going too fast. It stings a little, but that’s because it’s been so long and you’re big. Don’t stop. Please.” If he stopped, I might die. Even with the stinging, it was unbelievable how good it felt.

“There’s no way I’m doing that. Jesus, you have no idea how good you feel. You’re hugging my cock like a damn glove. I’m not going to last as long as I wanted, but I promise. I’ll make it up to you.”

Before I could assure him there would be nothing to make up for, he thrust hard. The last few inches entered me and I could feel the hairs on his groin touching me. I had this thing about my pubic hair. I hated it, so I kept myself shaved. The tickle of his hairs felt good against my bare skin. He held himself still for a few seconds then pulled back until only the head was still inside. His gaze bore into mine as he thrust again. Only this time he didn’t pause or go incrementally. It was one long thrust. I cried out in utter bliss. Tingles spread everywhere throughout my body.

He gripped my ass and lifted my bottom off the bed. I automatically wrapped my legs around his waist. I watched every expression that raced across his face as he thrust over and over inside of me. The urge to orgasm kept growing. It felt like it would far eclipse the others he’d given me. Each time he bumped my clit with his pubic bone I moaned louder.

Cian was breathing harshly and I could see sweat on his forehead. He was pounding my pussy, and I found I loved it. I was so close. Just a little more and I’d be there. He must’ve read my expression or maybe my body because he reached between us and circled my clit with his thumb. I saw stars as I detonated. My blissful scream was a long one. Fire raced throughout my body as I clamped down on him. I was vaguely aware of him thrusting a couple more times, then he

stiffened and jerked as he roared out an animalistic sound. Warmth washed through my insides. I welcomed the feeling.

Together we shuddered, gasped, and moaned. I had no idea how long we were like that before we collapsed. I felt boneless. He had dropped off to the side of me, but somehow stayed inside of me. He was staring into my eyes.

“I’ve never felt like that before, *anamchara*. If I had any doubts we were made for each other, this would’ve erased them. You and I are meant to be, Miranda. Forever and always,” he whispered before he kissed me. I kissed him back. I’d have to tell him the same once he let me talk.



Stretching awake, the first thing I noticed was I was sore. Between my legs I was sore although not horribly. It was a good sore. It was a reminder of the delicious things he’d done to me last night. After that first time, he’d taken me again. That time he’d driven me mad for even longer before he came. In fact, I lost count of my orgasms while he was inside of me after three. When we’d recovered enough to move, he’d taken me to the shower and washed me before tucking me into bed with him. We slept without a stitch of clothing on. Rolling on my side, I pried my eyes open. His face was close to mine, and he was awake. He was staring at me.

“Good morning. Have you been awake long? And why’re you staring at me? Do I look that frightening?” I asked as I lifted my hand to smooth back my hair. I had to look terrible. He stopped me as he shook his head.

“It’s more than a good morning. It’s the best. I’ve been awake for about fifteen minutes or so. And you don’t look frightening at all. I was wondering what I did to be blessed with someone so beautiful and special. I must’ve earned you in another life. How’re you feeling?”

“I feel sore but good.”

“Sore? Let me run you a bath and you can soak. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have been so rough. It’s been a long time for you. I got carried away,” he said as he went to get up. I was the one to stop him.

“You weren’t too rough. I love how I feel. I wouldn’t trade last night for anything. You can make me feel like that anytime you want. What time is it? Do you have to get ready to go to your meeting yet?”

“We have time. I want you to soak and then after you’re done and ready, we’ll leave. We still have plenty of time until our meeting with them.”

“Our meeting? Surely you don’t want me there? It’s your business, not mine, Cian,” I replied as we got out of bed. The walk to the bathroom made me reconsider the soaking idea.

“Actually, it is our meeting. I want you with me. This is a big part of my life. I run Divine and making decisions about which jewelry lines to carry is a big part of it. As my woman, I want you to be involved. I’d like your opinion on whether you think this line will attract buyers or not.” His admission and desire to hear my opinion made me glow with happiness. I gave him a big smile then a kiss.

“I’d be honored to come with you. Let me have that bath then I’ll get ready. I hope I have something nice enough to wear to meet these people.”

“Oh, I have no doubt you do,” he said with a wink before he left me. I wondered what he meant by that. I wanted to buy some clothes before coming, but he told me not to do it.

As the tub filled with hot water, I found a container of bath salts under the sink. I added some to the water. Pinning up my hair, so it wouldn’t get wet, I sank into the water with a sigh of absolute joy. It felt heavenly. After soaking for a while, I washed then got out.

Last night Cian had brought my makeup and toiletry bag into the bathroom. I rummaged through the latter one to find my deodorant and body lotion. From there, I got down to putting on my makeup and fixing my hair. While I did, he came in and got in the shower. I was distracted more than once by watching him shower. And the sly bastard knew it. Every time he caught me staring he’d give me a smirk and wink. If we didn’t need to be somewhere, I’d have joined him and seen

if I could change that look to something else. My biggest hope was one day I could make him beg.

He was out of the shower and dressed by the time I settled on the fact there was nothing else I could do to make my face and hair more presentable. Now, I had to face the dreaded task of choosing something to wear. He was looking impeccable in a tailored custom suit. I tried to talk sense into him.

“Cian, you should go alone. I can stay here and wait. I have nothing to wear and you don’t need me tagging along looking shabby. We can go out after you get back.”

“You could never look shabby, Miranda. However, I knew you’d say something ridiculous like that, so I made sure you couldn’t deny me. Look in the closet.”

He pointed to one of the two closets in his bedroom. Both suites had double closets. His and hers I supposed. I’d been too tired and distracted last night to bother to hang mine up. They would be full of wrinkles.

Slowly walking to the closet door, I swung it open. I was surprised to see his clothes and mine were in there. He must’ve hung them up while I was soaking in the tub. However, they weren’t the only clothes in there. Next to mine was a small selection of other clothes. At first glance, I knew they were designer clothes that were just as expensive and elegant as his. I held my breath as I rifled through them. There was a pantsuit, a dressy casual dress, and two formal gowns. On the shelf above were boxes. I took them down and opened them. Inside were shoes which would go perfectly with the new clothes. I closed the lids and looked at him in disbelief. “Cian?”

“Before you argue you can’t accept them, yes you can. They’re yours. Unless you hate them, I’m not returning them. I want to take you shopping while we’re here but I knew we wouldn’t have time before the meeting. Also, I know you. You hate feeling unprepared. You can wear what you have from home if you prefer. I don’t give a damn. You’re gorgeous no matter what you wear, but if you don’t feel like you’d be

comfortable in them, then please, wear one of these. It's entirely up to you. Nonetheless, these new ones won't be wasted. I'll exchange them for something you do like or you can wear them back home when you and I go out. Sometimes, we'll have to attend fancy dinners and parties. I can't get out of all of them. When I have to go, I want you with me."

Seeing how sincere he was, I fell even more in love with him. I walked over to him and wrapped my arms around his waist. I gave him a smile. "Thank you and I love them. You shouldn't have spent your money on them, but they are lovely. I would feel better wearing something nicer than my regular stuff. I don't want to make a bad impression on a potential supplier. You just keep doing things that make me love you even more." His eyes widened then he kissed me. As I gave myself over to the kiss, I couldn't help but wonder what else he'd surprise me with on this trip.

Cian: Chapter 16

Walking into Abbagliante headquarters, I felt like a king with Miranda on my arm. She looked like a queen, my very own *banríon*. I'd meant what I said. She was more than welcome to wear her everyday clothes from home. However, she'd chosen to wear the sapphire blue pantsuit I'd chosen for her. It was paired with strappy black heels I'd picked out with help from Cara. I was hoping while we were at Abbagliante that she'd tell me which pieces she liked the best. I fully intended to give her many sets of jewelry. I might as well start with some of theirs.

Kendric was in front of us and Thomas brought up the rear. Eyes turned to watch us make our way to the desk of the head man's assistant. She smiled when we came to a halt. "Hello, you must be Mr. O'Sheeran. I'm Mr. Albertelli's assistant, Giulia. He should be with you shortly. I'll show you into his private conference room. Your secretary and guards can stay here. I'll make sure they're comfortable," she added as she gave me an extra wide smile.

"My guards can stay out here after they've checked the room. No offense but if I don't let them do that, they'll never let me hear the end of it. They take their jobs very seriously," I told her.

"Of course, I understand." As she gestured for us to follow her, I added the rest of what I wanted to say.

"As for my secretary, she'll be attending the meeting with me."

Giulia stumbled to an abrupt halt. She swung around to give me a wide-eyed look of shock mixed with reproach. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Albertelli was quite clear that he only wanted to speak to a member of the O'Sheeran family. I'm afraid having an outsider in the meeting will not do."

"You can tell Mr. Albertelli that Ms. Tremblay isn't an outsider nor is she a secretary. She's my fiancée and as such, she's a part of my family. I'd hoped we might find her engagement ring in one of his collections. If that's not

possible, then I'll take her back to our hotel. Thankfully, we have things planned, so it won't be a total waste of my time coming to Italy."

I felt Miranda jerk when I called her my fiancée. Luckily, she didn't contradict me. It was a white lie. I fully intended for her to be that and soon. A small fib to get her into the meeting wasn't anything I was ashamed of telling. I did want her opinion. People like Albertelli irritated me with their attitudes. He'd already made me come to him in Italy. I wasn't letting him dictate anymore decisions. I didn't have to carry his jewelry in Divine.

Giulia's mouth opened and closed a couple of times. She reminded me of a fish gasping for air. I saw Thomas and Kendric exchange amused looks behind her back. They knew what I was doing. Miranda tensed up. Before she could say something like she'd wait, I tightened my hand on her arm. She stayed silent.

"I-I'll let Mr. Albertelli know that you're here. If you'll follow me," she turned around and opened the double doors behind her.

Inside was a typical, although excessively ornate conference room. It was smaller than some, but I would expect it for someone's personal one. Kendric and Thomas made a production of checking it over, even though there was really no place for anyone to hide. As they left, Kendric was the one to say something. "Mr. O'Sheeran, we'll be right outside the door. If you need anything, just text or shout."

As he said it, he patted his side. No one could misconstrue his meaning. He had a gun. They'd signed in their weapons downstairs, but I'd refused to have them hand them over. If they had insisted, I would've, but I wanted to test them. If this was my office, they wouldn't have been allowed up to see me with them. Again, I liked to see how far I could push people. In Albertelli's case, I'd heard various rumors about how much of an overbearing ass he could be. He liked to make people bow down to him. If he hadn't been like that, I wouldn't be acting the same toward him. As Giulia hurried out of the room and shut the doors, Miranda rounded on me.

“Cian, what in the world has gotten into you? You’ve never acted like this before. Is this how you act at work?” I heard the censorship in her tone. I wanted to reassure her, but I wasn’t sure if this room was bugged or not.

“I’ll explain later, *leanbh*. There’s a reason, I promise,” I said as I winked at her.

Her shoulders slowly relaxed then she nodded. “Okay. Wow, this is a very fancy room.”

“It isn’t bad, just not to my taste. I think ours at home is nicer, but I may be biased. Come here and have a seat. I want you right next to me.”

I pulled out a chair next to the one which sat on the right of the head chair. I knew he’d sit there. It was the head of the table. After she was seated, I sat down and reached out to pour us a glass of water from the iced pitcher on the table. I saw a bar in the corner. I must’ve rattled his assistant too much to have her remember to offer us something to drink. I’d wait to see if he rectified the oversight or not. We expected our employees to always be more than courteous even if they were thrown off kilter.

He ended up making us wait over fifteen minutes. We’d been a few minutes early, so it was technically ten minutes late. As the door opened and he came striding in, I stood up. He gave me barely a smile. I nodded back without smiling. He wasn’t pleased about Miranda joining us and wanted me to know it. I held out my hand to Miranda.

“Come *mo grá*, it appears that Mr. Albertelli is too busy to speak to us. Maybe we’ll do this again in the future. Or maybe we won’t. We still have our meeting with Belle Gemme tomorrow. I hope they’ll be more gracious hosts.”

She didn’t argue. She took my hand and stood up. I moved her chair back. As she did, he started to apologize. “*Mi scusi, Signore O’Sheeran*. I’m sorry you were kept waiting. I have more than enough time to meet with you. I’ve been looking forward to it for weeks. Please, sit and let me get you something to drink. I had an unexpected emergency call come in from England. One of our customers needed us to secure

him another shipment as soon as possible. He'll only speak to me, I'm afraid. I asked Giulia to make sure you were comfortable. She informed me you were having your fiancée join us. Congratulations. I hadn't heard the wonderful news."

His smile was tight. He didn't like apologizing or being made to look foolish. His willingness to let it happen told me he was in desperate need of my business. I'd found through Cody's research that he'd lost a few big customers lately. It was rumored it was due to his high-handed attitude. I was planning to use that to my advantage. I was going to walk out of here with a lucrative deal or nothing. Even pushing him to offer his lines at a lower cost wouldn't bankrupt him. He would still make a very tidy sum off the deal. I pretended to consider his request. Finally, I gestured for Miranda to sit back down then I took my seat again.

"We haven't made the official announcement yet. I'm still searching for the perfect ring to grace her hand. She's a rare woman and as such, deserves a rare ring. Miranda, this is Signore Edoardo Albertelli. Signore Albertelli, this is Miranda Tremblay."

He sagged in relief. "It's a delight to meet you, Ms. Tremblay. I agree with Signore O'Sheeran. You are a woman who deserves only the best. It would be an honor if you would look at my selection for your ring. I think we can find something for you," he stated as he took her hand and kissed it. I allowed it although I wanted to hit him for touching her. When he was done, he smiled.

"Where are my manners? Can I get you something to drink? I have vodka, whiskey, wine, and brandy." he asked as he walked over to the bar.

"Would you like some wine, Miranda?" I asked her softly.

"That would be lovely, honey."

"Do you have a white or rosé by any chance? If not, a glass of red will do. I'll have a whiskey, neat."

“I do have a very delicate rosé I believe she’ll enjoy. And the Italian whiskey I have, I think you’ll enjoy. It’s my favorite.”

I didn’t say a word. When he was done pouring, he brought the drinks to the table and served them. He took his seat and gave me another fake smile. I took a drink of the whiskey but didn’t say anything about it. Miranda sipped her wine and gave him a smile.

“Since we’re already behind schedule, I think we should get right down to business. I’ve looked over your lines and while I think they might be good for Divine, I wanted to have Miranda see them as well. She’s an artist and has an eye for color and composition. I foresee her working closely with me on all future endeavors for acquisitions.”

He gave me a stunned look. She was careful not to let him see her give me a shocked look. Albertelli recovered quickly. “Of course. Have you shown her the photos sent to you of our elite lines?”

