



AIDAN

DUBLIN KINGS

L . K . S H A W

AIDAN

DUBLIN KINGS, BOOK 3



L.K. SHAW

Aidan

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CHAPTER 1



Aidan

THE WORLD IS FULL OF LIARS.

Some of them tell the harmless white lie. The black lie for personal gain. Or the red lie because they want to hurt the other person or get even for some transgression against them. Me? I've told them all.

"Don't you dare touch that." Sorcha doesn't pause filling up the pint glass with the nearly-black ruby red stout as she threatens Aisling.

The young girl flashes me a wide-eyed, guilty glance as she slowly lowers the arm that had been reaching for the basket of fish and chips sitting on the counter behind her much older sister. My whiskey glass hides my grin. Inside O'Connell's pub, fishermen slowly trickle in after a long day out on the water, all of them wanting a cold drink and a hot meal.

Sorcha tips the glass and expertly leaves less than an inch of foam at the top, before spinning to grab the basket and round the other side of the bar. She sets down both in front of a white-haired, white-bearded man and then moves to a nearby table to take their order.

"She was crying the other night."

I drag my gaze from the lush curves showcased by the jeans she wears and turn to the tiny black-haired girl who moved to stand next to me. "I'm sure things have been hard for all of you."

What else do I say to a six-year old whose Da's been dead less than a month?

“She lied though and said she wasn’t.” Aisling pouts.

I guess even Sorcha can count herself amongst the liars of the world. “She probably just didn’t want to upset you.”

“Lies are bad. Da said so.”

I’m barely able to stifle my snort. Her Da was one of the biggest liars of them all. “Sometimes people tell white lies so they don’t hurt someone’s feelings or make them sad.”

Aisling shakes her head, her dark curls bouncing around her shoulders. “Da said even white lies are bad. We’re always supposed to tell the truth no matter what.”

“Well, then, you should probably listen to him.” Look at me giving out sage advice.

Except her bottom lip trembles and her bright blue eyes, exactly like her sister’s, shimmer with tears. “I can’t listen to him no more, cause he died.”

Christ. I shoot a desperate glance Sorcha’s way. She catches it and her gaze drops to Aisling. With a quick word to the men sitting at the table, she rushes over and crouches in front of her sister, palming the little girl’s cheek. “What’s wrong?”

“Aidan told me to listen to what Da says, but he’s dead and I miss him and I’m sad and I don’t want him to be dead,” she sobs.

“Oh, my sweet little nightmare.” Sorcha pulls Aisling into her arms and holds her tightly. She glances up at me with a sheen in her own eyes, but continues hugging her sister until finally the girl stops crying. Sorcha draws back and swipes away the tears still clinging to Aisling’s lashes. “I miss him, too. But just because he’s gone doesn’t mean we can’t still talk to him or hear his voice.”

The girl runs her sleeve across her snotty nose and takes in a shuddering breath. “I didn’t mean to cry.”

“You can cry any time you want.”

“Then why do you keep telling us you’re not crying when you are?” Aisling presses.

Sorcha winces and stands, although most people would have probably missed it. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I won’t do that anymore.”

“Promise?”

There’s a brief hesitation before she answers. “Promise.”

Lie.

But I understand why she said it. “Why don’t you go upstairs and make

sure the twins aren't getting into trouble?" Sorcha tells Aisling. "I'll send dinner up soon and be there to tuck you in later."

"Okay. Will you read me a story then, too?"

"Yes. Pick out a good one."

The little girl throws her arms around her sister again, then just as quickly releases her, and runs toward the kitchen and the stairs that lead to their flat above the pub. She turns and waves. "Bye, Aidan."

I return the gesture, but she's already dashed around the corner. Then I face Sorcha. Her gaze lingers where Aisling disappeared before she shifts it to me. *Where did the dark circles under her eyes come from? Or the rigid way she stands like she's bracing for something?* They weren't there earlier tonight, were they?

"You'd tell me if things weren't okay, right?" I have to ask, then cock my head. "And don't lie to me either."

"Of course I'd tell you." Sorcha doesn't even blink.

A fucking lie.

"Oy, can I get a drink?" A rough voice calls out behind her.

She jumps, fists the apron she wears, and spins away from me to hurry over to the impatient man. I throw back the rest of my whiskey and set the glass on the smooth wooden bar. While Sorcha takes and fills each order that comes through, I study her. She smiles at each patron, but the longer she does, the harder it appears for her to maintain it.

Do I offer her money to help her get by for a while? *You know she'll refuse.* Probably, but I should still offer it. Then again, how can a guy who allegedly works as an underpaid security guard for a Dublin-based business afford to loan or gift her that kind of cash? It would lead to a lot of questions I don't plan on answering.

The hours drag by as slowly the patrons leave until there's no one left but Sorcha and me. She locks the door, turns off the front lights casting darkness over the entrance, and walks back behind the bar. Her steps are slow like she can barely pick up her feet.

"I wish you would have let me help you." I also should keep my mouth shut, but I hate seeing her like this.

She wipes down the bar and shakes her head. "You're a guest, not an employee. Besides, it's easier if I do it. I have a system."

Some system. Sorcha has one cook, who could barely keep up with the orders, which left her to serve as both waitress and barkeep. With her Da

gone, why hasn't she hired extra help? "Can't you teach your system to someone so you're not left doing it all yourself?"

"I don't have time to teach anyone." Sorcha sighs and puts a bunch of dirty glasses in the sink. "Can we please not argue about this? You're only here for a couple days, and I've barely gotten to talk to you at all. I feel bad that you came to visit and I have to work the whole time."

Getting up from my seat, I circle around to stand next to her. "Don't feel bad. I'm the one who showed up without calling first." With everything that has gone down with Liam Campbell and the whole family, I needed to get away for a bit. "Now, move over. I'll wash."

Sorcha opens her mouth, no doubt to argue, but I shush her. "Don't make me pick you up and carry you over to the stool. Sit down. I'm perfectly capable of washing a few glasses."

I hold out my hand for the towel draped over her shoulder. With an annoyed growl, she slides it off, smacks it into my palm, then walks around to the other side and hops up into the bar stool I recently vacated. "How's your cousin? Caitlín, isn't it? Did she get engaged yet?"

"She did. Maybe a month or so ago." I dip the glass into the hot as shit sudsy water, rinse it off, and set it on the mat beside the sink. "It's a short engagement, too, from what I hear. They're getting married in a couple months at Caitlín's parents' house in Brooklyn."

"Wow, that is fast." Sorcha leans her elbow on the bar and props her head on her fist. "Then again, when you know you've met the right person, why wait?"

I glance up at her. "I had no idea you were a romantic."

She lifts one shoulder. "I wouldn't say I'm romantic. More pragmatic. If you love someone and want to spend the rest of your life with them, then do it without all the long, drawn-out fuss."

"What if it doesn't work out?"

"Then it doesn't work out," she says it so matter-of-factly. "Why stress about what-ifs and hypotheticals?"

I stare at Sorcha. No, definitely not romantic. Which makes me glad. When we first became friends, I'd worried she hint at wanting something more between us, but she never has. It's been nice not having to worry about hurting her feelings when things didn't work out between us. Our friendship is the longest relationship I've ever been in.

"Man, I hope the poor bastard who falls in love with you knows you

won't be too broken-hearted if you two ever break up." I snort.

A weird expression crosses her face, but then she glares. "I didn't say I wouldn't be broken-hearted. I just said I'm not going to bother worrying about something that may or may not happen."

I finish the last of the glasses and dry my hands on the towel. "What else needs to be done?" Sorcha opens her mouth, but I interrupt. "Just tell me, so we can get it done instead of arguing about who's doing it."

"It's rude to assume you know what I'm going to say before I say it."

"So you weren't going to tell me you have a system for this, too?" I arch an eyebrow.

"Smug doesn't look good on you."

I bark out a laugh and spread my arms out. "Are you kidding? Everything looks good on me."

"Let's get going. I don't want your head to get so big it explodes and I'm left cleaning up the mess." Sorcha grins and hops off the stool.

Together we wipe down all the tables and stack the chairs on top of them. I sweep and mop while she does a quick inventory and double checks that the kitchen has been put to rights. At least the one employee she has is competent. She wipes her brow and sags against the bar. I stand next to her and lean back.

"Thank you for your help." Sorcha shoulder bumps me.

"You're welcome."

Pounding footsteps filter through the ceiling and we both glance up. She tilts her head and glances over me. "I better go and make sure they're not destroying anything up there."

"Breakfast tomorrow?"

"Same place as usual. I'll see you at nine." Sorcha turns and hugs me. "I'm really glad you're here, Aidan."

I hold her for a minute, the faint scent of her coconut shampoo reaching my nose. She lets go and walks toward the door. I'm right behind her as she opens it, and I step out into the late evening air that brings with it the briny scent of fish and ocean water.

"Get some rest."

"I will." She gives me a small wave and then slowly closes and locks the door.

I stand there until the interior goes dark, and then I make my way down the street toward the small bed and breakfast where I'm staying. The tiny

fishing village of Burtonport on the northwest coast is a far cry from Dublin. The people here keep to themselves. It's the one place where I can disappear for a while when I need to get away from everyone. And *everything*.

No one here knows who I am. Or the family I belong to.

Not even Sorcha.

CHAPTER 2



SORCHA

AIDAN COULDN'T HAVE COME AT A WORSE TIME. NO MATTER HOW MUCH I might want him here. I climb the stairs up to my family's flat, alternating between wanting to cry and wanting to curse my Da the entire way. Except I can't cry, because every time I do I'm not sure I'll ever be able to stop.

I reach the landing and the sound of the TV and arguing filters through the wood barrier. Taking a deep breath, I open the door. Kellen is sitting on the floor leaning against the sofa, while Carson sits on it and stomps his feet a couple times. They're playing a video game and trash talking each other or whoever's on the other end of their headsets. I step around to stand in their line of sight and both of them jerk their heads in my direction.