“No, I haven’t. I thought it would be best if we both saw them in person. Photos only show so much. I assumed you’d have examples here.”

“I do, I do. Let me call Giulia to have them brought in. Once you’ve seen them, then we can talk more.”

As we waited for his assistant to bring them to us after he called her, I whispered in her ear. “Just go along with this. It’ll make sense after I explain later, I swear. Don’t make him think you love anything you see, even if you do.”

She whispered back, “I can do that. I can’t wait to hear the reason you’re being an asshole.”

I grinned at her before giving her a kiss. It wasn’t long before several men came in carrying cases. They were lined up along the table then they left. Albertelli proudly opened each one. I gathered Miranda and went over to look at them. I had to admit, they were even more exquisite than the photos. And the price tags on them reflected that and more. As much as I

wanted them for Divine, there was no way I'd pay what he was asking.

"Please, feel free to pick them up or try them on, Ms. Tremblay. I think they'll show better on your splendid person."

"Thank you, Signore Albertelli. Cian, is there any you'd like me to try on, so you can see them better?"

I had her try on several. Among them was a ring I could see her wearing as her engagement ring. It was even better than the one I showed Carruthers. It was brilliantly shiny, like most of his jewelry, although smaller than many of his stones. I knew she would never be comfortable with a huge ring.

It had a platinum band with an emerald-cut white diamond in the center. It was a carat in size and of the highest cut and clarity you could buy. On either side were two smaller emerald-cut blue sapphires flanked by tiny round white diamonds. I made sure she tried it on. She held her hand up to the light to admire it. I could tell by the way she studied it and how long it was before she took it off that she loved it. Even the size was perfect for her. When we were done checking them all out, we retook our seats. I could tell he was dying to find out what I thought.

"So, what did I tell you? They're enchanting aren't they?" he said smugly.

"They're not bad, I'll admit. There are a few other designers I'm looking at who fall in the same range as these. That's what is making it so hard to decide. I'd prefer to feature one new brand rather than several. It makes things simpler."

His smugness died a little. He began to look less confident that I'd choose his jewelry. "You mentioned Belle Gemme. I agree they have some nice things, but nothing of our quality."

"They might not, but I don't just sell the most expensive stuff in my store. I like to provide options to those who have less to spend too. Don't you agree, Miranda?"

“I do. As a working person, there’s nothing I could afford here, even if I saved for years. Most people can’t afford to spend what it costs to buy a car or home on a piece of jewelry. As it is, there’s nothing here I could buy.”

“Ms. Tremblay, surely I’m misunderstanding you. Your fiancée is from a very rich family. They can afford such jewelry.”

“He might, but I can’t. I’m not rich like Cian. I’m a regular working woman and I love your jewelry. It’s a shame no one like me could ever afford it.” Finding out she wasn’t rich hit him like a bombshell, I could see.

“She’s right. My Miranda is a hardworking, independent woman, who until a few days ago, worked in a bank as a teller. She’s deciding what she’s going to do next. This is one of the reasons I want her input. She knows what women of all incomes would love.”

I knew I had him as soon as he started to tell me that he had less expensive lines and that there could be a significant financial incentive if I carried all his lines. Miranda listened as he and I debated back and forth. Eventually, I called a halt to the proceedings. I wasn’t going to make the decision today, even if he had been hoping I would.

“Signore Albertelli, it’s been great to see your selection in person. I thank you so much for showing them to us. There are many things I liked. We’ll be making our decision in the next month, I think. We still have a few other designers to meet with.”

I rose up and helped Miranda out of her chair. He came bounding to his feet and fluttered around his cases. As we walked toward the door and he hurried after us, I worked not to smile. I had him where I wanted him. Opening the door, Kendric and Thomas came straight to us. They gathered close. I gave him a brisk handshake.

“Thank you. It’s been good to see your offerings and to put a face to a name. I prefer to be on good terms with those I do business with. When I’m not, we don’t seem to last long as business partners. I hope you have a good evening. We’re off

to see some of the sights and I want to introduce Miranda to authentic Italian food.”

As he shook my hand, I felt him press something in it. Glancing down, I saw it was the ring Miranda had admired the most. The one I loved and wanted to give her as an engagement ring. He gave me a secretive smile and murmured softly, so she couldn't hear him. “For your *bella fidanzata*, a gift for her. She seemed to like it.”

“Thank you. I'm sure my beautiful fiancée will love it. Good day.”

He gave Miranda's hand a kiss before we left his private office area. I kept my expression mildly pleased the whole way back to our car. As soon as we were safely inside, I couldn't help but laugh. I made sure the ring was hidden in my pocket. I'd give it to her later. Right now, I had to explain my odd behavior to her, so she didn't think she was with a total asshole.

“Cian, tell me why I sat in that office and watched you act like that? Oh my God, you were so arrogant and dismissive of him. Is that how you treat people you do business with? If it is, how do you ever get anyone to work with you?”

Her disappointment and censorship was evident in her tone. I quickly reassured her. “No, that's not how I usually treat people I go into business with. I don't typically treat many people like that unless they deserve it. In his case, he did. Edoardo Albertelli is a pompous jackass who treats his employees like shit. He pays them poorly and doesn't give them adequate benefits of any kind while he charges exorbitant amounts of money to those who carry his lines and to the customers who purchase directly from him. He started that same thing with me by insisting I come to Italy to meet him rather than we do this remotely or he came to Florida. He wanted to show who was in charge.”

“What a toad.”

“He is. Plus, he made us wait. It wasn't because he had an emergency call. He was trying to put us off balance. His

plan was to drive up the price and for me to fall for it. He didn't like the fact I brought you."

"He does have stunning things. I can see why people pay so much money if they can afford it. I loved how you told him you wanted more than just the super expensive lines. The way you had him bringing down his price was amazing."

"Thank you. I want to pass along a nice discount to our customers. Believe me, he'll still make money and so will we."

"What about the other company you mentioned, Belle Gemme? I didn't know you were meeting with two designers while we're here."

"I'm not. I just mentioned them since I know they're a competitor and he detests them. He'd do anything to get my business and not them."

She giggled. On the way back we stopped to enjoy a latte and a pastry. It was later than we'd planned, and she didn't want to eat too much and spoil our dinner. On our way back to the hotel to have a short rest and change for dinner, I had Kendric drive us past the Basilica Palladiana. It was one the first of its kind with what would later, during the Renaissance and afterward, be known as the Palladian window. The best example was in the loggia. For the past thirty years, it along with other Palladian buildings in and around the city had been designated World Heritage sites. She was in awe of its beauty. Even though I'd been to Italy and toured places like this before, it still took my breath away too.

Back at the hotel, our guards went to their suite while we went into ours, after they'd performed a thorough search. They wouldn't leave anything to chance. It was unlikely anyone would try and harm me here, but you could never be sure. With Miranda at my side, I wasn't willing to risk it. Anything happened to her and I'll never get over it.

As she admired the views in the daylight from our windows, I admired her. My thoughts kept going back to last night and making love to her. It had been the best sexual experience of my life. I knew it was because it was with her.

Being in love with the person you were with made all the difference in the world. I couldn't wait to have her again. With that in mind, I placed a call from the bedroom to the concierge. I instructed him on what I needed and when. He assured me it would be all set when we came back from dinner tonight.

There wasn't enough time for a significant nap, so we hung out talking and went over a guidebook to determine places she might want to go to in the next few days. About an hour before we were to leave, she excused herself to freshen up and get ready for the evening. Since I was in a suit already, I didn't have much to do. I told her she didn't need to change. The place we were going to dinner at wasn't one that required us to dress up fancy. That seemed to reassure her. I hadn't told her that I had a surprise for her tomorrow. It would require her to wear one of the fancy dresses I'd gotten her or maybe a new one if we found something.

When we walked into the restaurant, I was as proud of having her on my arm as I had been at Abbagliante headquarters. She whispered to me that people were staring at me. I had to tell her those stares weren't all for me. She couldn't believe they were interested in her other than for the fact she was with me. Sometimes she utterly astonished me with how unaware of her beauty she was.

It was one of the best Italian restaurants in Vicenza, called the Luna Etruscan, the Etruscan Moon. It typically required you to make a reservation months in advance. I lucked out because I knew the owner, Giuseppi Bonadio. He and I had met years ago when I was touring Europe and we'd hit it off. We'd stayed in contact and tried to meet up somewhere at least once a year.

I'd arranged that Kendric and Thomas would be given a small table out of the way too. They were on alert as we entered the ristorante. A hostess dressed in an elegant short black dress and heels gave us a pleasant smile. "*Buona serata*. May I have your name please?"

"It's O'Sheeran. We're Signore Bonadio's guests."

This made her snap to attention and eye us more. “Welcome Signore O’Sheeran. Thank you for joining us this evening. I hope you and your guests enjoy your dinner. If there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to let myself or your waiter know. My name is Filippa. We have your tables all ready for you. Right this way.”

She walked us through the center of the restaurant. People were dining all around us. It was full tonight. I was more than pleased to see the table Giuseppi had prepared for us. She gestured to the one with wine chilling on it. A smaller table sat close by without the wine. I helped Miranda with her chair then took my seat. It wasn’t until we were seated that the guys took theirs. The hostess pointed out the wine bucket.

“Signore Bonadio asked that we have this waiting for you. He said it was a favorite of yours. Here is the *vino e liquori* list if you’d like to order more drinks. Your waiter tonight will be Leone. He’ll be here shortly to check on you. Enjoy,” she told us.

Before she went to the front again, she stopped to say something to Thomas and Kendric. I was pleased that she wasn’t ignoring them. Many people who were used to dealing with the rich and famous treated bodyguards like they were invisible or beneath them. I didn’t like that kind of shitty behavior.

“Cian, this place is so lovely. Who is Signore Bonadio that you and the hostess mentioned?”

“He’s an old friend and this is his place. When he found out I was going to be here, he made me promise to come to dinner. After you agreed to come with me, I let him know when to expect us. See, it helps to have friends all over. The food here is excellent.”

As she spread her linen napkin on her lap, I opened the bottle of wine. It was a premier red wine made here in Italy, not far from Vicenza. I poured us both a glass. She picked hers up when I did.

“A toast, to a wonderful night together, amazing food and the most beautiful woman in this room. Thank you so

much for coming with me, Miranda. I want to share more trips like this with you. Here's to our future together. *Sláinte*. That's Irish for health." I explained. We clinked our crystal glasses together then took a sip.

"Mm, that tastes so good. Not quite as good as yours, but still really good. It still surprises me all the tastes you can get in different wines when they come from the same grapes."

"I need to take you to Temecula to see our winery. The grapes grow great there and it's fascinating to learn about the different types of grapes. How different wood in the barrels and other things change the flavor of the wine. Have you ever been to California?"

"This is the first time I've ever been out of Florida. You're lucky I had a passport. The only reason I did is a couple of years ago, I planned to go to Spain. The trip fell through, but at least I have a passport."

The way she said it told me she'd planned to go with Skyler. "Was it a trip you and Skyler were going to take together?"

She gave me a hesitant glance then nodded. "Yeah, it was. Of course, I realized after he dumped me it had been a lie. He was just using it as a way to earn my trust to get me in bed. I slept with him two months before the trip was scheduled. I think it was his backup plan to get me to sleep with him. That's ancient history. Let's not talk about him. I want to enjoy this evening and the trip with you."

"I want the exact same thing."

From there it was a night of laughter and enjoyment. Our waiter was more than attentive. He made recommendations on the specials. We both decided to try a couple of them. They ended up being excellent. We finished off the bottle of wine and ordered a second one. Our main meal was over and I was trying to talk her into sharing a dessert with me.

"You have to at least have a taste of something," I urged her.

She was shaking her head. That was the moment our table was approached by someone other than the waiter. Thomas and Kendrick came to their feet. I waved them off. I knew this man. He wasn't a threat and they knew it. They'd met him before more than once. I stood up. He enveloped me in his meaty arms and he hugged me close as he beat the hell out of my back. A weaker man would've crumbled under his pounding.

"Try not to kill me, Giuseppi," I told him. He laughed as he stepped away from me. His eyes had gone to Miranda, and I saw the admiration in them.

"Of course I'm trying to kill you, my old friend. It's so I can steal this enchanting beauty away and not have you track me down and kill me. *Ciao, la mia bellezza*, I'm Giuseppi Bonadio. I own this wonderful ristorante and I can make you my goddess if you'll permit me."

Giuseppi was a smooth Italian who had looks, charm and money. More than a fair share of women had fallen victim to his charms. Hell, we'd charmed women together. However, he wasn't going to use them on my woman. When I informed him I was bringing a woman with me, I hadn't explained who she was. I didn't want to be on the phone forever explaining. I planned to tell him after he met her. I knew he thought she was merely a bed partner for the trip.

"Giuseppi, there won't be any charming this one away from me."

"We can always share her," he shot back with a grin. I saw Miranda stiffen.

"No, we can't. Miranda, this is my friend Giuseppi, or Pino as I call him, who I was telling you about. Pino, this is Miranda Tremblay, my girlfriend and one day soon, if I'm very lucky, my fiancée and wife."

His face showed his shock. Miranda gave him a smile, but I could tell she wasn't feeling it. Damn Pino and his big mouth. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Signore Bonadio. Your restaurant is gorgeous, and the food has been wonderful. Cian

was just trying to convince me I had to try a dessert. I'm afraid I'm very full. Is there one you'd suggest?"

He clutched his chest. "Miranda, may I call you Miranda?"

She nodded her head yes.

"I must apologize for my crass joke. I had no idea Cian had found himself an actual woman. In all the years I've known him, he's never had one. You must indeed be a very special lady. I'm honored he brought you to my place. If you're not really hungry, try something light, such as gelato or a berry crostata. It's my favorite and the berries are ripe right now. They burst on the palate."

"If Cian is willing to share it with me, the crostata sounds incredible."

He gestured Leone over to us and gave him our order. After he left, Pino tried to charm her again. As he talked to us while we waited for our dessert, she seemed to thaw toward him. I was glad. He asked for the details on how we met and where. He thought it was hilarious I went to the bank and found her. He said he was going to the bank first thing on Monday. This made her laugh. Thankfully, he left us once our crostata came. Before he did, he made me promise to bring her to see him again, if he didn't make it to the US before then. A kiss on the hand was his final charming attempt. After he was gone, I took her hand.

"I'm sorry he upset you with his remark, *leanbh*. I'm not going to lie and say we've not taken women out together."

"Or shared them."

"Or shared them. They were interested in sex and didn't mind who they hooked up with."

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to make you feel like you have to explain your life before me, Cian. I really don't. Why don't we forget Pino and enjoy this dessert? My mouth is watering." Although I knew she wasn't truly over it, I let it slide. This wasn't the place for this kind of thing anyway.