"Did you finish your homework?" I interrupt their game. I love my brothers, but I hate being their parent.

"Yes." They nod and reply in sync then turn their attention back to the TV.

It's a bald-face lie, but I'm too tired to call them out on it. Instead, I head to Aisling's room. Her twinkle lights are lit and projecting shining stars onto the ceiling giving her room the appearance of an enchanted forest with the murals I drew on both it and the walls. I quietly walk over to the bed. She's lying on her back, sleeping, and hugging the book she picked out for me to read to her.

I'd planned on being upstairs a little earlier, but tonight had been busy

and even with Aidan's help, it had taken longer to clean up than it usually did. Gently, I take the book from Aisling's arms and bring the blanket up to her chin. She stirs and blows out a heavy sigh, but her eyes remain closed. I ghost a kiss over her forehead and go back out to the living area.

The twins have turned off their game in anticipation of me telling them it's time to go to bed. They know they have school in the morning.

"Aisling said Aidan's here," Kellen says.

I nod. "He came in about an hour before the dinner crowd started trickling through the door. I'm sure he would have liked it if you'd come down to say hello."

"We'll see him tomorrow," Carson adds. "We figured you'd want to spend some alone time with him tonight. Or at least as alone as you can with a pub full of people."

My cheeks heat, which is ridiculous. The boys don't have any idea about the stupid feelings I have for my best friend. We've been friends for five years, which isn't long in the grand scheme of things. Especially since we only see each other when he comes to visit every four to six months or whenever he can get time off from work. But he's been my closest and dearest friend during that time. Over the years, for various reasons, I've drifted apart from everyone else. Which is why I refuse to ruin our friendship by doing something as monumentally dumb as telling Aidan how I feel.

"You didn't have to do that on my account, but thank you. Now, it's time to go to bed, please." I shoo them off. "And I'll be checking your homework tomorrow."

They wince and scuttle off to their room. Once they're gone I grab a beer from the fridge and bring it back to the living room where I collapse on the sofa. I toe off my shoes, stretch my legs out in front of me, and almost sigh with relief. My feet ache and throb. What I wouldn't give for a nice foot massage. After I've washed the stink off first, though. My back hurts along with them.

I take a sip of my beer and drop my head to the cushion behind me. Tears threaten, but I squeeze my eyes shut as hard as I can to push them back. Twenty-eight years old and I'm not only a parent to a pair of twelve-year olds and a six-year old, but the owner of a pub I'm probably going to lose. This place had been everything to my Da. Except he's dead.

I didn't just acquire kids and the pub. I also acquired debt I'll never be able to repay. What was Da thinking? How am I supposed to keep this place

running when I can't afford to pay anyone to help me? How am I going to buy supplies with the ever rising costs? What am I going to do?



“SHOULD WE WAKE HER?” A STAGE WHISPER FILTERS THROUGH MY awareness.

I drag my eyes open, blinking slowly with the effort, and a figure appears. Three figures to be exact. My brain finally catches up with my vision. Kellen, Carson, and Aisling stand over me. Sunlight filters through the windows, and I squint against its brightness. I shade my face. “What time is it?”

“Half seven,” Carson answers.

“Shit.” I jump up. The kids need to get to school, and I need to get ready to meet Aidan. “Boys, go get your bags packed.”

I rush into the kitchen to make them breakfast, but they stop me.

“We already did,” Kellen says. “We ate breakfast, too.”

They did? Sure enough, dirty bowls are in the sink and the box of cereal is still sitting on the counter. Along with the milk. With a sigh, I put both of them back where they belong.

“You spilled your drink, but we cleaned it.” That’s Carson.

I turn back. What drink? Fuzzy memories of last night come back of me checking on Aisling, the boys going to bed, and then me sitting on the couch. With a beer. Shit, I can't believe I fell asleep. Actually, yes, I can. The late nights of staring at the accounting books and trying to come up with a solution clearly caught up with me.

“Thank you for doing that.”

Aisling comes to stand in front of me with her lips down-turned. “You didn't read to me like you promised.”

I kneel down to her level. Her hair has been brushed, and from the bright pink skirt with white polka-dots and white shirt with purple horizontal stripes, it's obvious she picked her own outfit.

“I'm sorry. You were sleeping so sweetly, I didn't want to wake you up.”

“But you promised,” she says, her voice plaintive.

A burst of anger at the unfairness of everything bubbles up inside me, but I bite it back. It's not Aisling's fault. She's just a little girl who lost her Da. *You lost him, too.* I hush the ugly voice.

“I’m sorry.” I brush back a curl dipping down onto her forehead. “Next time I’ll read you two stories.”

Seemingly satisfied, she nods, but I’m not sure she believes me.

I stand. “Alright, let’s get you off to school.”

Once I’ve made sure everyone’s bags are actually packed, we head down the stairs, through the darkened pub, and out onto the street. The sound of gulls fills the air, along with the familiar and comfortable scent of the ocean. Aisling holds my hand while the twins bicker with each other several yards ahead.

Out on the water, fishing boats move away from the shore and toward the silhouette of several islands in the distance. There’s a pang of longing in my chest to be somewhere else. This is my home, and I love it. But I never expected to spend my whole life here.

“Are you going to come get me after school?”

I glance down at Aisling. “I have to be at the pub. The boys will walk home with you.” I make a mental note to remind them.

“Okay.”

I hate the defeat in her tone, but there’s nothing I can do. Someone has to take care of the business and the only one around to do it is me. Thankfully the school is only a short walk from the pub and after our goodbyes and the three of them disappear inside, I rush back to the flat. I take a quick shower, throw on my clothes, and pull my hair up into a ponytail. A smidge of vanity has me dabbing on some pink lip gloss and a bit of mascara. There’s not much I can do for the dark circles.

By the time I make it out the door, I have fifteen minutes to reach my destination. Which, in a village as small as Burtonport, is plenty of time. I wave at the few villagers I pass on my way to the small cafe. Aidan’s waiting outside at one of the picnic tables. It’s the perfect weather to be sitting out here, actually. The sky is clear, although it’s a bit gray in the distance, but for the time being, it’s lovely.

When he spots me, he smiles and stands. I can’t help but appreciate the way his shirt pulls across his chest and upper arms. Or how his waist narrows and how snug his jeans fit. I suppose to some, Aidan might be intimidating with all the tattoos that decorate his upper body, covering the entirety of both arms and the back of each hand and all ten fingers. Especially the one that crawls up the front of his neck and wraps around both sides. But to me, they’re just a part of him.

“Good morning.” He pulls me in for a giant hug. It’s how he always greets me.

I squeeze him back, breathing in the woodsy scent that clings to him, and absorb the warmth of his body. “Morning.”

Aidan draws back and his eyes track down me. I can’t hold back a small shiver. *Please, don’t let him notice.* “You look nice.”

I relax. “Thanks, so do you.”

We take a seat and a minute later, Fiona comes out. “Morning, Sorcha. Aidan. The usual?”

“Yes, please.”

Aidan nods. Every once in a while, I’m tempted to surprise her by ordering something different, but not today. I need today to be like any other visit from him. Where my Da isn’t gone, I don’t have to parent three children, and I don’t have to worry about losing everything.

CHAPTER 3



Aidan

SORCHA'S BEEN TRYING TO HIDE IT SINCE I GOT HERE, BUT SOMETHING IS going on that she won't tell me. Nothing short of force will make her, either. She's that stubborn. And I don't want to spend our last day together fighting. Although, *together* is being generous. Since I got here the day before yesterday, we've had a grand total of eight hours where it's been just the two of us. I'm not complaining—I did show up unannounced. I just don't like the fact that she's working so hard without anyone to help. Tonight, she's going to have to deal with a disruption to her "system".

The pub is mostly empty, with only a couple elderly gentlemen occupying one of the tables, but a few of the fishing boats have already docked. The married men go home, but a large segment of the single ones come into O'Connell's. In a village this small, their options are limited if they don't want to cook for themselves. But what crowd *is* drawn here, is more than enough to keep Sorcha running around.

Aisling sits at the bar, her dangling legs kicking back and forth, with some paper and markers while she picks at the food in the takeaway container next to her. She doesn't have the artistic talent of her older sister, but maybe she'll grow into hers as she gets older and has more practice and instruction.

"Are you going to help Sorcha?"

I turn my attention to the twins seated across from me. Carson, the younger by five minutes, has a mouth full of the shepherd's pie I brought

from The Wagon Wheel Cafe. It might be tacky to bring another restaurant's food into the pub, but I didn't want to put any extra strain on the cook by ordering for the five of us. Kellen stares at me expectantly, but also with a trace of pleading.

"Is she in trouble?" Perhaps I'll get some answers from them.

The twins share a glance and Kellen turns back to me. "I heard her on the phone the other day talking to someone. She didn't know I was listening. It was something about borrowing money and the pub."

Borrowing money? And what does the pub have to do with anything?

"Do you remember anything else?"

Kellen shakes his head. "Nothing other than she was crying afterward."

Fuck. "Thanks for letting me know. I'll do what I can to help."

The boys and I finish eating before Sorcha sends them upstairs to do their homework.

"No video games until it's done or you'll lose your privileges," she warns. "Don't think I'll forget to check, either."

The two trudge into the kitchen with a wave over their shoulder. I clean up our mess and take a seat at the bar next to Aisling. More men enter. Not willing to go another night sitting here while she does all the work, I vacate the stool and come around the opposite side of the bar. She glances over at me from where she's filling a pint glass from the tap.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm helping. And don't feed me that bullshit line about a system." I glare at her. "I'm perfectly capable of delivering plates of food or filling a pint of beer."

"You're not supposed to curse," Aisling pipes up before Sorcha can argue with me.

I pull a euro coin out of my pocket and toss it on the bar top. "Penance."

She snatches it up and deposits it in her bag hanging from the back of her stool. "You can curse again, if you want."

Her sister groans and then shifts her glare back to me again. I stare back, daring her to contradict me. Finally, Sorcha throws up her hands with a sigh. "Fine."