Miranda: Chapter 17

I won't lie. It was hard to forget Pino's remark about sharing women. It made me feel a little dirty and inadequate. Women who would sleep with two men at the same time was way beyond me. What if Cian expected that from me? He acted like he didn't want other men around me as anything other than friends, but what if that changed? The whole ride back to the hotel, I kept silent. He tried a couple of times to get me to talk, but I wasn't in the mood. All of my pleasure in the evening was gone. All I wanted to do was get to our suite and go to bed.

After the security sweep was made and the guys left, I turned to him. He was watching me closely. "I'm suddenly really tired. I think I'll get ready for bed. Feel free to stay up and watch television or something if you want. It won't disturb me."

As I finished telling him that, I walked into the bathroom. Earlier today, I'd folded up my camisole and shorts and left them in the bathroom. I shut the door and started the shower. I began to strip, then gasped as the door came flying open. I grabbed a towel to hold in front of me. I still had on my underwear and bra, but I felt exposed.

"What the hell is this? You're mad so you dismiss me, walk off and now you're acting like you don't want me to see your body? Are you still that upset over the shit Pino said," he growled. His attitude pissed me off and before I could stop, I opened my mouth and let him have it.

"Yes, I'm still upset and I have a right to be. Some man I don't know from Adam comes up and bluntly claims he's willing for the two of you to share me. How do you think that made me feel, Cian? Anyone could hear what he said."

"I apologized and told you why he said it. I wasn't a saint before we met. You know this and you said you don't want me to have to explain my past life to you all the time."

"And I don't, but I realized that if that past makes me feel dirty and insecure that maybe I should rethink whether

we're right for each other. You're used to a whole different kind of woman. What happens when you want to share a woman again? Or will you expect me to allow you to share me with one of your friends?" I shouted. The look of utter fury on his face scared me. As he came toward me, I somehow got past him and I ran for the door.

"Miranda, don't run from me! Come back here," he shouted.

I kept going. I didn't make it to the bedroom door before he swept me off my feet and carried me struggling to the bed. He dropped me on it. I tried to roll away from him, but he came down on top of me and pinned me underneath him. I pounded on his chest with my fists. "Let me up right this instant, Cian."

He grabbed my wrists and pinned them to the mattress above my head.

"I'm not letting you go until you listen to me and hear what I'm saying loud and clear. I never wanted to make you feel dirty or insecure. You have nothing to feel insecure about. Yes, you're different from any woman I've ever been with. We talked about that. I love how different you are."

"If you love how different I am, then why did you get so furious just now?"

"Because you accused me of one day cheating on you or just as bad, that I'd share you with another man. I don't give a fuck how good of a friend someone is. I will never let another man touch you. You're mine. I'm the only man who gets to kiss you, touch you and be inside of you. That's never going to change. If one of them tried to do any of those things, I'd gut him and bury his body where no one would ever find him," he hissed.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. Tears filled my eyes. His expression softened. He let go of my wrists and lowered his mouth until it was only a hair's breadth away from mine. "I thought you knew but now I realize I've never said it in plain English," he whispered.

“Never told me what?”

“That I love you. I’ve called you my love in Irish more than once. It’s not just a saying for me. I mean it to the fullest extent of its meaning. I love you Miranda Tremblay. Introducing you as my fiancée and future wife wasn’t just to shock people. It’s the damn truth. I want to marry you. I want you by my side from now until the day I take my last breath. It’s fast and I don’t want to rush you into saying the same thing to me. I only want to hear you say it when you truly mean it. You’re my soulmate. I can promise you that I’ll never need or want another woman but you.”

The pleading in his tone and the sincerity on his face struck me in the chest. I started to sob. He pressed his lips to mine then lifted up. “Please, don’t cry. It kills me to see you like this. To know me and my friend made you feel like this. Tell me what I can do to make it up to you. I’ll do whatever it takes, just don’t leave me. I can’t survive that.”

I gripped him by the nape of his neck and pulled him down until our mouths touched. I poured every bit of love, passion, and excitement I felt into that kiss. Cian responded immediately to it. Our mouths devoured each other greedily. It was several minutes before we took a break. When we did, I told him what was bursting to come out.

“I can’t share you either. It would kill me to do that or to have you be with another woman.” He opened his mouth to protest, but I put my hand over his mouth. “I know. You said you won’t do that. I believe you. You didn’t let me finish. It would kill me because I love you too and I want to be your wife one day.”

He groaned. “Fuck, thank you, *Dia*. I was terrified you’d walk out. I couldn’t let you. I didn’t hurt you when I dropped you on the bed or held your wrists, did I?” He rubbed gently at my wrists.

“No you didn’t hurt me. Although, I can think of one thing you can do to make up for worrying me like that.”

“Anything,” he said.

“Make love to me. Show me what I mean to you and I’ll show you what you mean to me.”

“I’ll gladly make love to you any time, any day, and any way you want. Why don’t we get rid of this towel and your underclothes? I can’t stand these clothes on me for another second.” He raised up and stripped away the offending pieces of cloth. When I was completely naked, he stood up and stripped off his clothes. I watched him avidly. There was something I wanted to do before we got too lost in each other.

“Cian, there’s something I want.”

“Anything, all you have to do is ask,” he told me, as he crawled onto the bed. Before he could straddle me or start doing anything to me, I pressed my hand on his chest. He froze.

“Last night, I didn’t get to taste you like I wanted. I want you to let me do that now. Before we get too lost in other things. I’m dying to know what you taste like. To feel your heavy cock on my tongue and down my throat if I can take you that far. I’ve never experienced that and I’m dying to have you.”

His answer was to growl then he rolled over onto his back beside me. He spread his legs and raised his arms out to his sides. “I’m all yours. Although I will warn you, if you play too long, I might end up filling your pretty mouth with my cum. So when I tell you to stop, you need to stop or I’ll take it to mean that’s what you want.”

“I’ve been warned. Now, let me explore some first. I didn’t get to do that either.” I bent my head and kissed the pulse in his neck. Feeling it jump under my lips, I smiled and kept going.

Cian:

I couldn't believe how the evening was ending. After a great dinner, then a terrible meeting with Pino and a fight with the woman I love, I was naked and letting her do with me what she wanted. Her lips and fingers teased and touched me all over. She kissed my pulses, nibbled on the ridges of muscle on my chest and abs. Her tongue traced my tattoos and licked my nipples before sucking them into her mouth and teasing them with the edge of her teeth.

I'd had women touch me and taste me, but none of them came close to making me feel what she was. My whole body was lit up and my nerve endings were ablaze. I had to fight not to put my hands on her body and take over. She'd asked me to let her explore and suck my cock. That was what I was going to do, no matter how crazy it made me.

By the time she made it to my throbbing, aching cock, I was ready to beg for her to suck me dry. Her hand encircled the base, and she eyed it before flicking out her tongue. It swiped a wide path across the head of my cock taking my precum with it. I groaned as spikes of fire streaked through my groin. "More. I need to feel you all around me before I die, Miranda. Suck my cock. It's yours."

I watched as she smiled up at me from between my legs then while holding my gaze, she lowered her mouth and slowly, torturously sucked me inside her tight, hot, wet mouth. I fisted the sheets under me. Her movements were a little hesitant, and she had to experiment with her hold and suction, but it felt better than any blow job I'd ever gotten from the most experienced woman. Why? Because she was doing it out of desire to do it and she cared that it was good for me. I could tell it wasn't just something she was doing because I expected it out of her. Some women didn't like going down on a guy, even though most did it. They thought it was a tit for tat thing or that the guy expected it no matter what.

As she gained confidence, I moved closer and closer to losing all control. I had no idea how long she sucked and played with my cock and balls, but eventually, I was so close

to coming, I couldn't stand it. I gave her the warning I'd promised her. No way would I just shoot my load down her throat. Speaking of her throat, it was her attempts at taking me deeper and fighting her gag reflex that had pushed me here.

“*Mo grá*, I'm close. You need to stop or I'm going to come.”

Her answer was to speed up her pumping at the base of my cock, along with the movement of her mouth up and down my length as she sucked harder. I fisted my hand in the back of her hair. I had warned her, Pressing her down slightly, I thrust a tad deeper. She gagged then swallowed. As she did, my cock slipped deeper. The boiling inferno in my sac came bubbling up, and I shouted as I came. I floated in a haze as I poured my cum down her throat and came more and more.

Finally, I came to my senses. When I did, I let go of her and lifted her off me. Her face was flushed. She was breathing hard. Drool and my cum was smeared around her lips. I wiped it off with my thumb. She gave me a tentative smile. “I take it, I did alright.”

“You did more than alright. I came harder than I ever have from being sucked off. Any better and I'll for sure lose my mind.”

Her smile widened as she sat up. “Good. Now, after you get your strength back, I'd like to see what you had in mind for me tonight. I'm surprised at how hot sucking your cock made me. I ache, Cian. Right here.”

She took my right hand and placed it between her legs. She was dripping wet. I rubbed up and down her folds then thrust a finger deep inside of her. I zeroed in on her G-spot. She cried out, and I watched her shake as she rode my finger and stared at me in shock.

“That's it. Ride my finger. Get yourself off. Here, you need more than just one,” I growled as I eased a second then a third finger into her tight hole. She moaned and threw back her head. Her hips were going wild as she rode my hand. I reached up to tug on her taut nipples. That made her cry out and buck harder against me.

I planned to explore her body like she did mine then eat her pussy before eventually fucking her. I was back to being hard already. Only she had other ideas. Suddenly, she squeezed my fingers hard with her pussy and shook as she came and cried out. Watching her have an orgasm was beautiful to watch. As she started to relax, I went to ease her off me and onto the bed. Her words stopped me.

“Don’t. I can’t wait. I need you inside of me. Now,” she pleaded.

Before I could tell her alright, she lifted herself off my fingers, grasped my cock and notched it to her entrance then lowered herself in one hard thrust down on me. Both of us moaned. I gripped her hips and lifted her up then slammed her back down on me. Fire raced through me.

“That’s it. Ride me hard. Fuck that tight, wet pussy with my cock. Make us both come. Let me fill you full of my seed. Fuck, watch those beautiful tits bouncing,” I growled.

This only spurred her to ride me harder and faster. Her fingers clawed at my chest. I could already feel her starting to get tighter around me. It wouldn’t be long before she came again. I used my heels to lift my ass off the mattress and drill into her. A few thrusts like that and she came crying out to God. Her nails sank into my skin. I didn’t let it stop me. I kept pounding in and out of her. When she began to sag on top of me, I flipped her over onto her back. She moaned.

“I want you on your belly,” I growled.

She feebly tried to move. Knowing if I didn’t move her myself she probably wouldn’t, I rolled her onto her stomach then I got off the bed. Gripping her legs, I pulled her to the edge of the bed until her legs were hanging to the floor and her ass was perched on the edge. I squeezed her ass cheeks then pushed her legs wider apart. Seeing her glistening pussy, I placed the head of my cock to her hole and drove into her in one hard thrust. She reared half off the bed and screamed, “Oh God, yes.”

I hammered away at her and she sobbed over and over my name. As my balls slapped over and over against her clit,

my release started in my toes and began to work its way up my legs. I leaned over her back and panted in her ear. “Here it comes. Take it. Milk me dry, Miranda.”

She tightened down around me. Lights flashed in my eyes and I was the one to scream a second or two before she did again. Together we came in a whirlwind of ecstasy. My hips jerked and jerked as my cum kept coming. I could feel it running out around my cock. Eventually, I couldn’t move and collapsed on top of her. I had enough sense left not to put my full weight on her. I kissed the back of her neck. “Are you okay?”

“I’m not sure. Are you supposed to go blind and not be able to feel your legs?” she whispered hoarsely.

I laughed which made her tighten around me. This made me groan. “Only when it’s us. I’ve never felt that until now. You’ll kill me one day doing that, but I can’t think of a better way to die. They’ll come hunting us and find me still buried inside of you. If we die together like that, I’m leaving instructions to leave us together and bury us exactly as we are.” Her giggle made me smile. Soon we were both laughing in between our moans. I closed my eyes. I just needed a minute then I’d get up and clean us both up. Just a minute.



After smoothing over Pino’s stupid remark and the feelings it caused Miranda to have and having the best sex of my life, I was in a great mood today. There were no more meetings planned for this trip. The next few days were all dedicated to showing her Italy and the best time possible. I planned to take her shopping, do some sightseeing of just a few of the amazing attractions as well as taking her to a party. The party she had no idea about.

Because the party was tonight and I wanted to give her more options on gowns to wear, today would be dedicated mainly to shopping. After sleeping in and a leisurely late breakfast on our balcony, we got ready then headed out. I loved seeing her face as she took in all the architecture around Vicenza. She found it all breathtaking, she told me.

If there was one thing not in short supply, it was places to shop for clothing. Many top designers' shops could be found here, not just the Italian ones. I had my favorites that I wanted to see her dressed in, but it was really up to her to decide what was to her taste. At first, she was terrified to go into the stores.

"Cian, I have the clothes you bought me at the hotel. There's no need to buy more."

"Yes, there is. Since we're here, it's better to buy clothes than to go home and end up buying them and having them shipped. As much as you might try to get out of it, as my woman, there are going to be times I have to insist you attend events with me. I promise not to make it all the time. Hell, I get out of as many as I can myself, but we do have a name to uphold. Charities are a big part of that and when those happen, my whole family attends."

"God, what did I get myself into when I agreed to date you? I should seriously reconsider my decision," she grouched, but she had a smile on her face when she said it, so I knew she was teasing me.

"Too late. If you try to run now, there's nowhere you can hide. I'll find you and bring you back."

"And how will you keep me from running again?"

"I plan to shower you with so much love and make love to you until you can't think of anything but me."

"So you'll repeat last night? Cian, you know that almost killed us both. Your crazy wish to be buried together entwined will likely come true if you do that again."

"I know," I told her with a smirk.

She blushed then laughed. This is what broke the ice and helped me to get her to go inside. Once in the first one, it became all about the cost. She couldn't hide the fact that there were several items she adored. The longing in her eyes and the way she reverently touched the clothes gave it away. The various shops' attendants flocked to us. They were used to

fawning over rich people. It wasn't anything I liked much, but Miranda hated it. I waved them off in the third store.

“We'll show ourselves around. If we need your help, I'll be sure to call you. My fiancée and I prefer to browse on our own.”

I could tell they didn't like it. They worked mainly on commission and to let us do this ourselves would cheat them out of it.

“I promise, when we're ready, you'll be the one we get to help us. The sale should go to you since you were the first to greet us and offer your help,” I informed the older woman who'd met us at the door. Her name was Agnese. She was in her fifties I guessed and impeccably groomed and dressed. She gave me a subtle nod. “As you wish, Signore O'Sheeran. Could I interest either of you in a glass of champagne or wine while you shop?”