The rest of the night goes far smoother than either of us expected after a rough start. More than once we ran into each other and I spilled beer on the floor, but somehow we developed a rhythm that worked for both of us. Finally, the last customer leaves and she locks up. Together, we clean up and

I'm back behind the bar washing glasses while Sorcha sits in a stool on the other side.

"Thank you for your help tonight. I'm sorry if I was cranky earlier."

"You don't have to be sorry. But, if you want to make it up to me, then how about telling me what's going on." I'm not above manipulation to get what I want.

"There's noth—"

"How long have we been friends?" I interrupt her.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"How long?" I press.

Sorcha sighs. "Five years."

"And in those five years, have I ever asked you to do something for me?" I finish the last glass and dry my hands off.

Her entire body sags and she rests her forearms on the bar top. "No."

I mimic her pose and wait until she meets my eyes. "I'm asking now."

The silence lengthens between us until finally Sorcha nods. "The pub isn't doing well. Da was behind on payments when he died. By a lot. Except he told me he was able to get a loan. Yet, there's no record of it. I've been getting phone calls from vendors that haven't been paid in several months. If I can't pay them, they're going to freeze our account and I won't be able to order inventory."

She takes in a deep breath and blows it out. "I called the bank to try and get a loan, but they denied me. If I can't pay the bills, I'm going to lose not only the pub, but our home."

"Christ." I run a hand down my face. *Didn't you suspect something like this?* I did, but having it confirmed makes it real. "What can I do to help?"

I would never let Sorcha lose the pub or her home, even if I have to send her a large, anonymous financial gift. She reaches across the width of the bar and clasps my hand. "Thank you for offering, but there really isn't anything you can do. I'll figure things out."

"You don't have to do this all alone."

She huffs. "I'm not taking your money, Aidan."

I bristle in offense. "Why not?"

"What happens when that runs out? Because it will. Then I'll be right back where I am now." Sorcha throws up her hands. "I'll just have to figure something else out. Reduce the menu, maybe. Limit what's on it so I don't need to order supplies for something we're not going to make. I can also not

supply a larger range of liquors or beers. I'll work more hours."

"Jesus, you're already working twelve hour days."

"Then I'll work fifteen," she snaps back, finally losing her defeated expression, and sits upright. "I'm done talking about this. I'm not taking your money. End of discussion."

There's no point arguing anymore. Not with the mulish tilt to her chin. All it will do is drive a wedge between us. I'll let it go for the moment, but this isn't over. I'll figure out something. Maybe pay a visit to the bank and *persuade* them to reconsider giving Sorcha the loan.

"You're a pain in my ass. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, well, you're a pain in mine, so we're even." She glares at me then taps her phone screen. "I better get upstairs and make sure the boys did their homework. Plus, I promised Aisling I'd read to her. You'll say bye before you leave in the morning?"

"Of course." I round the bar as Sorcha jumps down off the stool. I wrap my arms around her and she hugs me back. "Don't be stubborn. If you can't figure things out, call me. Swear?"

She nods against my chest. "I swear."

Tastes like a lie. Would she take my money if she knew who I really was and that I can afford to buy out the loan on the pub? Knowing her, probably not. When I get back to Dublin, I'll make some phone calls. Sorcha draws back, rises up on her toes, and kisses my cheek. "Thank you for being my friend."

I kiss her forehead and hug her a little bit tighter. "Don't forget you swore."

She nods.

"I'll stop by in the morning and say my goodbyes to everyone."

We walk to the door and she opens it for me. I make my way down the footpath and glance over my shoulder. Sorcha still stands in the doorway, her face in the shadows. She waves and I return the gesture. Then she steps inside, and, a minute later, the whole pub goes dark. Faint light shines from the windows of the second floor. I blow out a breath and head for the bed and breakfast, already regretting having to leave tomorrow. But I can only be gone so long before Da or Cian starts asking questions. Plus, there is some unresolved family drama that needs to be faced.

CHAPTER 4



SORCHA

“KELLEN. CARSON. CAN ONE OF YOU GO LET AIDAN IN, PLEASE? HE’S AT THE door. And make sure you lock it behind you,” I call out from the bathroom where I’m trying to finish getting ready.

Footsteps pound, vibrating the floor, and then there’s more pounding as one of the boys runs down the stairs. I turn out the light and head into the living area. Aisling is finally finishing her breakfast. I kiss the crown of her head. “Go get your shoes on and grab your school bag.”

She jumps up from the table and runs to her room, nearly crashing into Carson, who strolls in from the hallway with his bag slung over his shoulder. Two sets of footsteps plod up the stairs and seconds later Kellen appears in the open doorway. Right behind him is Aidan, who shouldn’t look this good at just past seven in the morning. Another form-fitting shirt accentuates his broad chest, and the color of it only makes his blue eyes that much brighter. The sun shining in through the window hits his auburn hair, making it glow like fire. My belly flutters as though there’s a swarm of bees inside it. Stupid bees need to settle the fuck down.

“Morning.” Did that sound normal? I hope it sounded normal.

Aidan cocks his head slightly and his forehead crinkles, but then his face clears. “Good morning.”

I glance at Kellen. “Get your things for school, please, and make sure Aisling has hers. We need to be going.”

He dashes down the hallway.

“Let me clean this up quick.” I wash Aisling’s bowl and wipe down the table. By the time I’m finished, Kellen and she appear. “Everyone ready?”

Heads bob, and the five of us trek downstairs and out the front door. With Aidan leaving today, it shouldn’t be this pretty out. Aisling grabs Aidan’s hand and then mine, so she’s walking between us.

“I’m sad you have to leave,” she tells him, glancing up.

You and me, both.

Aidan winks. “I’ll be back again, before you know it.”

“Are you going to come for my birthday?”

“Hmmm, I don’t know. When is it again?”

Aisling giggles, because he knows perfectly well when it is. Every year since she turned three, he’s sent her a present. Same with the twins since they turned eight.

“It’s September seventh,” she draws out all three words with a sassy head shake punctuating each one.

“That’s right. How could I forget?” Aidan swings her arm gently. “I’m not sure, but I’ll see what I can do.”

She’ll see him before her birthday, since mine is before hers. Except, we may be out of a home by then. While Aisling chatters to him, I try to quell the panic that is creeping in. Didn’t I just tell Aidan the other night there’s no sense in worrying about things that may or may not happen? I need to take my own words to heart.

Finally, we reach the school. He squats down to give Aisling a hug and he shakes both Kellen and Carson’s hands since they’ve decided they’re too old for hugs. The three of them say goodbye and hurry into the building. Then it’s my turn. I hold on to Aidan a few seconds longer than I normally would. Or maybe he’s the one not letting go.

“Don’t forget you swore,” he whispers in my ear.

I manage to nod. Far too soon, I step back. Tears burn my eyes and my nose is getting stuffy. “You better get going if you want to beat all the traffic.”

He huffs out an amused breath. There is no traffic until he gets closer to Dublin. “I’ll text you later tonight.”

I raise my hand in farewell as Aidan turns toward the bed and breakfast and his car.

The walk back to the pub is depressing, because I’m alone. I’m on the

verge of bursting into tears, but that will only make things worse. I'm glad he left, even if I'm going to miss him terribly, because I don't want him to see me like this. It will only make him that more determined to try and help.

I'd been so tempted to accept his offer last night, but turning it down was the only thing I could do. Like I'd said, what happens when whatever he loans me dries up? I'll be in the same sinking boat. The small amount he'd be able to give me would only be a bandaid over a gaping wound. A drop in the bucket. I love him for it, but it also wouldn't make enough of a difference. He might as well save his money.

Which still leaves me with trying to figure out what the hell I'm going to do. *Don't think about it right now.*

The heavy weight of unwanted familial burdens nearly crushes me as I force myself out of our second floor flat and down the stairs. Another day filled with the guilt of bitter resentment awaits me when I reach the bottom. Even if I wanted to get away from the one place I never pictured myself stuck in, I can't. Da saw to that.

I step into our family's pub and the familiar yeast smell surrounds me. It's a scent I've been around since I was Aisling's age, maybe a couple years younger. I sat at this same bar, on the same stool, with my feet dangling while Da stood behind the counter pouring beer and shooting the shit. The villagers loved him. Visitors, too. Da never met a stranger.

Not once have I ever aspired to follow in his footsteps and run this place. I had other hopes and dreams, but I'd been forced to put them aside when Mum died five years ago. With Da's death a month ago, there isn't anything holding me here. I should sell it. Or try to. Except it's impossible. The pub isn't just our livelihood, it's also our home.

It had meant everything to Da. He'd go on and on about how it was his children's legacy. Kellen's, Carson's, Aisling's, and mine.

I don't want it. I never have. But with his death, I'm trapped. With a sigh of resignation, I drag all the chairs down off the tables. Once that's done, I prep the lemons and limes, make sure we have enough napkins, and double check the kitchen inventory one more time, even though our cook Glen always takes care of it. Everything is as ready as it's going to be for the dinner crowd to roll in so I run upstairs and grab some lunch.

By the time I'm finished, there's a little over an hour until I have to open. I go back downstairs and do one more walk-through, because I have anxiety like that. The kids should be here any minute, so I'm not startled by the

pounding on the door. I open it with a welcome home smile that sharply drops at the sight of two men—strangers—standing there. The hairs on the back of my neck rise.

“I’m sorry, but we aren’t open for another hour.”

“I know. We won’t be long.” The larger of the two grabs my arm, yanks me inside, and pushes me up against the wall, crowding me with his body. The second man closes and locks the door behind him.

My heart pounds and wild panic screams inside my head. The bitter taste of fear spreads across my tongue. Oh, god, the kids will be home any second.

“What do you want?” My voice trembles. The sooner they tell me, the sooner they’ll leave. I hope.

“We’re just here for a friendly visit and to offer our condolences on the death of your poor Da.” Creepy dude’s breath is rancid and when he runs a fingertip down the side of my face, I jerk my head to the side. His laugh sends a chill running down my spine. “We’re also here to collect this month’s payment.”

Payment? What payment? “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He tsks. “Did Keir forget to tell you? Now that’s a real shame.” His smile is twisted and ugly. “Maybe we’ll have to take what’s due from somewhere else.”

He thrusts his pelvis forward, and bile rises to my throat at the hardness pressing against me. The other man chuckles.

“Stop,” I whimper and try to disappear into the wall behind me.

The devil’s hand whips up with lightning speed and grabs a fistful of my hair, yanking my head to the side. I cry out in pain. He leans in close and sniffs the entire length of my neck, dragging his tongue with it. I flinch away, but he’s holding me so tight I don’t move far.

“Dónal Sheehan was lenient with your Da’s payment plan. However, there’s been a regime change, and the loan has been transferred to its new owner. He doesn’t grant favors to his enemy’s old friends. Which means, it’s time to pay up.”

“I don’t know who Dónal Sheehan is or what loan you’re talking about,” I grind out between clenched teeth. “But I’ll have your money tomorrow. Please, just leave.”

I’ll promise anything to get them to go away before the children get home. Another knock hits the door. This one softer. Both men’s gaze shoot toward the sound.

“Sorcha, we’re home,” Kellen’s loud voice filters through the wood.

I whimper. “Please, don’t hurt them. I’ll have the money tomorrow. I swear.”

Tense seconds pass. Another knock and a louder call. “Sorcha. Let us in.”

At last, evil eyes releases me and steps back. He glares and puts a finger right in my face. “We’ll be back tomorrow. If you’re lying, I won’t be so nice. To you or the little mongrels.”

I suck in a breath and nod frantically, trying not to cry. “I’ll have it.”

“Sorcha!” Kellen yells this time.

Quickly, I push past the man and open the door with a shaky smile. “Sorry, I didn’t hear you. We were in the kitchen.” How I managed to speak normally I’ll never know.

“Who’s we? Is Aidan still here?” The two boys sweep past. Kellen comes to an abrupt halt and Carson crashes into his back.

“Hey, why’d you stop?” Aisling whines.

The twins’ eyes widen and dart between the two men and me. I give them a weak smile and wave them in so they’re out of the doorway, then quickly swap places.

“I was just giving these gentlemen a tour. They’re friend’s of Da’s visiting from Dublin and opening their own pub. They wanted to see how he ran ours.” It’s scary how easily the lie slips past my lips. “They were actually on their way out.”

The two dangerous men flash evil smiles and stride forward. The shorter man walks past first, but the big bad pauses and stares down at me with a terrifying smirk. “I’m looking forward to doing business with you again tomorrow.”

My mouth tightens, and the second he’s across the threshold, I slam the door shut and sag against it, my chest heaving.

“Sorcha?” There’s a tremor in Aisling’s voice

Eyes I didn’t realize I’d closed pop open. Kellen, Carson, and Aisling stare at me with equal amounts of fear on their faces. I come away from the door trying my best to forget about the men and what just happened and stride toward them. “How was school today?”

“Fi—fine,” Kellen answers.

“Good. Are you guys hungry? I have some stew upstairs if you want to heat it up for dinner.” I guide them to the stairs and they all march up with

me right on their heels.

The four of us go inside without speaking, but I can tell there are questions on the twins' lips. Thankfully, neither ask any of them. As with every other day, while I heat up their dinner, they tell me about their day, although the conversation is much more subdued than usual. Like the three of them can all tell something is going on and that it's bad. It was the same way the first couple of weeks after Da died.

"I need to get back downstairs, but make sure you clean up the dishes when you're done. Come down and say good night before you go to bed, and don't forget to make sure your homework is done before video games," I warn the boys.

"Sorcha?" Carson, the more sensitive of the two of them, speaks up.

"We'll talk later, okay?" I press a kiss to both of their foreheads—something they allow for the first time in months—and then Aisling's, who's been unusually quiet. "You can stay up a little later tonight since you don't have school tomorrow."

They nod. With a final glance over my shoulder I walk out the door and down the stairs, my legs trembling with each step, it's a wonder I don't tumble down them. For the rest of the night, nausea churns in my gut, and every time someone walks in, I flinch. By the end of the night, my nerves are frayed and my whole body shakes. I nearly slam the door shut behind the last customer, locking it as quickly as I can.

On numb legs, I make my way back behind the bar and call the only person I can.

"Aidan, I need your help. Please," I beg before bursting into tears.

CHAPTER 5



Aidan

I DON'T GIVE A SHIT HOW LATE IT IS.

I pound on the front door of a pretentious house owned by a ruthless prick. It might be minutes later, or seconds, but it's finally jerked open. In its place is a hulking shadow and, my guess? A .45mm. I don't even blink. It's not the first gun I've had shoved in my face.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't pull this trigger," the bastard growls.

"Liam, put that thing away," Imogen calls out seconds before her shadowy figure appears behind him.

"Yeah, *Liam*, put it away."

Seconds pass before he lowers the weapon. "What the fuck do you want?"

Imogen continues standing close enough to touch Campbell, and there's tension in her shoulders, but she doesn't say anything else.

"You and I need to have a discussion."

"Make an appointment." He tries slamming the door, but my foot blocks it from shutting.

I smirk. "My appointment time is now."

There's been an unsteady truce between Campbell and our family since Imogen entered the picture almost two months ago. He's still being a cunt and controlling the shipping docks, which has made importing contraband—

weapons—more than difficult. He’s also moved forward with purchasing a building to open his own casino in order to compete with ours. Then again, that deal had already been in motion before he fell in love with my half-sister. Beyond that, while he hasn’t done anything more to try and take Da and the rest of us down, he also hasn’t done anything to help us, either. Essentially, we’re in a holding pattern that all rests on Imogen’s—and his stepsister Nessa’s—shoulders.

“Fucking Donnellys,” Campbell curses under his breath. “You have five minutes and then I *will* shoot you.”

Imogen throws her head back with a groan and stares at the ceiling for a second before dropping her chin and glaring at her lover. He turns on several lights and walks away, brushing his hand against hers as he passes her. No doubt my time has already started, so I trail behind. Apparently she trusts him enough not to follow through with his threat, because she doesn’t come with us.

Campbell walks into a room, turns on the light, and takes a seat behind a behemoth desk, setting the gun on its surface but pointed in my direction. He doesn’t offer me a chair, but I sit in one anyway.

“Four minutes left. You better start talking.”

I lean forward. “Call your men and tell them to leave Sorcha O’Connell the fuck alone.”

There’s not a single flash of recognition on his face at the name. I’m also sure he’s counting the seconds until my time is up.

“Dónal Sheehan loaned money to a man named Keir O’Connell.” I pause. “Two...loan collectors visited his daughter earlier today. She doesn’t know anything about it and doesn’t have the funds to pay it back.”

“Three minutes. I’m also bored already.”

Arsehole. “Since you took over Sheehan’s organization, I assume *you* are now the new loan holder they mentioned. You need to wipe the debt clean.”

Campbell snorts. “I don’t *need* to do a fucking thing.”

I grit my teeth, because pushing will only make him push back that much harder. “I’ll pay the loan.”

That has him straightening in his chair and a calculating gleam enters his eyes. “I’m afraid I can’t let you do that.”

My body goes rigid. “You’re such a bastard. Why not?”

“Yes, I am, and because I don’t want to. Two minutes.”

I stand up and lean into my palms on the desk until I’m in his face. “Call

your men off or they're both going to get a bullet in the back of their head. As will every man you send until they're all dead or you start a war. I doubt Imogen will be too happy with you if your force her father and brothers to retaliate."

A dangerous spark flares to life in his eyes. "I highly recommend you back the fuck up."

My gaze drops to where his palm curls around the grip and his index finger lies alongside the trigger. I grin. "What? You gonna shoot me?"

"Yes."

I blink.

Campbell doesn't.

Jaysus, he's serious. I laugh, but I straighten. "You really are a psychopath."

"Test me again and find out," he snarls. "I may have promised Imogen I won't kill any of you, but I never swore not to make you bleed. Your time is up. Now, get the fuck out of my house."

"I *highly recommend* you call off your men. Imogen will be displeased if she finds out they're threatening the woman I'm going to marry." With that pronouncement—*where in Christ had that come from?*—I turn and walk out of the room, trusting he won't shoot me in the back.

Imogen stands at the end of the hall with her arms crossed, biting her lip. Since discovering she's Cian's, Finn's, and my half-sister, we haven't spoken much. It's been awkward to say the least, especially since I've purposely been avoiding her. It's a lot to take in. She walks with me to the front door.

"Is she really your fiancée?" Imogen asks when we reach it.

"Yes." No. Maybe. Fuck.

She glances over my shoulder and meets my eyes again. "I'll have him call them before we go back to sleep."

I nod. "Thanks."

Imogen smiles slightly. "Of course. I'd like to meet her one of these days."

"I'll see what I can arrange."

Footsteps approach, but I don't turn.

"Goodnight, Aidan." She opens the door.

"Night."

Despite the late hour, there's no way I'm going to get any sleep. Plus, after promising Sorcha I'd take care of things, I told her I'd call. Once I'm on

the road, I voice activate her number. She answers on the first ring. “Aidan?”

“Everything’s going to be fine. You don’t have to worry about those guys—or any others—again.”

She sobs. “Thank you. But *how*?”

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course.” Sorcha doesn’t hesitate.

“Then trust that I handled it.” She may trust me, but I don’t trust Campbell. Even with Imogen’s reassurance. “I’m on my way there.”

“What? No, you shouldn’t be driving this late. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

There are barely any cars on the road as I make my way out of Dublin. “There’s no way I’ll be able to sleep tonight anyway. Plus, I want to make sure you’re okay.”

Sorcha hesitates, but then sighs. “Please be safe.” She may not admit it, but there’s relief in her tone.

“I’ll call you when I get close.” It’s an almost four-hour drive. “Don’t wait up, though. Try and get some sleep.”