I glanced at Miranda. She gave Agnese a sweet smile. “I'd love a glass of champagne if you don't mind. You'll have to forgive me, Agnese. I've never been shopping like this and at heart, I'm a simple woman. Cian is trying to teach me what to do in places like this.”

With those words, she won Agnese over hook, line and sinker as the saying goes. Agnese gave her a motherly smile. “It's perfectly alright. I'm here to make this as comfortable as possible for you. I'll be back with your champagne. Signore?”

“I'll take the champagne as well. Thank you.”

From there, we were left to walk the massive showroom and look at the blinding selection. As we looked, I slipped in questions. That was how I discovered her sizes. Once I knew those, anytime I saw her focus on an item longer than others, I pulled one in her size. She kept protesting but I wouldn't stop. She deserved to have beautiful things and I could give them to her. It wasn't like this would make a dent in my bank accounts.

We ended up staying for a couple of hours in that shop. After we had walked the whole thing, I insisted she try on the

clothes I'd selected for her. She did it and as she modeled outfit after outfit, I was again struck by her beauty and grace.

While we shopped, Kendric and Thomas stood guard. Both of them were inside with us, but they kept their distance, so Miranda wouldn't feel smothered. They knew I was armed and would be able to defend us both if the need should arise.

By the time we left that shop, she'd added a few more cocktail dresses, two pant sets, a wrap, and two formal gowns to her wardrobe, along with shoes. It had taken everything I had to get her to let me buy that much. The look of horror on her face when I paid had me trying to reassure her as we left. Agnese promised to have our purchases sent to our room at the hotel within the hour. That way we didn't need to carry them around with us.

"Miranda, you need to stop worrying so much. I have more than enough money to take you shopping like this every week and I still wouldn't come close to running out of money. You know my family and I are very wealthy."

"I know, but it still doesn't seem right that you spend all this money on me. What do you get out of the deal? I'm never going to be able to buy you stuff."

"First of all, I get the best part of this relationship. I get you. I'm getting a family of my very own. I'm getting your love. Those far outweigh my money. As for never being able to buy things like this for me, yes you will. Once we're married, my money will become yours. If you get a wild urge to buy me another motorcycle, then go for it. My brothers and cousins can help you with what to get if you need help," I said with a grin and a wink.

We were now in the car and driving along the streets. She turned half toward me in her seat and stared at me in shock. "You will do no such thing! You'll do what smart rich men and women do and have me sign a prenup if we get married. I don't want your money. Could you imagine what people will think?"

I didn't like what she said about if we got married. It was going to happen. The privacy window was up between us

and the guys. Quickly, I undid her seatbelt and brought her to me. I stared hard at her. “We will be married. Don’t ever doubt that. As for a prenup, that’s not going to fucking happen. My parents and my *uncaili* and *aintini* don’t have them.”

“Surely, Darragh and Ashlynn do?”

“No, they don’t. She tried to say this shit too, and he shot it down, like I am. There won’t be a divorce, Miranda. If we run into a difficult time, then we’ll work it out. Marriage isn’t always easy, our parents taught us that, but it’s worth the battle to preserve it, if you marry the one you love. The one you consider your soulmate. That’s what you are to me. Are you having doubts about how you feel about me?” The dread in my stomach caused me pain. What if she was?

“Don’t be silly, of course I’m not having doubts. I love you, Cian. I’ve never said that to another person other than my dad.”

“What about you-know-who?”

“I thought I might be but I could never say it, which tells me I wasn’t. I’m just afraid of how it appears to outsiders. I don’t want them ever saying anything to make you think I’d married you only because of your family and wealth. I’m not like that.”

“I know that. I’ve never doubted it.” As she relaxed in my arms and I knew I’d won the argument, I proceeded to kiss her until I had to quit for fear of taking her in the back of the car.

We still had time until we needed to head back to get ready for tonight’s surprise. She begged not to go into any more stores, so instead, I had the guys drive us to check out one of the local sights.

Vicenza was located halfway between Verona and Venice. I had them take us to the outskirts of Vicenza to the Portici di Monte Berico. It was a pilgrimage church which had been built in the sixteen hundreds. Its central design was modeled on the Rotunda, which was a circular design prevalent in old architecture. The ornate style was stunning to

see, especially when you realized when it was built and how many years it had remained standing. After seeing it, it was time for us to return to the hotel. She tried to get me to tell her what our plans were.

“Cian, aren’t you even going to give me a clue as to what we’re doing tonight?”

“Yes, I will. You’ll need to wear one of your new long gowns. It’s your choice which one but let me know so I can coordinate. We’ll eat there and don’t expect us to get back until very late. Make sure to bring your wrap too. Everything else will be provided.”

“That doesn’t tell me much. Okay, I’ll let you play this game, but if I embarrass you, it’s your fault.”

“You’ll never embarrass me, *a stór*.”

By the time she was done trying to get me to tell her everything, we were back to our suite. She was astonished to see her new purchases were here. I knew they would be. While she went to take a bath, I went to talk to the guys. They opened the door to their connecting suite at my knock. “Is everything alright, Cian?” Thomas asked. He glanced behind me looking for Miranda, I assumed.

“Everything’s great. We’ll be leaving at seven o’clock. I have no idea how late we’ll be back, but expect it to be late. Miranda has no idea where we’re going, so mum’s the word.”

“You’re going to take her there without a warning? What if she gets upset?” Kendrick asked worriedly.

“She might feel a bit uncomfortable, but she’ll see there’s nothing to worry about. If I told her in advance, she’d make herself into a nervous wreck. She’s afraid she’ll do something to embarrass me or to make people think she’s only with me for my name and money.”

“Well, if they think that, they’ll soon see they’re wrong. Anyone who gets to know her, will see she’s not that kind of woman. She’s like Ashlynn. They couldn’t care less if you were rich or poor,” Thomas stated firmly.

“You’re right. And she needs to realize that anyone who continues to think that about her after getting to know her, isn’t someone we’ll call a friend, so they don’t fucking matter.”

They both grinned and nodded. With them updated, I left them to relax and get ready. I had a while before I had to shower and dress, so I called home to check in on how things were going. If I went into the bathroom and saw her wet and naked in the tub, I’d get sidetracked and we’d be in bed still when it came time to leave.

I placed my call to Darragh. Not that no one else could update me, but as the head of the family, he’d be the one to know everything and if everyone was doing fine. Even if I was on a mostly personal vacation with Miranda, I wanted to stay in the loop if there were any issues. Some of the others might think they shouldn’t tell me stuff. Thankfully, when he answered, I found out I was worrying for nothing. We talked for about twenty minutes before he had to get off the phone to go spend time with Ashlynn. He told me to make sure I took care of Miranda. I assured him there was nothing more important.

Miranda: Chapter 18

With Cian not telling me where we were going, I had a hard time deciding which gown to wear, but in the end, I chose the emerald-green one. It molded my body and showed off what curves I had. The low neckline showed my breasts off more than I usually did, but it was still tasteful and I felt sexy and confident in it. I paired it with silver heels.

When it came time to do my hair and makeup, Cian had a surprise for me. A woman named Gina was there with a massive rolling suitcase. He informed me she was a professional makeup artist and hair stylist. He asked her here to help me prepare. A part of me felt relieved someone better qualified would do those for me, since I didn't know the venue and I had no doubt we would be with many other uber rich people. The other part of me wondered if he did it because he felt my efforts would embarrass him. I don't know how he knew it, but he knew exactly what I was thinking and was quick to tell me it wasn't for that reason at all.

Gina was a talker and in no time put me at ease. She said an updo would go best with the dress when I showed it to her. She twisted and curled my hair until it was off my neck, but still in a sexy bun. She explained that it was called a rose-shaped braided bun. She put my hair in a low ponytail then loosely braided it before wrapping it into a bun. Once that was done, she pulled at parts of the braid to make them puff out and look sort of like petals. Bobby pins secured it. I loved it and it was simple enough I thought I could do it myself.

She layered on my makeup, although to look at it, you'd think I wasn't wearing much. My eyes were lined in dark liner and several coats of mascara to make them larger. My cheeks had barely a wash of peach on them and my lips she lined and painted in long-wear lipstick. It was a deep burgundy color. I thanked her over and over before she left. I tried to give her a tip, but she said it had all been taken care of by Cian.

While I got ready, he used the other bedroom to get ready. I was dying to see what he looked like and what he'd

think of my look. I took a deep, fortifying breath then walked out into the living room. I could hear music playing softly out there. He was looking out the windows when I came in. It gave me a chance to check him out. Even without seeing his face or the front of him, I knew he was gorgeous. He turned to me. I guess he'd sensed me or maybe I'd moaned out loud. That's when I saw that he had on a tuxedo. He wore it like he'd been born wearing one. It fit him impeccably.

“You look incredible, Cian. Although, I think you've looked like that since birth. It's so unfair that the rest of us have to put so much effort into looking acceptable and you just look like this all the time.”

He came toward me. He was running his gaze up and down my body. “Turn around,” he said hoarsely. I slowly twirled. I didn't want to chance falling in these heels. When I made it all the way around, he was right in front of me. “Is your lipstick smudge proof?”

“Yeah,” I answered with a smirk.

“Thank *Dia*,” he groaned before he plastered his mouth to mine and he kissed the hell out of me. By the time he was done. I was dizzy and felt like I was on fire. “I take that kiss to mean you approve.”

“I more than approve. You continue to make me unable to think. This gown looks even better than I imagined it would. Granted, it couldn't help but look more wonderful with you in it. Do you like it? What about what Gina did with your hair and makeup? I didn't want you to stress over it. Sometimes *Mam* and the others use professionals to help them get dolled up. They say it puts them in a relaxed mood.”

“I can see why. She was great and this hairdo I think I can do myself. She knows her stuff. I want to look my best tonight. I know wherever you're taking me, it must be important and that a lot of very rich and important people will be there.”

“You're right, it is important. You'll get to meet some of our acquaintances and a few people we consider friends. Others will just be there to attend. Before we go, there are a

couple of things I need to do. First, I think your beauty needs to be highlighted. I'd like for you to accept these." As he said it, he handed me a medium-sized, flat velvet box. With a pounding heart I opened it.

Inside, was one of the most stunning jewelry sets I'd ever seen, even considering what we'd seen at Abbagliante yesterday. It was a necklace, bracelet and earrings literally dripping in diamonds and emeralds. They dazzled the eyes under the lights. I gasped.

"Cian, they're utterly gorgeous. I love them, but I can't wear them. They must cost a fortune. What if I lose them? How did you buy these without me seeing you do it?"

He took the case out of my hands then lifted the necklace out. He motioned for me to turn around. I wanted to say no, but my feet moved of their own accord. The coolness against my skin made me shiver. His lips grazed the back of my neck. "You can wear them. They deserve to be worn only by a beautiful woman. They're insured. And you didn't see me buy them because I brought them with us. They're from home. This is a set I've had for years saved for my future wife one day, if I was so blessed to find her."

I couldn't keep the tears from filling my eyes, even though I was able to prevent them from falling and ruining my makeup. He gently swung me around and clasped the bracelet on my right wrist. After it was on, he gestured to my ears. I took out the simple earring posts I had put in and exchanged them for his. He took my hand and walked me into the bedroom and stood me in front of the full-length mirror.

I couldn't believe how unreal I looked. I barely recognize myself. I felt like a princess. "Cian, I love these so much. And even though I'm terrified of losing them, I can't help but wear them. You never cease to surprise me. I can't believe you saved these for years for your wife."

"I just knew they would be hers, yours. All I had to do was wait on you. Now, there's one final thing before we need to go. We don't want to be late."

“I can’t think of what else we’d need to do,” I told him as I stared at the jewelry more.

Suddenly, I saw him drop to his knees in the mirror. As I stared in disbelief, he reached into his tux and brought out his hand. Grasped in his fingers was a ring. Only it wasn’t just any ring. It was the one from Abbagliante that I had fallen in love with. He lifted my left hand and focused on my face.

“Miranda, will you officially do me the honor of becoming my fiancée in every way, not just in words? I want the world to see this ring and know that you’re all mine. Will you marry me? I know we’ve been telling people we’re engaged, but I need to have it be true in every way.”

I couldn’t speak, so all I did was nod. I saw the look of relief on his face as he slid it on my fourth finger. Like yesterday, it felt like it was meant to be on my finger. He came to his feet and he kissed me again. This time I put all my passion into it too. When we parted, both of us were smiling. “It’s just as unbelievable as it was yesterday. How did you get it? I know this didn’t come from home.”

“Edoardo slipped it into my hand before we left. He knew you loved it and he was trying to seal the deal. I would’ve sent for it if he hadn’t, but he saved me the effort. It doesn’t compare to you but it is at least worthy to be on your finger.”

“It’s more than worthy of that. I adore it and you. I can’t believe this. There’s no way to top this on this trip.”

“Don’t say that yet. Let’s go and see what tonight has in store for us.”

I walked out of the suite five minutes later, still on cloud nine. Thomas and Kendric congratulated us when Cian told them we were now officially engaged and they complimented me on how gorgeous I looked. I remember responding, but I couldn’t tell you what I said. It must’ve been good because they smiled widely at me.

The whole car ride was a blur too. I couldn’t stop looking at my ring and thinking about how I was in a fairytale.

It wasn't until we came to a stop did I look out the window. It was my turn to be shocked again. Not far in front of us was the Mediterranean Sea. Floating on it was a massive yacht. The whole thing was lit up with lights and there were people going aboard and more milling around on the decks.

“Cian, where are we and what is this?”

“We're in Venice. We've been driving for over an hour. This is a family friend's yacht. He's excited to meet you. It was purely coincidence that our trip coincided with his benefit dinner and dance on his yacht. It's for one of his charities which my family supports. It raises money for sick children who don't have the means to pay for treatment. I thought it would be a lovely event for us to make our debut at and to show Cosmo support.”

“I can't believe it. The charity sounds wonderful. I love that you all support stuff like this. I'm just kind of taken aback that I'm about to go on a yacht. It's big enough to house multiple families or a small town. God, does your family have one of these?”

He grinned and shrugged as he helped me out of the car, Thomas had opened the door. “Yes, we do have one. We keep it in Florida as you would imagine. It has sailed all over the world more than once. When we get back, I want to take you out on it. The whole family should take a trip, I think. Have you ever been on a boat?”

“Yeah, but not like this! It was a fishing boat that went out in the ocean off the Florida coast. Dad likes to fish out there. It's a good thing I don't get seasick,” I said as I shook my head at him.

Someone came to take the car keys from Kendrick. Lord, valet parking for a yacht. The four of us headed toward the ramp up to the deck. I tried not to stare like a country bumpkin but it was hard not to. I saw people ahead of us look over their shoulders at us. By the way most of them reacted, I knew they recognized Cian. They gave me a range of looks. Many merely contained curiosity. Some gave me angry looks.