She chuckles, but there’s no humor in it. “I’ll try, but I doubt it will happen.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye. And Aidan?” she pauses. “Thank you.”

I disconnect the call and focus on the road. It’s going to be a long fucking night.



THREE AND A HALF HOURS LATER, I FIND A CAR PARK A BLOCK FROM THE PUB and call Sorcha.

“Hello?”

“I should be at your door in two minutes.” The village is dark and quiet, but it won’t be for long. Fishermen will be rising and heading out on their boats within the hour.

“I’ll let you in.” She disconnects the call and I pocket my phone.

The door of the pub is already opening before I reach it, like she ran down. Sorcha steps out in her pajamas and then she’s sobbing in my arms. I hold her until she’s all cried out, stroking her hair and whispering

reassurances the entire time. She takes in a shuddering breath, draws back, and swipes at both eyes.

“Will you come upstairs?” she whispers.

“Whatever you need.”

We head inside and once she’s turned the lock, we climb the stairs. It’s dimly lit and I can’t help my eyes being drawn to her ass. *Knock that shit off. This is Sorcha.* Still, I’m a guy in his prime who appreciates a beautiful woman, even if she happens to be one of my best friends.

Once inside, I toe off my shoes and leave them at the door. A lamp near the sofa is on and despite the dimness of the room, it’s not hard to miss the dark circles under her eyes or the tightness around them and her lips. I sit on the couch and tug Sorcha down beside me. She curls her legs underneath her and snuggles against my side, resting her head on my shoulder.

“Thank you for coming.”

I wrap my arm tighter around her and kiss the crown of her head. “You’re welcome. Now, close your eyes and get some sleep. We’ll talk in the morning.”

She nods and tucks her hands under her cheek. Eventually, her breath evens out and she relaxes completely into me. Trust is hard to come by in my world. The fact that Sorcha does so without question is something I’ve never taken for granted. Which is why I suspect tomorrow’s going to be a shit show and that afterward, when everything comes out, she may never trust me again.

CHAPTER 6



SORCHA

I'M RESTING ON A HARD SURFACE. THIS IS DEFINITELY NOT MY BED. I OPEN my eyes. Blink. Why am I lying on the sofa? My gaze drops to the legs under my head. I sit upright and crack my skull on something. I wince.

"Motherfucker," a male voice roars.

I rub the spot where it hurts. Aidan cradles his face in his palms.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry." I reach for him, but he gently nudges my hand out of the way with an elbow. "Are you okay?"

He stands up, tips his head back, and pinches his nose. "I'm fine."

I jump up and stare while he paces. There doesn't appear to be any blood, but I rush into the kitchen for a towel just in case. When I hurry into the living room again, he's already lowered his arm. No blood, but his eyes are watering. Everything about last night also comes rushing back to me. I wring the towel nervously.

The sun is barely up, which means we might have gotten three hours of sleep. I glance toward the hallway. The kids will probably be awake soon regardless of the fact it's Saturday. We've always been a family of early risers. I don't want to have this conversation when it might get interrupted.

"I'll make us some breakfast."

Aidan follows me into the kitchen. "We should talk."

I shake my head. "Later. When little spouts with big ears aren't around. They'll probably be out here soon."

He nods. “Can I help?”

The offer surprises me. I’ve never pictured him as someone who knew how to cook. “If you don’t mind getting milk, butter, and an egg out of the fridge, please.”

While Aidan does that, I get the rest of the ingredients out of the cabinet and preheat the oven. I don’t make scones every Saturday, but today feels like a special treat day after the mess of yesterday.

“I could use a cup of tea, if you don’t mind,” I tell him. “There’s also coffee if you want.”

“Sure thing.” He nods and gets to work filling the electric kettle. He’s been here enough times to know where the teabags and coffee are kept.

I measure everything out, drop spoonfuls of the mixture onto my baking sheet, and just as I put it in the oven, Kellen walks in. He pauses at seeing Aidan standing there.

His gazes darts between the two of us and comes to rest on me. “Is he here because of those guys from yesterday?”

My younger brother has always been too smart for his age. I’m not sure if it’s because of the large age difference between us that he’s almost like the oldest child or something else. Whatever it is, there’s a maturity present in him this morning that I’m not sure was there before. Nearly thirteen is still too young to be worried about or dealing with what’s going on.

“Aidan just missed us so much, he couldn’t stay away.” I laugh, trying to make a joke. *You didn’t think his presence here all the way through did you?*

Of course, Kellen side eyes me, clearly not believing my obvious lie.

“I came back because I have a proposition for your sister,” Aidan speaks up.

My gaze darts in his direction. *A proposition?*

“What kind of proposition?” Kellen echoes my silent question.

“Something she and I need to discuss first.”

My brother cocks his head, but he doesn’t press the issue. A few minutes later, Carson stumbles in rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He drops his arm and also stops at the sight of Aidan.

“Will one of you set the table and the other go wake up your sister, please?” I ask before more questions pop up.

The boys exchange glances—and their own unspoken language—and then Carson turns around and heads down the hallway he just came from. In the meantime, Kellen gets dishes and glasses from the cabinet, silverware

from the drawer, and places them on the table in front of each chair.

I fill up the kids' glasses with orange juice and take the cup of tea Aidan passes to me. A few sips temporarily satisfy me and then I grab the jam and cream from the fridge and place them on the table as well. My timer goes off and I bring the sheet from the oven. Carson and Aisling stroll in, the latter's hair a tangled mess.

"Everyone sit. We'll be back in a second." I take my sister's hand and guide her to the bathroom.

Aidan's voice carries in behind us as he talks to the boys.

"I thought Aidan went home," Aisling says as I run the comb through her hair, taking care not to tug each knot. One in particular gives me some trouble and she winces.

"Sorry, little nightmare. He did, but he missed us so much he came back for another day or two."

At six, she hasn't learned quite yet to detect lies and takes what I say at face value. "I missed him, too."

"All done." I tap her on the shoulder and set the comb on the counter. "Let's go get some breakfast."

We walk into the kitchen and Aisling gives Aidan a hug before taking her seat. I put the scones in a basket and set it in the middle of the table before sitting as well. "Dig in."



AFTER THE KITCHEN HAS ALL BEEN CLEANED UP, THE FIVE OF US HEAD OUT for a walk along the old Railway Walk trail. It's overcast, but the temperature is pleasant.

"Aidan and I need to talk so why don't the three of you go ahead. We'll be right behind you." I send them off so we can have at least a small amount of privacy.

Aisling opens her mouth to protest, but Kellen takes her hand. "Come on, nightmare."

She pouts, but goes with them, leaving me alone with Aidan. When they're out of earshot, I turn my head toward him. "This is about the only alone time we're going to have for this conversation. And I'm curious what this proposition is that you said you have for me."

There's a wariness on his face, like he'd rather not have this discussion, which makes me nervous. A weight settles over me. Maybe I should just accept that he took care of things and leave it at that.

"What do you know about a man named Dónal Sheehan?" he asks.

I suppose there's no turning back after this. "Like I told you last night, nothing. The first time I've ever heard his name mentioned was when those men said it yesterday."

Aidan nods like he expected my answer. "Up until a couple months ago, Sheehan was head of the second most powerful family in Dublin. He was involved in things that weren't completely legal."

How did Da get tangled up with someone like that? "You said 'was'."

"He's dead."

"Oh," I breathe out the word. "That still doesn't explain how Da knew him."

"That I don't know. But what I do know is that Liam Campbell overthrew the organization. If your Da borrowed money from Sheehan like those men claim, then Campbell is the one who took ownership of the loan."

"How do you know these people?"

Aidan doesn't say anything. I glance over at him and there's a pained expression on his face. I stop in the middle of the trail and touch his arm to stay him. "What's wrong?"

He straightens and finally meets my eyes. "Do you know who the Donnellys are?"

My forehead wrinkles. "I know they're rumored to be Irish mafia and the most powerful family in Dublin—maybe all of Ireland—but that's the extent of it. I don't really keep up with the news and you know everyone around here just gossips about the locals."

Aidan glances to where Kellen, Carson, and Aisling are still walking and back to me. He runs his hand through his hair, something he only does when he's nervous.

I lay my hand on his arm again. His muscles are tense beneath my palm. "What is it? You know you can tell me anything."

"I want you to know I'm sorry."

"Sorry? For what? Aidan, you're scaring me." My heart's pounding.

"My name isn't Aidan Broderick."

I draw back in confusion. "I don't understand."

"Broderick was my mother's maiden name. It's the name I use when I

travel and don't want people to know who I am. Anonymity is something I don't often get, so I take advantage of it when I can. I've loved the freedom I've had being around you. I was worried that if you knew who I was, it would change things between us."

Every word coming out of his mouth buzzes around my head, but none of them make sense. "I need a minute, please."

I start walking while I try to process. Aidan's footsteps echo mine.

"Sorcha."

"I said I need a minute," I snap at him, maybe for the first time ever.

My pace increases, and I'm suddenly desperate to get away. Kellen glances over his shoulder. He snags Carson's arm, who then stops Aisling. Seconds later, I reach them. "We're going home."

We turn back in the direction we came, and I usher the three of them past Aidan. The boys' gaze bounces between me and the man who trails us, keeping his distance.

"Why are we running?" Aisling whines.

Are we? I'm not, but she is trying to keep up with us. I scoop her up and set her on my hip despite the fact she's almost too big for me to do so. Still, I can't slow. Kellen and Carson keep up with me until finally, we reach the pub. I'm sweating and my back aches from the extra weight.

"Sorcha, will you stop and talk to me?"

I fumble with the lock on the door with a trembling hand. "I think it's best if you don't come in right now."

Finally, I manage to get it open and push the three of them inside. I'm right on their heels and shut the door in Aidan's lying face. After the stress over the last few weeks of not knowing how I'm going to keep things going and the fear those men caused me yesterday, this new revelation is more than I can handle at the moment.

"Boys, can you please take your sister upstairs? I'll be up shortly. I need to be by myself for a little bit, okay?" I hope they won't ask me any questions.

As though sensing how on the edge I am, Kellen takes hold of Aisling's hand. "Come on little nightmare. Let's go watch a movie. I'll even let you pick."

With only a quick glance back, he guides her toward the kitchen with his brother following.

"Can we watch the scary one with the weird people?" Her voice trails

away as they disappear into the kitchen.

I cross the length of the pub and pour myself a gin and tonic, not caring that it's barely nine in the morning. I finish it in less than two minutes and start on a second before I finally collapse into one of the chairs. Aidan's words rattle around inside my brain again. If his last name isn't Broderick then what is it? The only other names he mentioned were Dónal Sheehan, Liam Campbell, and the Donnellys. Sweet Jesus, is he a Donnelly? What does that mean? Is he a cousin or something? Surely, he can't be one of *the* Donnellys.

Grabbing my phone from my pocket, I do a quick search. There isn't a lot of information on them. Then again, if they are the mafia, I doubt they want the attention. I search news articles, images, videos, until finally I find a clip from the main news in Dublin. About a month ago, three members of the Donnelly family were arrested for allegedly attempting to break into a Liam Campbell's home. Each one of them were armed. The video shows three handcuffed men being escorted by several members of the Gardaí into a building.

In the lead is a familiar auburn-haired, tattooed, and pierced Aidan.

CHAPTER 7



Aidan

THAT DID NOT GO AS PLANNED. I DON'T BLAME SORCHA FOR BEING PISSED, but I'm a little disappointed she shut me out completely before giving me a chance to explain myself. *What is there to explain? You've been lying to her for five years.*

I walk back to my car, grab my bag, and head to the bed and breakfast I'd checked out of only yesterday to secure another room. I'm not sure how long I'll be in town. I should probably touch base with someone at home as well. I pull my phone from my pocket and call Cian. He might be the only one besides Da up this early and the longer I avoid talking to Da the better.

"Why are you calling me at this hour?" he grumbles and then whispers something unintelligible, most likely to Nessa.

"Stop bitching. It's not that early."

"It is when you're in bed with a beautiful woman. Since you've already ruined the mood, what do you want?"

"I'm just letting you know I'm going to be out of town for a few more days."

"I didn't realize you were gone."

Of course he didn't. "Well, I am. I'll be back either tomorrow or Monday in case Da asks."

"Why are you calling me instead of him, then?" Cian complains. "Unless you don't want him questioning where you are."

I pause for a second. “It’s complicated.”

“Which means there’s a woman involved.”

“There is no woman.” Jesus. I shouldn’t have said anything.

Cian barks out a laugh. “You’re a shite liar, you know that, right?”

I’m almost offended. I happen to be an excellent liar. I’ve been doing it for years. “Look, I’m just letting you know I’ll be back in a couple days.”

“Thanks for ruining a perfectly good morning by calling for something I don’t care about. Tell this non-existent woman I said you’re an asshole.” He ends the call.

Fuck. I shouldn’t have bothered. Cian is always waiting for a chance to bust my balls, so I suspect I’ll be getting a call from Da soon. The bed and breakfast comes into view. Once I’m checked back in and settled in my room, I lie down. I’m going to need all my energy to convince Sorcha of my proposition. One I hadn’t been able to broach since she kicked me out of the pub. It doesn’t bode well for her accepting my offer, either. I’ll have to do what I can to convince her then.



IT’S A DICK MOVE, SHOWING UP WHEN SHE HAS CUSTOMERS, BUT REGARDLESS of her being pissed, she’s still by herself and needs my help. Even if she won’t ask for it. I walk through the door behind a couple regulars. They take a seat at one of the few empty tables and I head behind the bar. Sorcha glances up, scowls, and ignores me. This might be the first time I’ve witnessed her truly angry. She’s kind of adorable.

She skips right past me with the pint of beer and delivers it to a table. I glance down and find a ticket for another order. Grabbing a glass, I set it under the tap and start filling it. She returns, pauses, and sighs in resignation. Like we’d done two nights ago, we form a rhythm and work together seamlessly, although Sorcha only speaks to me when she has to. I’ll take it. After the last customer leaves, we go through the closing ritual until the pub has been cleaned and ready for tomorrow.

Taking my chances, I come to stand next to her. “Will you hear me out now?”

She’s silent for a few seconds. “Let me check on the kids and I’ll be back down.”

I sit at one of the booths and wait, drumming my fingers on the tabletop. Nearly ten minutes later, Sorcha walks in from the kitchen and slides onto the seat across from me.

“Alright, talk,” she demands, not wasting time. “And let’s start by telling me your name.”

Fair request. “My name is Aidan Donnelly. My father is Carrick Donnelly and I have two brothers and a recently discovered half-sister.” I take a breath. “Nothing else I’ve told you about myself has been a lie.”

Sorcha raises both eyebrows. “So you’re really a security guard, then?”

If I could blush, I’d be doing it. “Technically, that’s not a lie. Sometimes I guard things.”

“Like what?”

I’m toeing an extremely thin here. “I don’t want to lie to you, but I also can’t share family business.”

To my surprise Sorcha appears to accept my answer. “Why do you hide your identity? I’d think you would want people to know who you are. I’m sure they’re afraid of your family’s name. You could certainly use that to your advantage.”

“That’s not always a good thing. Plus, we have enemies. Sometimes, it’s just easier.”

“It’s been five years. Once you knew you could trust me, why continue to keep the secret?” There’s hurt in her voice.

“Because I didn’t know how you’d react. Like you said, it’s been five years. Was I just supposed to blurt it out? How well do you think that would have gone over?” I don’t let her answer. “Probably about as well as it’s going now.”

“That wasn’t for you to decide. How do you expect me to believe anything that comes out of your mouth now?” Sorcha sags in her seat.

Neither of us say anything for a minute, because I don’t have an answer for her.

“I really am sorry I lied.” Apologizing and trying to figure out how to make it up to her are the only things I can do.

“You can be sorry all you want, but it doesn’t change the fact you did it.”

I sigh. “You’re right, I did.”

Silence settles between us again. It’s tense and uncomfortable. Something we’ve never been with each other. Not even when our friendship first began. We’ve always somehow fit together with no awkwardness.

“You said those guys won’t bother me again and to trust you. Let’s say I’m sorely lacking in the trust department at the moment. So, how do I know they’re gone for good? Or that someone else won’t show up trying to collect money that Da owed them?” Sorcha challenges me, which I can both appreciate, but also hate that I’ve made her feel like this.

“I told you how Liam Campbell took over Dónal Sheehan’s organization.” She nods. “Liam also happens to be Imogen’s...whatever he is. Either way, they’re together. I reminded him how unhappy she’d be if he and I were forced to go up against each other if he didn’t call his men off.”

“And what happens if they aren’t together anymore?” she prods. “Am I going to be back in the same position because you no longer have something to hold over his head?”

Things are going to go to shite more than they already are. I can tell. I rub the back of my neck.

“What aren’t you telling me, Aidan?”

“I’ve taken on the debt your Da owed Sheehan, and it will be paid by the end of the day tomorrow. You and the kids will be under the protection of my entire family.”

“Does your family even know about me?”

“Not at the moment. But they will. Especially once we’re married.”

“I’m sorry, when we’re what?”

“I told Liam you were my fiancée. He’s a ruthless prick and unless I gave him a good reason to back off, he won’t. He’d find some way to get around the threat of Imogen being pissed. That’s just how he is. He’s already making me prove we’re engaged. There’s always a price that has to be paid.”

Sorcha jerks back. “So I’m the one who has to pay this price by marrying you? I’m the one who’s getting punished for my Da’s actions?”

Ouch. “I’m sorry you see marrying me as a punishment.”

She throws her hands up. “How else would you see it? What happens if you fall in love with someone else? Or I do? What do I tell the boys and Aisling? I didn’t ask for any of this.”

Before I can reply, she jumps up and goes to the bar. I don’t follow her while she pours a shot and tosses it back. Then another. Finally, I move across the room.

“What are you doing?”

Sorcha glares. “I’m getting pissed. What does it look like I’m doing?”

She throws back a third shot.

I reach across, pluck the shot glass out of her hands, and set it on top of the bar. “That’s not going to help or change things and you know it.”

“Maybe I’ll go to sleep and when I wake up, this will have been nothing but a dream. A nightmare, actually.”

“You know, if you keep on, I’ll start thinking you don’t like me or something.” I walk around to her side of the bar, smiling and trying to infuse humor into the situation.

Sorcha blinks those big blue eyes of hers and then they soften. “I know this isn’t entirely your fault, and I shouldn’t take it all out on you. But Da isn’t here and you are so you’re the one who gets the brunt of my anger. Not that it’s entirely undeserved considering you’ve been lying to me for *five fucking years*.”

I wince. “I’m sorry.”

She growls. “Stop saying you’re sorry.”

“Fine. Why don’t you go upstairs and get some rest then?” With a hand to her lower back, I guide her to the kitchen. “We’ll talk again tomorrow when you’ve had a chance to sleep on everything.” And sober up.

“I’m still mad at you,” Sorcha slurs the tiniest bit and pokes the middle of my chest.

I clasp her hand and kiss her fingertip. “I know you are.”

She climbs the stairs with me right behind her in case she stumbles, but she makes it safely to the top. At the landing she turns and hugs me. I’m going to take that as a sign that she’ll forgive me after she sobers up and has time to think.

“Night.” I draw back and kiss her forehead.

Sorcha scrunches her nose. “Still mad.”

I chuckle. “Go to sleep.”

She opens the door and then closes it in my face without a goodbye. I head downstairs and come to a stop at the exit. Shite. I don’t have a key to the pub, which means I can’t leave. Otherwise, it’ll be unlocked the whole night. I guess it’s a good thing I slept late today. It’s going to be another long fucking night.