Those came from a lot of women. I bet they were wishing they were on his arm instead of me.

Everyone was dressed similar to Cian and me. The amount of jewels I saw would feed most countries for years. As we gained the deck, we slowed down as people paused to greet an imposing man standing there. He was in his late thirties or early forties, I guessed. He was over six feet tall and like Cian, wore a tux like he was born in one. He had dark skin, eyes, and hair with some gray just at his temples. When we made it to him, his pleasant smile morphed into a huge grin. He grabbed Cian's arm and brought him to him to give him a hearty man hug. When he let him go, he spoke.

"Goddamn, it's so good to see you, Cian. I was deathly afraid tonight might get too boring until you said you'd be here tonight. Sorry for being so rude. Tell me who this ravishing woman is on your arm. I'm Cosmo Alexopoulos. It's an absolute pleasure to meet you." As he said it, he took my hand and tried to draw me into his arms. Cian stopped him cold.

"Cosmo, no need to try and charm her panties off. She's taken. I wanted to surprise you and have you be one of the first to meet her. Miranda, this as he said, is Cosmo Alexopoulos. He's an old friend of the family. Cosmo, this is Miranda Tremblay, my fiancée. If you behave yourself, you'll get an invitation to the wedding. If you don't, then you may be going for a swim in your tux."

Cosmo's smile grew bigger. "I can't believe it. Another O'Sheeran has fallen into the matrimonial trap. I couldn't believe it when I heard Darragh had succumbed and now you. Did your parents threaten to disown you if you didn't marry?"

Cian frowned warningly at him. He stepped closer. "No they didn't. Like Darragh, I was lucky enough to meet my soulmate and get her to agree to be mine. We make love matches in our family, not business deals. I'd better never hear you insinuate Miranda or any of the women we marry are anything less than the loves of our lives," he growled.

The look of astonishment Cosmo got on his face would've been comical if his words hadn't worried me. I didn't want people to think I was after Cian's money or that we were getting married as part of a business deal. His expression was quickly replaced with a look of horror.

“Jesus, I'm so sorry. Forgive me, Miranda. Sometimes I speak before I think. It's been a standing joke that Cian and the others will never get married and I've teased them for years that they'd have to accept an arranged marriage. They've always said that would never happen. I should've believed them. I'm beyond delighted to meet the woman who stole Cian's heart and I'll eat as much crow and beg your forgiveness as many times as it takes for you to forgive my big, stupid mouth. If it'll make you feel even an iota better, I'll let Cian throw my ass in the sea and spend the rest of tonight a salty, soggy mess.”

I wanted to stay upset with him, but his puppy dog eyes and the candor in his voice made me think he was telling the truth. He hadn't meant to insult me. Cian was still glaring at him. I held out my hand so Cosmo could take it. “You're forgiven, but if it happens again, you won't have to worry about Cian throwing you in the water. I'll do it gladly. I love him and don't want anyone saying things like that about him. Now, I think we should move along. We're holding up the line. I look forward to talking to you more later and finding out the details about your charity. Cian didn't tell me where we were going.”

He smiled as he took my hand and kissed the back of it. “It will be my pleasure to get to know you and thank you, oh magnanimous lady. He certainly has won an absolute gem. Lucky bastard.”

“Don't I know it. See you later, Cosmo,” Cian said. He was no longer looking like he might kill him. He took my arm and escorted me further inside. I hoped it wasn't going to turn out to be a lion's den. I wanted to enjoy myself.

“*Leanbh*, I'm sorry for Cosmo. He is right, he does speak before he thinks.”

“It’s not your fault. I know I’ll have to grow a thicker skin. People will make assumptions and some will be bold enough to speak them aloud. I’ll be fine. Why don’t we get something to drink so you can show me around this floating palace and introduce me to the people you like?”

He laughed. “That’s a deal. This way. I will warn you, people I don’t like will insist on talking to us and meeting you, but I’ll do my best not to talk to them for long.” I let him lead me to a waiter holding a tray of champagne glasses. I was going to need a tiny bit of help to face this crowd.

Cian:

I was proud as hell over how Miranda was doing facing this many people. Maybe I should've started her out at a smaller event, but when Cosmo asked you to attend, one of us always did our damndest to make it. Despite the leg he put in his mouth with Miranda, he was one of the few we really considered a friend.

She was charming people left and right. That wasn't to say there weren't any naysayers. There were. Some were those who disliked everyone, even themselves. The Queen of England could be talking to them and they'd turn up their noses and treat her like she was beneath them. Others were jealous. Many of them were women, but there were men too. More than a few had aspirations of catching one of the O'Sheerans. Personally, the family and I thought it was ridiculous, but had learned to tolerate or ignore it.

Miranda was gracious to them all. That's not to say she took the assholes without giving them a taste of their own medicine back. She did, just with more class than they had. The hours had flown by. I enjoyed it more than I can recall enjoying one of these in the past.

The charity had raised a record amount. Some of the thanks for that had to go to my woman. She'd subtly challenged those she met to try and beat each other's donations. She could spin very convincing stories about sick children. When I asked her how she came up with those stories, she informed me that her and her dad had been going to hospitals visiting seriously and terminally ill children for years. They heard their stories firsthand. The police department did it every year.

That was another reason to get her dad on my side. We could do so much more good together than alone. With the weight of my family combined with the trusted local police department, we could do even more for those in need. Children weren't the only ones who needed help in our community and beyond. Our parents had raised us to be thankful for the gifts and wealth we had. In order to show it,

we did give back to the world. There was more to us than fancy clothes, fast cars, and more money than you could ever imagine or spend.

The dinner served was nothing short of spectacular. Again, nothing I didn't expect out of Cosmo. As the evening drew to a close and we re-docked, we watched the others disembark. It was after midnight. A whole lot of drunk and "lighter in the checkbook" people left. We stayed behind.

Cosmo had caught me earlier and begged that we stay after everyone else left. He wanted to spend time with us without others disturbing us. Miranda had been willing, so I told him yes. As the last group made their way to their waiting cars, he came up to us on the main deck.

"Every time they leave like this, I thank God they're rich enough to have drivers. The thought of them driving makes me shudder," he said.

"You know you provide car service for those who drive themselves and are impaired. I recall you shoving our asses in a car a time or two."

He laughed. "Yeah, and it was fun too. Let's go sit somewhere comfortable and talk. It's getting cool out, would you mind coming into my stateroom?"

"That's fine by me. Miranda, are you okay with that?"

"Anywhere on this floating city is fine by me. Cian, tell me your yacht isn't this size."

She stated as he led us to his private area. Her question made Cosmo chuckle. We left Kendrick and Thomas to relax with Cosmo's security force. Now that we were back on land, he had more standing guard. Only so many had gone out to sea with us. It was a matter of numbers and since most of his guests had brought at least one guard, he had to trim his force down.

"So, she hasn't seen the family yacht yet. Well, I hate to tell you this, but it's just as big. Actually, I believe it's bigger because you know, Cian has to compensate for his

deficiencies in other areas,” he said, as he grinned evilly at me and glanced down at my crotch.

Before I could let one of my insults fly, Miranda beat me to it. “You’d better invest in some glasses Cosmo because your eyesight is shot. There’s nothing small or inadequate about Cian, in any of his areas, especially in that one. I know he’s never had any complaints. I’m so sorry that you have. I think they have implants now that might be able to at least make yours visible,” she said sweetly as she crossed her legs and sat back on the couch beside me.

Cosmo looked stunned for a moment or two then he threw back his head and roared with laughter. “Goddamn, she’s perfect, isn’t she? I need a woman like her. If you’re not willing to give her up, then please tell me she has a sister, a cousin, an aunt, someone who’s just like her.”

“I’m not ever going to give her up but you’re out of luck. She has none of those things.”

“Hell, maybe I need to quit wasting my time with rich bitches and find myself a down-to-earth woman. I haven’t been to St. Augustine in a while. Maybe an extended trip is in order,” he mused aloud.

“You might be onto something. Darragh’s Ashlynn is like Miranda in a lot of ways. She worked in a jewelry store as an office manager when he met her.”

“A jewelry store? What about you, Miranda? Where do you work?”

“Until a few days ago, in a bank as a teller. Now, I’m between jobs.”

This led him to ask why and we explained what had been going on with her job, her dad and her two stalkers as I called them. He was intrigued and had several suggestions on how to handle them. All of them involved pain. I agreed with him but I don’t know if Miranda did.

We spent a couple of hours talking and enjoying each other’s company. He told Miranda some stories about me that I wanted to punch him for, but I got him back by telling equally

embarrassing ones about him. I called a halt to the enjoyable night when I caught her yawning behind her hand. He offered to have us stay in one of his other staterooms, but I insisted we needed to be back at the hotel. After agreeing to meet up soon and allowing him to give her a hug and kiss on the cheek, we set out for the hotel.

By the time we made it back, she was out cold. I carried her up to our suite and stripped her for bed. She barely mumbled. I knew from my sister and my cousins that they hated to sleep with makeup on. Something about it made their skin break out. After rummaging around in her toiletry bag, I found a package of makeup wipes. I used a couple of them to get off as much of her makeup as I could. Hopefully, it would be enough. After she was taken care of, I stripped and crawled into bed with her and took her in my arms. It had been a long day and night. I was exhausted. I couldn't wait to explore more of Italy with her.

Cian: Chapter 19

I hated to see the last of Italy, but it was time for us to go home. The past few days had been filled with exploring and enjoying the sites, culture, and food of Italy. I even got Miranda to allow me to buy her a few more clothes. What she didn't know was when we got home, there would be more shopping to do.

I'd held off telling the family we were officially engaged. I was praying no one from the charity fundraiser would speak to them and blow it. I wanted them to all be together when we told them our fantastic news. I knew once they found out, it would be full steam ahead with wedding planning. Like Darragh, I didn't want to wait. I wasn't a patient man when it came to this and a year or more engagement wasn't my style.

We were met at the airport by one of our drivers in a limo. He drove the four of us straight to the compound. Despite the time difference, we weren't tired. We'd slept on the plane for most of the flight back. When we got to the gates, I informed our driver to take us to my house. This would give us a chance to unpack our stuff. On the flight, I'd talked Miranda into staying with me for a few days before venturing back to her place. I was hoping in that time frame, I could convince her to move to the compound permanently. Thomas and Kendric carried in our luggage then said they'd see us later, before disappearing. I'd asked them to put it all in the master bedroom.

"Do you want something to drink or eat, Miranda? I know we probably don't have much time before someone comes knocking. Most of the family will still be at work, but not all of them."

"Water would be great, honey. I feel dehydrated."

"Flying does that. I should've thought to get you to drink in the car. Sorry, here you go."

I got each of us a bottle of ice-cold water and we went outside on the veranda. It was warm but not suffocatingly

humid and hot like it would be in the summer. We hadn't been sitting for more than a few minutes when I heard the doorbell ringing through the open door followed by pounding. Getting up, I went to let whoever was busting down my door inside. I guess it was a good thing I had locked the door.

As I swung the door open with my mouth open to blast whoever it was, I was stopped from saying anything by the sight before me. Standing there was every single one of my family members. And by the expressions on their faces, they weren't here to welcome us home. Something was wrong. "What's wrong?"

"Where's Miranda?" *Daid* asked.

"She's out on the veranda, why?"

"*Mac*, we have some bad news for her. Can we come in?"

"Of course. Come in. What happened?" They all came striding inside and shut the door.

"Tell me," I ordered. However, I was too late to find out before she did. Miranda came in from the veranda. Her smile of greeting slid away as she saw their faces. She rushed over to us. I wrapped my arm around her. Whatever was wrong, we'd get through it together.

"I can tell by your faces that you're not here to welcome us home. Tell us what happened?"

"We're sorry to be the bearers of bad news, Miranda, but we knew you'd want to know as soon as you could. Let's sit down," *Darragh* told her with a concerned look on his face. My heart sped up.

"I'd rather stand if you don't mind. Tell me what has you so upset," she said.

"We got a call not long ago. It was from someone who knew we'd be interested in knowing what he'd just found out. I don't know how else to say this other than to say it. Your dad was taken to the hospital earlier today. He collapsed at the police department. His people called an ambulance. We don't

know what's wrong or how serious it is since we're not family, but the word is, they're looking for you."

She sagged against me. I had to wrap my other arm around her to keep her from falling to the floor. I swept her up in my arms and walked to the living room so I could sit down with her.

"I need to get to him," she said softly.

"Not until you can stand up you're not. When you can do that, I'll take you there myself. Why the hell didn't someone call us on the plane? I could have prepared her and we would've gone straight to the hospital when we landed," I growled.

"We thought about it, but we wanted to give you a chance to relax, even if it was only for an hour after you landed. We have someone there and they'll call if they find anything out. We wanted to be here for her too," my *daid* told me.

"That's why you're all home on a workday. I wondered why when I opened the door."

"It is," *Mam* nodded.

Miranda struggled to sit up on my lap. She looked me deep in the eyes. I saw the fear in them. "Cian, I need to go now. I have to find out what's wrong with him. He's never sick. For him to collapse, it has to be something serious."

"We will. I'll call for a car. You try and rest until it gets here."

I didn't end up placing the call to our drivers, instead, Patrick did. He ordered enough to take all of us to the hospital. It looked like they meant what they said. They were going to support us. We hurried out the door as soon as the cars were at my door. I know the drive was a blur for her. She didn't say a word, just stared out the window blindly. Those who rode with us were quiet.

At the hospital, it was all I could do to keep her from running inside. We'd gotten word on the drive that he was in their emergency care center. We knew where that was located.

We only took a couple of our bodyguards with us. Unfortunately, since it was a hospital, we couldn't take our guns inside. When we made it to the emergency center, we had to call back to ask for admittance. A woman came out to meet us. On her nametag, I saw she was an RN.

“You said you're Chief Tremblay's daughter. May I see some ID?”

Miranda fumbled as she took out her wallet and showed her driver's license to the nurse. All I wanted to do was shout at her to stop stalling and tell us what the hell was wrong with him. Even if he hated me, I didn't wish him harm. He was Miranda's dad, and I still held out hope that one day he'd accept me and be a part of our life. Once the nurse was satisfied that Miranda was who she said she was, she gave her the rundown.

“Your father was brought in a few hours ago from his work. He collapsed and was unresponsive. We're still running tests to determine what exactly is causing it. We're waiting for a few more to be done then we should be able to tell you more. His vital signs are stable. We've got him listed as in guarded condition until we know more. He's allowed to have two visitors at a time until visiting hours are over. They can only be immediate family,” she said that part as she ran her gaze over all of us.

“This is my fiancé. I need him with me,” Miranda told her. I heard the indrawn breaths of my family. They all glanced at her left hand. Not the way I'd hoped to break our good news, but it couldn't be helped. *Daid* gripped my shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze.

“Congratulations, Cian. We're so happy for both of you. Go with Miranda and take care of her. We'll be here if you need anything. Some of us might have to go back to the compound, but there'll always be a few of us here.”

“Thanks, *Daid*. We appreciate it. I'll let you know as soon as we find something out.”

The others called out they would be praying for him as we followed the nurse inside. She escorted us to a room about

halfway past the nurses' station. Entering it, the sound of the equipment was the first thing I noticed then it was her dad. I'd known him for a lot of years. I'd never seen him look so pale or small. He didn't look like himself. Miranda began to sob as she ran to his bed and laid her head on his chest.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I should've been here. Please, wake up. Talk to me. Tell me you're going to be alright." As she continued to cry, I stood rubbing her back, trying to bring her some kind of comfort. There wasn't anything I could say, and I refused to tell her everything would be alright when we had no idea if it was true. Eventually, she got herself back under control and I was able to get her to sit down. She sat holding onto the one hand that wasn't covered in tubes and wires.

We sat in silence, listening to the steady beeping of his heart on the monitor and the sound of his breathing. I wasn't sure how long we'd been there when loud voices and the sound of a commotion reached our ears. I wasn't that surprised at it. People had to receive bad news in here all the time. Reacting like that wouldn't be out of bounds. Hopefully, whoever it was would be calmed down soon. It was disturbing to others, especially the patients who were awake.

Next thing I knew, the voices moved closer, then the door to his room came crashing open. I jumped on my feet and placed myself between Miranda and the door. Some grieving family member wasn't going to hurt her in their grief. Only it wasn't a family member. It was Officer Carruthers along with two other cops. Behind them were men and women who I could only assume were nurses and doctors by their clothes. They were trying to get Carruthers to quiet down. When he saw me, he came at me with his fists clenched at his sides. He was breathing hard and looked like he wanted to murder me. What the fuck was his problem?

"I want this man arrested and out of here," he shouted.

"Sir, you can't be shouting like this. You're disturbing very sick people," one doctor protested.

"Why should I be arrested? I haven't done anything," I stated calmly.

“Like hell you didn’t! You kidnapped Chief Tremblay’s daughter and took her where no one knew where she was. She’s been gone for days. You’re going to prison for this, O’Sheeran,” he snarled.

The man actually didn’t even hear what he was saying, I don’t think. The illogic of it was almost comical. If I had kidnapped her, why was I here with her? The two officers with him exchanged worried glances. They knew he was talking crazy. He whipped around to face them. “I told you to arrest him! Put the goddamn cuffs on him or you’re fired,” he shouted.

Miranda stepped out from behind me. I grabbed her and pulled her back against my chest. I didn’t want her to get within hand reach of the lunatic. There was no telling what he might do to her. If he hurt her, I would go to prison for assault, and possible murder of a police officer. There’d be a dozen witnesses.

“Carruthers, you don’t have a clue what you’re saying. Cian didn’t kidnap me. I’m with him willingly. We’ve been on a trip to Italy if you must know. We just got back a little while ago and I heard about my dad. We came right here. What’s gotten into you to cause you to say such wild and untrue things?”

“Don’t lie, Miranda. I know he’s threatening you with something to make you say this. You’re not with him willingly. I should’ve realized it sooner. All this time I thought he was suckering you in and you couldn’t see what a criminal he is, but that isn’t true, is it? He’s been holding something over you and forcing you to be with him. Don’t you understand, I’ll protect you. You can tell the truth now.” The fervent and maniacal expression was scary to see. I knew he actually believed what he was saying. He wasn’t acting.

“*Leanbh*, get behind me. He’s not right in the head,” I whispered in her ear, as I slowly inched her to the side.

Seeing her moving, he launched himself toward us. I quickly placed her behind my back again. The two officers with him yelled at him to stop as they tried to grab him, only

he was too fast for them. In a blink, he had his gun out and in my face. Miranda screamed along with the nurses and doctors. The other officers swore. "I'm gonna kill you," he shouted at me.

"Dwight, put down your gun before you do something you'll regret," the taller officer said urgently.

"I won't regret killing this bastard. You know who he is. The whole family is like a disease. I'll be doing the world a fucking favor by killing one of them. You know he's making her lie."

"She's not lying. I can tell. You're distraught. We all know how close you and the chief are. Let's put down the gun and talk about this calmly," the other officer stated.

As they spoke soothingly to him, I saw them inch closer to him. He had his back to them. All his focus was on me. I needed to get myself and Miranda out of the range of his gun before they tackled him. He might pull the trigger on reflex.

When they were close, one of them nodded at me. I took that as the signal to duck and take her with me. Luckily, I had my arms behind me and my hands on her waist. As I dropped down, I jerked on her hard. She cried out as we fell. Better bruises than a bullet to the head. At the same time as we were falling, I heard swearing and scuffling. Miraculously, there was no gunshot.

I rolled to the side so she wasn't crushed by me. I watched as the other officers subdued Carruthers and took away his gun. They went as far as to place cuffs on him. As soon as I knew he was contained, I moved so I could check on Miranda. "Are you hurt? I tried to be careful. Talk to me, baby," I ordered her.

She appeared to be stunned. She was staring at Carruthers. Finally, she dragged her stare away from him and looked at me. She reached up to touch my face. Her hand was shaking. "I'm fine, Cian. I didn't get hurt. It was just a shock to see him act like that. Are you alright?"

Breathing a sigh of relief. I stood up then helped her to her feet. Turning to face the others, I took in the scene more. Besides the nurses, doctors, Carruthers and the other two officers, there were now two security guards standing in the doorway looking like they didn't know what to do.

“Take him out of here and keep him out of here,” I snapped.

“Mr. O’Sheeran, we’re sorry for this, but only Ms. Tremblay can ban him from seeing her father,” the tall officer said. I noticed his badge *West*. The other one said *Knox*.

“No, but I can have him arrested for making a death threat against me and all these people, including yourselves, are witnesses. If you don’t want to have to arrest a fellow officer and have him spend time in prison for that, then get him out of here and keep him away from us. My fiancée doesn’t need the stress of his insane bullshit on top of what’s already happening with her dad.”

West and Knox both got surprised looks when I said Miranda and I were engaged. Carruthers went wild. He’d started to calm down a bit before that, but this news sent him spiraling again. He tried to break away from them and get to me. The whole time they fought to subdue him, he screamed profanities at me and swore he’d make me pay. They had to accept help from the hospital’s security guards to get him out of there.

Once he was gone, everyone settled down and went back to work. The staff apologized to us for the disturbance, not that it was their fault. As soon as we were alone, Miranda collapsed in her chair.

“What do you need me to get you?” I asked.

“Nothing. I just need you.”

“I’m here for you. I just need to send a text to let the family know what the hell happened. I knew he wanted you, but I had no idea he was this bad.” I took out my cell phone and typed out my message.

“I didn’t either. God, what would make him like that? I swear, I never once encouraged him to think there might be something possible between us. Do you think if they get him some help, he’ll be alright? I don’t think he can change without professional help.”

“I don’t know. As long as he stays clear of you, me, your dad, and the rest of my family, I’m willing not to press charges. If he doesn’t, then I’ll make sure he pays.”

She nodded her head in agreement. I didn’t go further to explain that my version of him paying was to see him disappear permanently. If he continued to be a threat to her or my family, I’d have no trouble doing the deed. Sometimes there were people too far gone to recover. Carruthers struck me as one of those people.

It wasn’t long before responses came in from the family assuring me that they would have guards outside the emergency center to prevent Carruthers from trying to come back. Hopefully, Knox and West would be able to hold him for a few hours. In addition, my family suggested that we anonymously send in the information Cody had discovered about him. It might keep the cops busy, which in turn would keep him busy. I doubted there would be enough there to arrest him immediately, but they might suspend him pending an investigation. A man like him didn’t need to be out on the streets dealing with others. I told them to do it.

It was more than two hours later, after her dad had been taken for another scan, before a doctor came to see us. “Hello, you must be Ms. Tremblay. I’m Dr. Dunn. I’m the doctor caring for your dad while he’s here. I know you’ve had a scare and must be desperate for news.”

“Call me Miranda. Yes, Dr. Dunn, we’re anxious to know what is causing this. As far as I know, my dad wasn’t ill before he collapsed today.”

He turned to me and raised his brow as if to ask who I was. “I’m Miranda’s fiancé, Cian O’Sheeran,” I told him. His brows inched higher.

“As in O’Sheeran Cancer Center here in the hospital?”

“Yes, my family funded the department several years ago.”

“It’s an honor to meet you,” he eagerly stated.

I shook his hand that he extended. “You were about to tell us what’s wrong with him,” I reminded him. He looked like he was going to talk more about the center. This wasn’t the time or place for that. He quickly took the hint.

“Of course, sorry. I have a question or two first. Have you noticed any changes in your father’s behavior?”

“Like what?”

“Has he had any emotional outbursts, said, or done anything that is out of character for him. Talking about stuff that didn’t make sense?”

She was quiet for several moments before she answered. “Yes, now that you mention those, he has. A couple of weeks ago, we got into a fight. He believed a stranger over me. He has never done that. He said some harsh things to me that hurt me deeply. Also, he hasn’t spoken to me for a while. He’s never been like that before.”

Dr. Dunn nodded. “I’m not surprised. The last scan we did was of your father’s brain. We noted a small area which our experts reading the scan says is a tumor.”

Miranda gasped and sat back down as if her legs had gotten weak. I moved closer and took her hand in mine. “Is it cancer?” she asked softly.

“We’re not sure yet. We’ll have to do a biopsy to determine that. I have the surgeons and oncologists getting together to come up with a plan. It may be that they can remove it partially or as a whole. At that time we would test it. If it’s inoperable, they’ll just take a biopsy and try something else to shrink it such as radiation. It’s too soon to tell what the best course of action is. As soon as we know, I and the other doctors will meet with you to go over your options. We see that your father has an advance directive on file. He’s open to surgery and other treatments just not to be resuscitated if he

should stop breathing. I'm telling you this not to scare you, but to make sure you know there is that to consider."

"Is he going to wake up or will you have to remove the tumor before that happens?"

"Honestly, I don't know. The area it's in is called the limbic system. It's the part of the brain which controls emotions and behavior. The tumor isn't huge, so it's hard to know how long he's had it. I'm hopeful that with the skill of some of the doctors here, they can perform surgery to remove it."

"But there are risks with surgery," I stated.

"There are just like there are with any of the other options we might have. I prefer not to go into those until we know more. You'll have a decision to make when the time comes. You're his medical decision maker. It will be up to you to decide what we do or don't do. We'll give you all the information and risks, so you can make an informed decision. We should be able to advise you in the next day or so. In the meantime, spend time with him, Talk to him and let us know what we can do to help you. I'm leaving word that if you and Mr. O'Sheeran want to stay after visiting hours, it's okay."

She thanked him profusely. I thanked him too. I knew his offer to let us stay was more likely due to who I was than her. In times like this, having the O'Sheeran name was a benefit. After he left, she began to cry. I picked her up then sat down with her on my lap. I rocked her and whispered how much I loved her and how strong he was in her ear. Telling the family could wait.

Miranda: Chapter 20

The past twenty-four hours had been hell. There was no other word for it. Sitting at my dad's bedside watching him not move or speak was killing me. It had only been made worse by the meeting we just had with Dr. Dunn and the other doctors. They had us meet with them in a private conference room. I hadn't wanted to leave my dad. Cian got permission for his mom and dad to sit with him while we were gone. They promised to text immediately if there was any change. I was scared that he'd slip away while I was gone.

The news wasn't all bad, but it was requiring me to make a decision. They wanted to treat him as soon as possible. The surgeons and oncologists explained they thought it was likely cancer and based on its size and location, they felt there was a very good chance they could operate and remove it. The goal would be to take the whole thing if they could. Another option was to try chemo and radiation to shrink it, then go in later to do surgery to remove it.

A third option was to treat it with chemo and radiation and nothing else. They explained that it would possibly extend his life but not cure him. He'd eventually die. Based on his age and health, they wanted to give him the best possible chance to make a full recovery. He had those two things going for him. Despite his stressful job, he was healthy and strong.

After they went through the options, they filled us in on what the possible negative side effects might be even with successful removal. Listening to them talk about hemorrhaging, stroke, seizures, infections, and neurological deficits made my head whirl. I felt sick and lost. Cian was the one who asked them to give me time to think and make a decision. They asked me not to take too long. The quicker they started the better chance he had.

In the hours since that terrifying discussion, I'd been talking of nothing else with Cian. He was supportive and gave me his thoughts, but ultimately it was my decision. "I want to bring in a world-renowned brain surgeon the family knows. He works at the Mayo clinic here in Jacksonville. We've

donated money to them and we've met several times at fundraisers. I'm sure he'll consult with them."

"Really? You think we could? I hate to take his time, and no offense to the doctors here, but I'm scared, Cian. What if they're wrong? What if there's another option they don't know of? Not every doctor can be an expert on everything."

"You're entitled to a second and third opinion. This isn't an easy thing to decide. And yes, we can. In fact, if you're willing, he can meet us here at six. I kind of already took the liberty of having him called. He said he'd be more than willing to consult. He already has privileges here from a past case he worked."

I couldn't help myself. I flung my arms around him and kissed him. When we broke the kiss, I had tears of joy running down my cheeks, not pain or fear. "I want to do it."

He didn't waste time in placing a call to his family. I wasn't sure who he was talking to. After he got off the call, he smiled. "They're calling him now to confirm six o'clock. Until he gets here, you need to eat something and take a shower. It'll make you feel better. You've been going without sleep. You can't afford to get sick. Cara brought us some clothes from home. We can use the shower in here. It's not as nice as the one at home, but it'll get us clean."

I knew it was useless to argue so I agreed. An hour later, I was eating a sandwich and soup feeling more like myself. I was still tired, but the shower and clean clothes made me feel at least human again. The hospital had eased up on the restrictions of only immediate family and two at a time. They weren't willing to do anything to offend the O'Sheeran family. His family came and went as needed. They didn't stay long, but they made sure I knew they were all here for me and they'd do anything they could to help. It made me love them.

To get up and move a little, we walked the unit several times. I was stiff from sitting so much. I tried to convince Cian again that he didn't need to stay with me if he needed to go to work, but he insisted it was all under control and he wanted to be with me. To help pass the time, I asked him if his family

had heard anything about how Carruthers was doing, not that I truly cared.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s not your concern right now.”

The way he said it, told me he had heard something he didn’t want to tell me. I gave him my best stare. “Cian, I know something is up. Tell me. Don’t make me call the station and ask myself. They’ll tell me if I do.”

More than one officer and other staff had stopped by to check on how Dad was doing. The staff didn’t let them into his room, but I did talk to some of them in the hall and updated them on how he was. They were all praying for him. My dad was well liked. He was seen as a fair and decent boss.