CHAPTER 8



SORCHA

MY HEAD IS POUNDING. I LIE STILL HOPING THE PAIN WILL EASE, BUT THE throbbing at the base of my skull remains. My mouth is dry as the desert, too. What the hell? I hope I'm not getting sick. I can't afford it. With a groan, I slowly sit up in bed and rest my forehead between my palms. The thud-thud inside only gets worse. My stomach roils, and I swallow back the nausea. Bits and pieces of last night and yesterday return. Oh, yeah. Not sick. Hungover.

I can't believe Aidan has been lying to me all this time. If we're going to remain friends—my heart pinches at the possibility of *not* staying friends—I'm going to have to come to terms with the fact he belongs to the freaking mafia. As much as it should, that isn't what bothers me the most.

The one person I never imagined lying to me is Aidan. How long would he have continued doing so if those bastards hadn't shown up yesterday? *Forever, probably.* That's what hurts more than anything. It's the fact he didn't trust me enough to tell me the truth.

And marriage? What the hell was he thinking telling his...brother-in-law, or whatever he is, that I'm his fiancée? *Would it really be so bad being Aidan's wife?* Yes, since I could easily fall in love with him. Hell, I'm already halfway there. And then what? Spend the rest of my life loving a husband who doesn't love me back? Because *that* sounds like a lot of fun.

Would he still cover the debt even if we're not married? How much did

Da borrow from this Sheehan bloke, anyway? If I decline Aidan's non-proposal and ask him to loan the money to me, will I be able to pay it back? The way he described Liam Campbell, I doubt he'd give me any kind of extension. Which means, either way, I'm screwed. In this moment, I hate Da.

Slowly, I crawl out of bed, trying to keep the nausea at bay, down a couple pain relievers, and take a shower. It's barely light outside, which means it's still early and the kids are sleeping. Once I'm done getting dressed, I head into the kitchen and make some tea. While the kettle heats up, I eat a leftover scone, hoping it will settle my stomach. With my cup in hand, I make my way downstairs. I grew up in the pub, and although I never pictured myself running it, especially alone, being inside it soothes me in ways. The familiarity and the reminder of better times, I suspect.

I walk out of the kitchen, turn on one of the lights, and come to an abrupt halt. Lying on his back across four chairs pushed together to form a line is Aidan. His arms are folded over his naked chest and his feet hang over the edge of the last chair. Beneath his head is, only what I can assume, his crumpled shirt. I take a moment to study him. Nearly every chiseled inch of him from just under his pecs, up his chest and neck, across his shoulders, and down both arms all the way to his fingertips is covered in black ink. I asked him once what all the designs and shapes signified and he told me he just liked the way they looked. He also has a couple small facial tattoos, including a tiny four-leaf clover at the corner of his left eye, and a silver hoop through the left side of his nose too.

His hypnotic and bright blue eyes are hidden by closed lids whose entirely too long lashes make me envious. Same with his full lips. My fingers itch to sketch him exactly the way he is. Relaxed yet still holding on to the slight edge of danger he possesses while awake. My gaze travels the length of him again and then up to his face. This time, he's staring back.

"What are you doing in here?" The words tumble out.

He unfolds his arms and pushes himself to sitting with a groan. "Christ, those are some uncomfortable chairs."

"Aidan?"

He looks over at me. "I got locked inside."

I glance at the door. Oh shit. I stumbled upstairs last night, not even thinking about the fact the door was locked and that he'd have no way of getting out. Well, he could have left, but that would have meant the pub would be unlocked the entire night.

“I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you come and get me? I would have let you out or you could have slept on the couch. It would have been far more comfortable than those chairs.”

“You were pissed. It’s a fitting punishment, being forced to sleep on hard chairs for a night, I suppose.” He stands and slips his shirt over his head, hiding the stunning canvas of his body.

Again, my fingers twitch with the desire to put his likeness to paper. “I guess you’re right.” There’s still a twinge of guilt.

“You’re up early,” he says while he puts the chairs back where they belong and I slide into the nearest booth. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I took three shots of whiskey in less than a minute and barely slept, which five years ago, wouldn’t have even stunned me. But I haven’t drank more than a beer here and there in those five years, so it sort of hit me.”

He sits across from me and lays his forearms on the table.

I take slow sips of my tea. Thankfully my stomach has settled a little and my head isn’t throbbing as bad as it had been. We sit for a few more minutes in silence. I rub my thumb up and down the outside of my cup. “How much did Da borrow?”

“I told you I’ve taken care of it.”

“Tell me,” I demand.

Aidan sighs. He knows how stubborn I am when I want something. “Over ten thousand.”

I blink back tears and swallow. The nausea returns full force. “I see.”

That amount is probably nothing to. Merely a drop in the bucket. Pocket change. The thought alone is enough to make me sick.

“You don’t have to worry about it anymore,” Aidan assures me yet again.

“Not worrying about it apparently means marriage. It won’t work, though. Your life is in Dublin. Mine is here.” I palm my tea cup and squeeze.

“Except Campbell says he doesn’t believe we’re getting married if you’re here and I’m not. Which means he won’t clear your debt.” His jaw clenches. “Besides, you and I both know running your Da’s pub is never what you’ve wanted to do. Aisling is only six. That’s another twelve years of being here until she leaves for uni. Do you really want to be forty and still living in Burtonport working at a pub you don’t even want? You live upstairs for fuck’s sake. There’s no getting away from here.”

Aidan’s words hurt. Then again, the truth often does.

“So what? I’m just supposed to give this whole place up, marry you, and move the kids to Dublin—uprooting them from everything they know—because your psycho brother-in-law won’t believe this farce you’ve created if we don’t? What happens then, Aidan? Do we just go about our daily lives while you do whatever it is that you do in the mafia and I, what? Stay home and keep house?” I lash out.

He reaches out and grabs my hand. “You can do whatever you want to do. You could even go back to art school. Get the degree you wanted. Open the art gallery you always dreamed about.”

Tears gather in my eyes and spill down my cheeks. I’d given up that dream when my mum died, because Da needed me here.

“Besides, I know you, remember? You’d be terrible at keeping house.” Aidan grins.

I sputter out a watery laugh and swipe my face with my free hand. The offer is more than tempting. “That still doesn’t answer the question of what if you fall in love with someone, or I do? I don’t want to do that to either of us.”

He squeezes my hand. “There are no guarantees with anything in life. But I can promise you this. No matter what happens in the future, I will always take care of you. That will never change regardless of anything else. Besides, weren’t you the one who told me not so long ago that you’re pragmatic and you aren’t going to worry about something that may or may not happen?”

I pout at him. “You know it’s quite rude to throw my own words back in my face.”

He loses his smile and his expression turns serious. “This is the only way to protect you, Sorcha.”

I’ve never responded well when being backed in a corner, but this time I’m not really sure there are any other options. I can’t afford to pay Da’s debt and I don’t fancy a return visit from those men. I shudder at the memory of the devil’s tongue on my skin. If his boss is anything like him, then he’s terrifying. How in god’s name is Aidan’s sister with someone like that?

“Let me talk to the kids. They have a right to know what’s going on before I make any decisions.” How do I explain something like this to them? Kellen is smart enough to figure out there’s more to what’s going on and he’ll tell Carson. There are no secrets that I’m aware of between them. That just leaves Aisling. She’ll be the easiest. She loves Aidan.

He squeezes my hand. “Everything is going to be fine.”

I force myself to smile and keep my eyes on his. If only he wasn't such a gifted liar.

CHAPTER 9



Aidan

WHY DOES IT FEEL LIKE I'M LYING TO SORCHA? THERE'S AN ITCH UNDER MY skin that won't go away. She draws her hand out from under mine and stands.

"Come upstairs and I'll make breakfast. The boys will probably be awake in a little while."

I follow her up to the flat and into the kitchen. "What can I do to help?"

She waves me off. "Just have a seat and tell me about this family of yours. I should probably know more about them if there's a chance I'll be marrying into it."

While Sorcha moves around the room and takes things from the fridge and cabinets, I talk. "What do you want to know?"

She glances over her shoulder at me with a small glare. "They're *your* family. What are the important things you think I should be aware of?"

If she's going to be my wife, I guess I should start with the basics. "Carrick is my Da. He's the head of our organization and is both respected and feared. He loves his family and isn't afraid to show us he cares about us. He's hard, but fair. Nora is his long-time lover who lives at our home. They started an affair while he was married to my mother, Kathleen, which resulted in my half-sister, Imogen. We only recently found out about her, though. She'd been raised by someone else who she always believed was her mother."

"Lord, that sounds complicated," Sorcha remarks.

“It’s been a lot for us to deal with. Especially with her and Campbell being a thing and the fact that until they got together, he was doing his damndest to destroy our entire family and take over Dublin.”

She whistles. “I’m guessing that didn’t go over well?”

I chuckle. “There will probably always be animosity between him and us, but as long as he keeps his business to himself and we keep to ours, we’ll manage to remain civil. For Imogen and Nessa’s sake.”

“Who’s Nessa?”

“She’s Campbell’s stepsister, and if Cian has anything to say about it, she’ll be my brother’s fiancée soon as well.”

Sorcha turns, leans against the counter, and stares at me. “Let me get this straight. Your brother is soon to be engaged to your, for lack of a better word, adversary’s stepsister, and this same adversary also happens to be romantically involved with your half-sister?”

I nod slowly. “That’s pretty much it.”

She bursts out laughing. “I bet that makes family reunions awkward.”

“You have no idea. Although, we’ve all only been in a one room together twice and it became clear very quickly that it won’t become a regular occurrence. Too much bad blood.”

“I can imagine.” Sorcha goes back to preparing breakfast. “So, Cian is the oldest. He checks in on the various legitimate businesses we own and makes sure they’re all running smoothly. Finn runs and manages our casino. Takes care of the accounts and supervises all the employees.”

“And what do you do?” she asks.

What *do* I do? Cian oversees our general operations and Finn is the one with the knack for numbers and business. Me? I’m the one with the artistic talent. What would Sorcha say if she knew that I create counterfeit artwork and then we sell it to unsuspecting victims for a fuck lot of money?