Sighing, Cian rolled his eyes. “Fine. He’s not in a cell where he should be. After they took him away yesterday, he supposedly settled down, so they took him home. They left an officer outside the house, just in case.”

“So he’s doing better. That’s good. Why didn’t you want to tell me that?”

“Because he didn’t stay at home. Sometime during the night, he snuck out without being spotted. They figured it out when they called the morning officer who took over guard duty to bring him to the station. They wanted to talk to him about the information they’d received through an anonymous tip.”

“What kind of information?”

“That he has a history of being abusive to women. Not only has he hurt ex-girlfriends, but he has also done the same to strippers and prostitutes at a strip joint he frequents every week.”

“Did you have anything to do with that tip?”

He gave me an innocent look, but I wasn’t fooled. He’d had the information Cody found turned over. He had told me he had something on him before we went to Italy. In all honesty, I wasn’t upset that he had. It was Carruthers fault for being a man like that. Better to get him away from those poor

women. What it did do was make me curious to meet Cody. The way Cian talked about him, he was nothing short of a computer god.

“Don’t give me that look. I know you did. I hate the idea he’s out there doing lord knows what, but why not tell me?”

“I didn’t think you needed any extra stress right now. They’ll find him eventually and bring him in. Right now, your dad is all we need to be worried about.”

He was right. Carruthers could wait. As six o’clock drew nearer, the more nervous I got. I kept praying that this new doctor would have better news or at least could promise us better chances of my dad making a full recovery. It was a quarter after six when there was a knock at the door. Cian called out, “Enter.”

In walked an impressive man. He was in his late fifties I think. He had a commanding presence. This had to be the doctor. He came straight to Cian and shook his hand.

“It’s good to see you again, Cian. I wish it was under better circumstances. And you must be his lovely fiancée, Miranda. May I call you Miranda? I’m Dr. Lawrence Madden. You can call me Law. Sean and Brenda told me all about you. They’re so excited to add you to the clan, as I call it. They tell me they aren’t a clan, that’s the Scottish, but I don’t know any others who fit that description better,” he said with an easy smile. His attitude and teasing remark to Cian set me instantly at ease.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you and thank you so much for taking time out of what I know has to be a crazy schedule to meet with us. I agree with you on the clan remark and I’m the lucky one to be joining their family.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m always glad to help. I’m sorry I was late, but I met with your father’s doctors first. They showed me his test results and explained what they recommended. I’ll be honest, I think surgery is the best route to take with the most chance of success and the least amount of residual deficits. If you’d like, I’ll study his case more and

give you my percentages of each. It's tricky but I've successfully performed this surgery in the past. It's doable."

"You're kidding me? You've had patients with the same issue in the same spot?"

"I have. In fact, a few had bigger tumors than your dad. Of course, no surgery is without risks and those remain. However, I think I might be able to shorten the odds of him having a lasting impairment. The doctors here are wonderful. They just haven't done as many cases as my team and I have. If you're in agreement, I'd like to do the surgery with my team and a few of the doctors here."

"We'd have to move him to Jacksonville then."

Law shook his head. "No, we can do it here. I'll bring my team with me. This hospital should have all the equipment we need and if they don't, I can get it brought to them. I'm not trying to rush you into a decision. I know it's a lot to take in. Hit me with your questions."

I did ask him a few, but mostly I was in shock. Cian asked a couple. When we were done, I told him I wanted him on the case. I didn't care if I had to work the rest of my life to pay for it, my dad would have the best care possible.

"In that case, I'll go home and study his chart and test results. I'll plan to meet with you sometime tomorrow to go over my newer findings. I'll let Sean know times that might work for you. We can do a teleconference call. Does that work for you?"

I answered him by giving him a hug. He laughed and hugged me back. He shook Cian's hand again and said he'd see us soon then left. I was so happy that I couldn't contain my smile. It wasn't a guarantee, but I was more at peace with him having the surgery if Dr. Madden was on his case. I couldn't wait to hear what he had to say tomorrow after studying everything.



It was hard to believe that in less than forty-eight hours after talking to Dr. Madden initially about my dad's condition,

that he had his team here and they were doing the surgery. I asked Cian how that was even possible. He said to never doubt the power of money and influence. They could create miracles. Usually, I'd be the one protesting something like that being a consideration but not this time, I was too thankful to care.

We were all waiting in the surgical waiting room. Here, I could have his whole family with us. A few of the officers who weren't on duty were with us too. At first, I could tell they were uncomfortable with the O'Sheerans, but after an hour they relaxed. They saw that they were just like regular people. I was relieved that Carruthers wasn't there. According to Cian, they still hadn't tracked him down. He was keeping a low profile.

The family kept my mind occupied and made sure I drank and ate. The ladies even got me to talk a little about the wedding and what I might like. I would've thought they were tired of wedding talk with Darragh and Ashlynn's wedding coming up in a month, but they weren't. According to them, there was no such thing as too many weddings. I saw the gleam in the moms' eyes as they looked at their single children. I almost felt sorry for them.

Since they would have to remove a small part of his cranium, Dr. Madden said to expect the surgery to take four to six hours. Honestly, I thought it would be much longer than that, not that four to six hours wasn't enough. When four hours came and went, I had to take a walk. Cian went with me. He got me to agree to walk outside in the garden they had. There were pathways and seating out there. He insisted the fresh air would do me good. I couldn't argue with that.

"This was a good idea, honey. This fresh air smells so good. The ocean air always smells so good to me," I told him, as we walked along the pathways.

We were lucky and had the whole place to ourselves. A couple of the guards had wanted to accompany us, but Cian told them we needed to be alone. He agreed to let them stand outside the building, around the corner from the garden. The only way to enter the garden was past them or through a door which came from inside the hospital. It wasn't in a public

place. It was only used by the employees to enter and exit the garden. We walked around for about five minutes when I suggested we return.

“*Mo grá*, they promised they’d call me if Law or one of his crew comes to speak to them. You’re starting to look too pale. I’m afraid you’re going to get sick. Remember, he’ll need you when he comes home.”

Cian was right. Dad didn’t know it, but when he was ready to be discharged, he wouldn’t be going to his house or my apartment. Cian had arranged for him to have a bedroom and around the clock care at home. He insisted he’d heal faster outside the hospital. I agreed. There were too many germs in there. I knew Dad would fight it, but this was one fight he had no chance of winning.

Instead of going inside, we took a seat on a bench in front of a small water fountain. It was tranquil. We just let all the positive vibes wash over us. Due to us focusing on that, we didn’t realize we were no longer alone right away. It wasn’t until we heard footsteps did we become aware of it. We both turned to see who had joined us. My breath caught as I recognized Carruthers.

He was fast approaching us. He wasn’t coming from the entrance where Cian’s guards were. He was coming through the small door which led into the employee area of the hospital. The one staff only should know about. The reason we knew about it was the bodyguards had made it their responsibility to know every entrance and exit in the building. Carruthers had a look of utter hatred on his face. Cian calmly came to his feet. As he did, he pulled me to mine and tucked me behind him. I hated that he did that.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised to see you here, Carruthers. I would’ve thought you’d keep a low profile. Your department is looking for you.”

“You wish. I knew you’d try something. Too bad they weren’t smart enough to assign better guards to watch me. I’m not going to allow you to take her away from me. Miranda was always meant for me. Her father told me how he wanted a man

like me for her. She'll see I'm right as soon as I get her away from your influence. I know you're drugging her. That's the only reason she'd lie and do the things she's done, like this phony engagement. Why couldn't you stick to your own kind? Decent women like her shouldn't be used by men like you."

"Men like me? You mean men who don't beat the women in their lives. A man who doesn't break bones or leave bruises and other injuries. I know all about how you treat women, Carruthers, remember. My man had no problem finding out. I told you at the strip club to stay away from Miranda. This engagement is real. There's nothing you can do about it. Leave before you get into more trouble," Cian ordered him.

Carruthers sneered before pulling his hand out of his jacket pocket. As I'd thought, he had a gun in there. Cian uncrossed his arms and let them fall to his sides. I was close to hyperventilating. I wanted to shout for the guards, but if I did that, he'd most likely shoot Cian. I couldn't risk it.

"Carruthers, he's telling you the truth. I love him and he's the only man I plan to marry. There are no drugs or brainwashing or anything else causing me to say this. I'm sorry you thought I was meant for you, but I'm not. Do you think my dad would condone this kind of behavior? He's up there right now fighting for his life in surgery and you're down here terrorizing us. He'll hate you for this. Just let us go."

"I don't care what he thinks now, Miranda! All I care about is getting what I was promised. What I deserve. You. Come with me and don't make a sound. If you do, I'll let this bastard keep breathing. If you don't, I'll kill him in front of you. Which is it going to be?"

The crazed look on his face and the way he was holding the gun, told me he was dead serious. As much as it pained me to do it, I couldn't let him kill Cian. "Okay, okay, I'll come with you, just lower the gun. I'm afraid it'll go off. I don't want to be shot."

"Miranda, don't!" Cian shouted, as I started to walk around, getting in front of him.

Carruthers lowered his gun. In a flash, I heard shouting and the retort of a gunshot, although it was muffled. Cian grabbed me. Another body jumped between us and Carruthers. From somewhere, a body flew through the air to tackle Carruthers to the ground. I could barely see it happen because Thomas blocked my view. He was the one to get between us. More men, ones I recognized as belonging to the O'Sheeran family, filled the garden. At last when they got him to his feet, I recognized the one who tackled him. It was Kendrick. The expression he wore on his face was scary. It made me shiver. He was pissed.

"Take him out of here. You know what to do. We need to get back to check on Tremblay. I'll call you later to check in," Cian told them. His voice sounded steady although pissed. I knew mine would've sounded like a croak.

"No worries, we know what to do," Kendrick said before marching Carruthers away. He struggled but couldn't get loose. They'd cuffed him and gagged him. Two other guards went with them.

Thomas and two more stayed with us. He was shaking his head when he checked us over. "Your mom is going to kill us, Cian. Why the hell didn't you let us come into the garden with you? If we hadn't heard the extra voice because we'd gotten concerned and decided to check on you, he might have gotten Miranda and killed you. Hell, at this point, the family might be madder at her being taken than getting rid of you. You never listen."

I was shocked to hear him talk to his boss that way. I waited for Cian to blast him, only he didn't. Instead he laughed. "You might be right. I know Darragh might pay to get rid of me. He's been threatening to do it for years. I am thankful you ignored my orders and came to check on us, but I had a plan. I was trying to get Miranda out of firing range then I was planning to take his ass down."

"How were you going to do that?" I almost shouted.

"With this," he said with a smile as he took a small handgun out of his jacket pocket. Thomas smiled.

“Where did you get that? There are no guns allowed in the hospital. Wait, how do the rest of you have yours?” I asked.

“After the first day, we cleared it with the hospital administration and the head of security that our men be able to have their guns. They just didn’t realize I had one too. I got Rory to slip me one the other day,” Cian explained.

“God, will my life with you always be crazy?”

“Maybe not crazy, but it’ll never be boring. Why? Too much for you to handle?”

“You wish. You’re not getting rid of me that easily. I love your family too much. Although, I’d appreciate in the future you clue me in on things like this. I almost died thinking he was going to kill you,” I scolded him.

We bickered back and forth the whole walk back inside and up to the surgery waiting area. Thomas and the other guards grinned as they escorted us. When we got there, the family could tell something had happened, so Cian filled them in. Looks were exchanged between the men when he informed them Carruthers had been taken away by Kendrick. I wondered what it meant. I was about to ask when Dr. Madden came walking in. He looked tired, but he had a smile on his face.

“Good news. The surgery was a success. We got everything. He’s in recovery and it’ll be awhile before we know if he’ll regain consciousness right away. I’ll send someone to get you once he’s moved back to his room. Two visitors at a time, please.”

“Dr. Madden, do you think he’ll make a full recovery?” I asked hesitantly. After today, I wasn’t sure if I could take any more shocks.

“Actually, I have a great feeling about him. Only time will tell for sure, but I do believe he will.”

Again, like the day I first met him, I ended up hugging him. He gave me a hug back. The others all shook his hand and thanked him. I was too busy crying for joy to say a word. My dad was hopefully on the mend and Carruthers was being

dealt with. I had no doubt he'd get prison time for this. No way Cian wouldn't press charges. I know I would if he didn't.

Cian:

I stared at the man shackled before me. He didn't look so hot. Not after being the toy of Kendric and our other enforcers—Seamus, Eamon, Finnegan and Angus, the past two days. They had been under strict order not to kill him, only to make him hurt and wish he were dead. The right to take his life was mine.

When the other cops hadn't been able to find him, they'd searched his house with the warrant a judge gave them based on the anonymous tip they received from us. He hadn't been a smart man. For someone in law enforcement, I would've thought he'd be smarter.

He had videos of sessions where he'd not only beaten women against their will but he'd even raped a few. They were mainly strippers, but they were still human and didn't deserve that. In addition to that, there was a handwritten diary where he'd written about taking care of people he hated permanently. There was a list of names and some were crossed out. So far, they'd found that some of those names belonged to people who had gone missing over the years. No surprise that my name was on that list.

We were in the secret basement which was under one of the warehouses we owned at the docks. It was where our family had been successfully bringing our enemies for decades. It had everything you could possibly need to torture and kill someone. We might be legitimate businessmen but we were still men willing to do whatever it took to keep our family and others safe. Ridding the world of a man like him, wouldn't be a chore. He didn't have family to mourn him or wonder what happened to him. Unlike some of the people we suspected he'd killed.

There was not only a statewide but a nationwide manhunt out for him. Many people were speculating whether he'd left the country and went to Mexico or Cuba. As I stood over him lying on that hard metal autopsy table, I couldn't muster up a single regret. Maybe that made me a psychopath.

Despite all they'd put him through, he was still defiant to the end. He expressed his hatred for me by glaring and swearing at me. I smiled coldly. Darragh, my male cousins and brothers all stood behind me. "Keep it up. I'm only here long enough to give you an update then I'll kill you and get on with my life. Our enforcers told me you've been asking for updates. Well, here they are. You might be happy to hear that Chief Tremblay made it through surgery and he's awake. He's expected to make a full recovery."

"I'm glad about that, but how can he recover when his daughter is with scum like you?"

"You have the nerve to call me scum. With all the stuff they found in your house, you're the scum."

He appeared taken back and fearful.

"Yeah, your hiding place wasn't that good of one. They found your videos and your diary. You're the focus of a nationwide manhunt. As for the chief, he's still learning to deal with me being a part of his family, but I have no doubt he'll get there. Without the tumor pressing on his brain, he's not being hateful toward his daughter anymore. He truly only wants her to be happy, loved, and safe. I can do all that."

"Like hell he'll accept you. Wait, once he's well, he'll kill you."

"I doubt it, but you won't be around to see it. I doubt they have messenger services in hell for you to find out. My next update is more about Miranda. She's going to be working with my *mam* and the others to plan our wedding as soon as possible. We'll wait for Martin to be well enough to walk her down the aisle. The doctors think October will be a good target for that. While we wait, I'm going to do my best to see if she's ready to start our family. A baby sounds like a perfect gift for next year. Don't you agree?" I smiled as I said it.

I guess he didn't think it was, because he screamed and tried to get loose from the table he was strapped to. I continued as if he hadn't made a sound. "Lastly, I thought it was only right that I inform you of your fate. In case you haven't guessed it yet, you're gonna die. There won't be any turning

you over to the police to send to prison bullshit. I wouldn't want to chance you getting off or out of prison before you die."

He spit at me. "It takes a big man to have his goons kill for him. Why don't you let me loose and face me yourself?"

"Oh, I have no intention of having anyone else kill you. That's going to be my pleasure. As for letting you loose, sure, I don't have a problem with that. Do you want to bare knuckle fight or is there a weapon you'd prefer? The condemned man should choose. Guns are the only thing off the table as an option."

"They'd just kill me even if I did win," he muttered.

I turned to the others. A few were giving me concerned looks. I knew I could take him even if he had been at his best. This would give him a chance to go out like a man instead of a worm. It was more than he deserved but I was feeling generous. After all, I had Miranda and a happy life to look forward to, so I could be the better man.

"If he wins, he's not to be harmed. He's being set free, and no one is to go near him unless he threatens the family, Miranda, or Martin. If he does that, then all agreements are void. All of you swear you'll abide by this." It took a few minutes, but eventually they all agreed.

"What's your weapon of choice, Carruthers?"

"Well, since your men thought they should beat on me, I'll pass on fists, although I love the idea. My second choice is a knife." He smirked.

I knew what he was thinking. As a rich person all my life, he assumed I'd grown up soft and protected. There was no way I'd know anything about knife fighting. Too bad for him, he was sadly mistaken. Our fathers had made us study not only a variety of different martial arts and with guns, but they had included thorough lessons on knife fighting. Street fighting had been part of our lessons. In fact, my *daid* was an expert at it and knives. He'd taught us all.

“Knives it is. Untie him, give him something to drink and get the knives. To be sporting, I’ll give you a half hour to regain use of your arms and legs and to hydrate. Don’t try to run for it. You’ll never get out of here.”

“Don’t you worry, I’m not gonna run. I’m gonna love gutting you, fucker,” he hissed.

I knew in his case, the crazy would make up for part of the weakness he might feel from being beaten these past two days. While they untied him and gave him his water, I prepared. I’d worn regular street clothes. I stripped down to my underwear and pulled on a pair of loose sweatpants. I didn’t want to leave here with his blood on my clothes. And I didn’t have an extra set with me. These pants could be burned easily. I’d pay Declan back for them. They were his.

Exactly a half hour later, we both stood up and faced each other. The others gathered a safe distance away. A circle had been painted on the floor sometime in the past. I had no idea why, but it was large enough to provide us with a big enough fighting area.

“We have to stay within the circle. This is a fight to the death. There’s no calling for mercy and getting pardoned,” I quickly informed him as I stepped in the circle.

“Agreed,” he said, as he entered the circle. Only after we were set, did Kendric hand me a knife, and Seamus handed one to Carruthers. They were identical in every way. Each one had a five-inch blade with a serrated edge on one side.

“Go,” Darragh shouted.

After dancing around and testing him out for a couple of minutes, I felt I had a feel for his foot rhythm and how he held himself. He wasn’t rushing to stab me. I didn’t try to stab him. I continued to taunt him and move around. I wanted him to get angry and make the first move. The one who lost his cool was the one most likely to lose the fight. He didn’t break until I mentioned Miranda. It was a low blow but I had places to be. Namely, back at the hospital with her.

“You know, I took Miranda to Italy. It was just the thing to do. She loved it so much and it was there that she realized she couldn’t live without me. She agreed to be my wife. And I got to find out what it was like to be with her, in every way possible. There’s a mind-blowing woman underneath all that innocent calm.”

I knew he’d take it to mean sexually. I meant it in every way possible. My family and the enforcers all laughed and shouted how I was a lucky bastard. I watched the crazy take over. His actual whole demeanor changed. He screamed like a madman before charging me, slashing wildly as he screamed. “I’m gonna kill you and piss on your corpse! Miranda doesn’t want you. I’ll prove it one day.”

I could easily avoid his slashing while striking out at him. I cut an angry path along his ribs. He cried out.

“She wants everything I can give her. That includes in the bedroom,” I taunted as I danced away.

On and on it went. He got more reckless and screamed more as I kept up the flow of conversation. He landed a few minor cuts, but nothing too deep. I, on the other hand, landed several. I made sure they were all deep and hurt like hell. He was pouring blood all over the floor. I wasn’t sure how he could still be standing. I had to be careful not to slip in his blood as we circled each other.

Seeing an opening, I darted close again and thrust my blade into his stomach. Jerking up, I sliced through skin and muscle, making a six-inch gash. When I withdrew my blade, part of his intestines spilled out. That was what finally ended his strength. He fell to his knees and dropped his knife. He clutched his intestines, trying to push them back inside as he stared at me in horror. I stood there and watched as the light faded from his eyes slowly. He tried to crawl toward me but couldn’t. Until the end, he kept insisting she was his. I taunted him with how she was mine. I wanted him to enter hell with nothing else on his mind but the eternal torment he’d have knowing she was with me. Yeah, I could be a bastard when needed. Finally, after about an hour, he fell to the floor dead. It

was me gutting him and the subsequent loss of blood from all his wounds that did him in.

Turning to the others I nodded. “It’s over. You know what to do. Do you want some help?”

“You leave that to us. You and the family get out of here. I expect Miranda is wondering where you are. Tell her we’ll see her soon,” Kendric said as he picked up Carruthers’ knife. Thanking them, I handed mine to Finnegan. A quick hop in the shower followed by antibiotic cream and a few dressings on my cuts and I was clean and redressed in record time. It was time to see my *anamchara* and let her know her biggest worry was over.

Miranda: Epilogue One Month Later

I couldn't get over how gorgeous Ashlynn looked in her wedding gown or how proud Darragh looked as he held her in his arms. The love between them shone like a beacon. Everyone at the reception had no doubt they were a love match, just like Cian and I were.

The past month has been hard. There had been so much happening, although most of it was good. On the bad side, which wasn't really bad, was Carruthers. When Cian came to me at the hospital and told me I no longer had to worry about him hurting me or anyone else, I read between the lines. The police would never find him alive. Hopefully, the body had been disposed of where it would never be found. I tried to be upset or even horrified about the thought of them killing him, but I wasn't.

Although I could accept it, I wasn't sure my dad could, so I kept the news to myself. He was aghast when he found out all the things Carruthers had done over the years and how he'd become convinced Dad wanted the two of us together. He swore to me he never said that. He admitted he had always seen Carruthers as one of his best officers, but never as the man for me.

Dad was still coming to terms with the fact that Cian and I were getting married. I saw him slowly starting to warm to him and his family. It was hard not to when you were living in our house on the family compound. Every single one of them was friendly with him and wouldn't let him isolate himself. He had tried to stop me from taking him there when he was discharged from the hospital, but I told him if he didn't, then he'd have to stay in the hospital longer. Dr. Madden helped me with that lie. Added to it was my refusal to live anywhere but with my future husband. In the end, Dad's desire to be out of the hospital had won out over his dislike of Cian. He grudgingly moved into Cian's house.

For the first few weeks, he had a nurse around the clock. Two days ago, that had been cut down to twelve hours a day. He was about to start his more intense rehab. We'd gotten the green light to start him with physical and occupational therapy. He had a few minor neurological deficits the doctors were sure could be resolved with time and therapy. I told him he had to be able to walk me down the aisle. No matter how much he might still disapprove of Cian, he would never miss that.

While he worked on his recovery, I was busy working with my new family to have another wedding in October. Seeing Ashlynn's come to life made me even more excited to see how mine would look. The designs and things we'd chosen so far I loved. My dress was out of a fantasy. I couldn't wait to see Cian's face when he saw it.

There had been a rather shocking event in the past month. About a week after Carruthers was taken care of, the police had been called to Keaton Hill's home. A neighbor had reported not seeing him leave it for several days and they were worried. The cops did a welfare check and found something they weren't expecting.

For one thing, his house had several walls covered in photos of me. According to what the police told my dad and me, they had been taken all over town, even outside my apartment. There were a few of Cian and I leaving the compound. I knew he'd been watching me, but still, it made me ill. However, that wasn't the worst part.

They found Keaton hanging from a rope in his bedroom. He'd used a chair and tied the rope to the ceiling fan. They were astonished it hadn't collapsed the ceiling on him. He was dressed in a brand-new tux. On the bed was a wedding gown and beside it was my picture and a note. Apparently, he had become despondent when he heard I was engaged to Cian. In the note he said he couldn't live without me.

I felt terrible that he had been so obsessed that he would kill himself. Only someone unstable would go to that extreme when faced with not getting the one they wanted. I

admit, I wondered if there was anything I could've done to prevent it, but everyone kept reassuring me there wasn't.

Wanting to push all negative thoughts out of my head and enjoy the day, I rejoined my fiancé on the dance floor. He took me in his arms and danced me around the room. The reception was in full swing. Toasts had been made, the first dance was done and the food and cake had been eaten. Suddenly, the music stopped playing. Everyone turned to face the band to see why. Standing there was Darragh and Ashlynn. They were both smiling. I guess they had more toasts to make. We waited to hear what they would say.

“Sorry to interrupt the dancing, but Ashlynn and I have one more thing we'd like to say. Today, she made me the happiest man on the planet by becoming my wife. That's all I wanted or needed today, however, it seems my new bride has other plans. She just informed me she has a gift for me and she wants to present it to me with you all here to witness it. Okay, *Leanbh*, tell me, what did you get me? Is it the new car I want?”

She laughed and shook her head no before leaning closer to the microphone. His family jeered at him. He'd been talking for weeks about buying a new car. As if they didn't have more than enough now. Men and their toys.

“No, Darragh, my love, it isn't the new car you want. You can get that whenever you want. It's something much better than a car.”

“What is it?” someone shouted from the crowd. Others laughed and started to shout the same and their guesses. She waved for them to get quiet. Once they did, she only had eyes for Darragh as she answered them.

“What would you say to us welcoming our first baby in February? Isn't that way better than another car, no matter how sporty and fast it is?”

His stunned expression was quickly overcome by a blinding smile as he gave a shout and hoisted her in the air. He swung her around as the whole family went wild, Cian and I included. The other guests were all clapping and shouting their

congratulations to the ecstatic couple. For the family, it was so much more. Like a wave, all of us converged on the stage and got in our hugs and kisses. What a perfect ending to a magical wedding.

Cian:

Later, after everyone settled down from Ashlynn's amazing announcement, I spirited Miranda away to our house. Martin had returned home earlier. He'd gone to the wedding, which surprised the hell out of me, but got tired early. He was tucked away on the other side of the house with his nurse. She was staying only at night now.

I smuggled a giggling Miranda into the house and behind the locked doors of our bedroom. I wasn't in the mood to talk if he happened to still be awake. I wanted alone time with her. Thankfully, when I built this house, I had the bedrooms soundproofed. I didn't waste time stripping off her clothes. I was desperate to have her. As she pretended to be hiding her body from me, I tore off my clothes.

Growling like a bear, I took her down to the mattress. Sucking a tit in my mouth, I heard her moan then felt her hands grip my hair. I was ravenous and didn't know how long I could hold out before having her. My cock was hard, aching and felt like it was close to bursting. The ride home had taken all my strength not to attack her in the backseat. My hand slid down her stomach to her pussy. When I reached it, I was the one to moan this time. She was soaking wet. I thrust a couple of fingers inside of her and teased her G-spot.

"Oh God, Cian, don't. I'll come if you do much more of that."

"Good. Come for me. I'm not sure how long I'll last before I have to replace my fingers with my cock."

"Don't wait. I need you now," she cried.

As much as I wanted to do as she begged, I had to make her come at least once before sinking into that heavenly pussy. Working her fast and rubbing circles on her clit, it only took me a minute or so to have her screaming and coming all over my hand. I kept going until she was spent and limply lying underneath me.

Sitting up on my heels, I gazed down at her. I still couldn't believe my fate was to be with her for the rest of my life. Every day I came to be more in love with her than the previous day. I fisted my cock and pumped up and down my length. When I reached the head, I made sure to smear the precum around and down to my balls. She was panting and watching my hand. Her hands crept up to tweak her nipples.

“Take me, Cian, I can't wait.”

“I will, but first there's something I want to ask you.”

“What?” she wailed as she tried to impale herself on my cock. I stayed just out of her reach.

“Are you ready to work on giving Darragh and Ashlynn's baby a cousin?”

Their news had only inflamed my desire to have a baby with Miranda more. As soon as she would agree. Over the past month, we'd talked about it a lot and I knew she was right on the verge of saying yes. Her main argument had been she didn't want to do it until her dad was better. Well, he was better.

“Actually, now that you brought it up, I planned a little announcement of my own tonight. I wanted to tell you that I've decided it's time to start on baby number one. I took my last pill yesterday, and I didn't get a refill. If we don't make a baby tonight, at least we can get in more practice,” she said with a smirk.

I didn't say a word. I simply guided the head of my cock to her entrance and thrust into her in one long stroke. She cried out in pleasure and I groaned. It never got old. No matter how many times we made love, it was unbelievable for both of us. This time, knowing we might create a child made it even more so.

Setting a hard pace, I pounded inside of her. This first round had to be fast and hard. After that, I planned to have her ass. She and I had been working up to that for a month. It was time. She had been so open to trying new things when it came to our sex life. I was benefiting from being her teacher. She

gave it her all and was equally concerned about my pleasure as getting her own. She was so cute when she first brought up her desire to see if anal sex was something she would like. She'd turned pink as she fumbled through asking me if it was something I had ever done and if I liked it. Like with other sexual talks, I assured her as long as she enjoyed it, there was no need to worry I wouldn't and that I had done it and enjoyed it. Each time we worked toward that goal had brought us both screaming out in ecstasy.

Thinking of going the whole way made me even hornier. Minutes later as we both orgasmed and yelled, I sent up a thank you. *Dia, thank you for bringing this astonishing woman into my life. All I ask is that you let us grow old together and let us die with our family around us when we're a hundred or more.*

The End Until Aidan's Ardor Book 3

Note: Information on the Basilica Palladiana comes from [online](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basilica_Palladiana) at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basilica_Palladiana

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