“Aidan?”

I shake myself out it and glance up at Sorcha. “Yeah, sorry. I’m security.”

“Security like a bodyguard or something?”

“Basically, yes. On occasion, I’ll work the floor of the casino and make sure tempers remain in check and that players behave themselves while in our establishment. If they have grievances with each other, they have to take it elsewhere.”

She makes some small noise. “And your cousin Caitlín lives here with her fiancé, who also works for your Da?”

“Yes. Her brother Nathan and his wife and kids live here as well. Lucia works at the National Museum of Ireland. Not sure exactly what her title is, but from what I understand, she pretty much runs it.”

Sorcha puts the pan in the oven and comes to sit near me at the table. “The National Museum? That’s incredible. It’s one of the most prestigious museums in the UK, aside from the British Museum.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” I huff out a short laugh. “Now you know all the immediate family.”

“I’m already overwhelmed and I’ve never met any of them.” Sorcha clenches her fingers together.

“We’re all normal people,” I try to reassure her.

She snorts. “Normal people don’t run the Irish mafia.”

“Almost normal, then.”

Approaching footsteps draw our attention to the living area where Carson walks in. He glances over at us and waves. “Hey.”

I nod in greeting. Sorcha gets up and sends him over to the table while she gets juice out of the fridge and fills a glass for him. Minutes later, Kellen and Aisling trod in and she pours their drinks as well. The three of them are seated and chatting amongst themselves. I glance over at her as she cleans up. She’s always taking care of everyone. Who takes care of her?

Sorcha finishes up and finally takes her seat. “Breakfast should be ready soon. But while you’re all here, I—we—wanted to talk to you about something.”

Their gazes bounce between us and the three of them are unusually quiet. Probably remembering the tension from yesterday and the way I’d left. Sorcha’s eyes dart in my direction before focusing on her siblings again. She hesitates then opens her mouth and closes it, like she’s unsure where to start. She takes a deep inhale.

“Aidan asked me to marry him,” she blurts out. “We wanted to tell you first and see how you feel about it.”

Kellen and Carson are quiet, but Aisling wiggles in her seat.

“Does that mean Aidan will be my brother?”

Sorcha glances at me. “Yes, I guess it does.”

The little girl jumps down from her chair and runs around the table to throw herself in my arms. “Woohoo! I get another brother.”

I squeeze her back. “And I get another sister.”

Aisling steps back. “You have a sister?”

“Her name is Imogen.” I nod. “I also have two brothers, Cian and Finn. So you’ll really be getting three more brothers and another sister.”

She turns to Sorcha. “Did you hear that? I’ve got more brothers and a sister.”

“I heard. That’s exciting.” Sorcha smiles at her, but her eyes hold worry as her gaze flickers to her brothers. “What about you two? How do you feel?”

Kellen speaks up first. “Does this mean you won’t have to borrow money for the pub now?”

His sister startles. “Where did you hear that?”

“I overheard you talking on the phone last week.”

Sorcha’s face flushes.

“Yes, it means she won’t have to borrow any money,” I speak up. “I told you I’d do what I could to help.”

Sorcha sputters. “You two talked about this already?” Her pitch rises with each word.

“The boys were worried about you.”

Her mouth snaps shut, but I can tell she’s upset about it still.

I turn back to the kids. “Before you make up your minds, you should know that if your sister marries me, we would all need to live in Dublin. The pub will still be here for when you get older if you want to come back. I’ll take care of it. But until then, you’d have to leave here.”

Quiet settles over the entire room until Sorcha finds her voice. “Nothing has to be decided today. I just wanted to let you know that he asked. We can talk about it later tonight if you want. Give yourselves time to think on it.”

She heads over to the oven to check on whatever she’d put in there. It must be done, because she brings it out and sets it on the counter. I glance over at the three kids.

“It’ll be okay,” I mouth to them with what I hope is an encouraging smile.

Sorcha opens the fridge and brings the jam and cream to the table. Then she carries a basket over and sets it down as well. She glances at me. “Hope you don’t mind scones again.”

“I don’t mind.”

While we eat, the atmosphere is thick with tension. Aisling’s chatter fills the silence, but the boys pick at their food and keep their eyes downcast. This morning is entirely different than yesterday. What if Kellen and Carson are opposed to not only the marriage, but moving? Sorcha’s not going to do anything that will make her siblings unhappy. They’ve had enough

unhappiness in their lives. They all have.

I need to find a way to make them happy.

CHAPTER 10



SORCHA

BREAKFAST HAD BEEN AWKWARD. THE BOYS WERE SUBDUED AND WHILE Aisling kept up most of the conversation, even she grew quiet. I'm the oldest—the pseudo-parent. I should have been reassuring them that marriage to Aidan is going to be great. That they'll love living in Dublin. There is so much to do there. More friends their age. But my fears and worries are just as big as theirs if for different reasons.

I finish cleaning up the kitchen. The twins and Aisling excused themselves as soon as they were done eating. I join Aidan at the table with my tea.

“What other questions do you have for me?” Aidan asks. “I'll try to answer them as honestly as I can.”

I'm still smothered in overwhelm that my brain is struggling to process. “I need to weigh all my options. Let's say I turn down your offer of marriage, and you loan me the money,”—I hold up my hand when Aidan attempts to speak—“and I do mean *loan*, what would happen?”

He sighs. “I don't know. Campbell knows you don't have the money on hand, and he already refused to let me pay it directly. Which means he'll assume I gave it to you. He will probably charge interest you can't pay and despite my telling him I'll kill anyone he sends to try and collect, it will eventually start a war between our families.”

I swallow at the image. “Can't your sister talk him into taking the

money?”

“Maybe, but that has other potential consequences. It will only cause a further rift between everyone. Liam will accuse us of using Imogen to manipulate him,” he explains. “Then, if she doesn’t talk him into it, then it pulls at the tentative relationship my Da is building with her.”

It’s damned if I do and damned if I don’t.

“I know it’s no consolation, but I’m sorry that you, Imogen, and Nessa are caught in the middle of this battle between Campbell and my family. It’s not fair to any of you.”

Him saying it actually makes me feel better. Because it *isn’t* fair that us three women appear to be the only thing stopping a bitter war. Also hearing Aidan casually mention killing people had been jarring. And more than a little terrifying. Is this really what my life has come to?

“So we get married. Why can’t we stay here and you stay in Dublin? You can come visit anytime.” Nothing would have to change except I’d be Aidan’s wife.

“I can’t protect you if you’re here and I’m not,” he says and there’s a hint of impatience in his tone that’s easy to identify.

“Why do we need protecting if you pay off Da’s debt?” It should be over and done with by then.

“Because we don’t know that Sheehan was the only person your Da borrowed money from. What if there’s another debt somewhere and more guys show up to collect?”

I hate that with every argument, he presents a counter. Everything he’s saying makes sense.

“What happens after we get married, then?”

He shrugs. “I’ll take care of Campbell. Then I’ll hire a family to run the pub for you. Make sure nothing happens to it. You and the kids come to Dublin with me. Bring whatever personal items you want. I’ll need to speak to Da, but there’s no reason why, for now, you all can’t live at our estate.”

Aidan makes it sound so easy. Only he’s not the one being uprooted from the only home he’s ever known. Kellen, Carson, and Aisling have grown up here. Not just in Burtonport, but in this flat itself. Since the day they were all born. He and I are asking them to leave it all behind. Not to mention, what happens between Aidan and me once we’re married? I assume we’ll be intimate. He’s not going to be celibate the rest of his life and there’s no way he’d cheat. That’s just not the kind of person he is. Except I’m too scared to

ask for an answer I'm not ready to hear the answer to. Call me a coward.

"I'm not trying to appear ungrateful for everything you're doing for me. Truly. It's just a huge decision." I reach over and lay my hand on his arm. "Will you be upset if I ask you to let the kids and I have some time alone to talk about this as a family?"

"Of course not. I'll head to the bed and breakfast. Maybe we can all have dinner together, though?"

I nod.

"I'll call you later." Aidan stands and bends to kiss my forehead. Then he walks to the door.

I follow because I have to lock up behind him. Once he's gone, I sag against the wall with a huge sigh. My life was never supposed to be like this. Except it is. I head back upstairs. The living room is still empty, so I go to the boys' room. They're playing their video games like usual. To my surprise, though, they also recently cleaned. Their clothes have all been put away and all the dirty dishes are gone. Their beds are made, and I don't trip over their shoes or schoolbags they usually dump right inside the door.

When was the last time this place had been tidied? Far too long ago. I hope it lasts.

They pause their game and I sit on the bottom bunk where Kellen sleeps. They pivot from their positions on the floor and face me.

"I want to talk to you about more grown up things before I talk to Aisling."

While I have no intention of sharing everything, there are certain things the boys deserve to know.

"Is this about the money?" Kellen asks again.

I'd put him off once before, but I can't any longer. "Yes. Before Da died he borrowed money from someone to help with the pub. Except now I can't pay back the loan."

"What does it mean that you can't pay it back?" Carson asks.

"And who were those men?" Kellen adds.

I try for a half-truth. "Those men worked for the man Da borrowed money from. They came to look at the pub because if I couldn't pay the loan, then their boss would have been the new owner."

The twins share a concerned glance.

"Will Aidan really keep it for us?" Kellen asks.

"Yes, but the only way to do that is by marrying him. He is going to pay

off Da's debt and make sure no one else will be able to own the pub but our family."

"What is Dublin like?" Carson's question is almost hesitant.

I pause as I scramble for how to describe it. "Do you remember going to Belfast?"

They both nod.

"It's a bit bigger than that. But there's tons of stuff to do and see. You'd go to a bigger school so you'd have a chance to make a lot of new friends. There's a really pretty park there called St. Stephens Green. It has a walking path surrounded by lot of trees and flowering bushes. There's a pond and two fountains. I think you'd really like it." I've only ever been there once, but it had been a memorable experience.

"Where would we live?" This is also from Carson.

I clasp my fingers together between my knees. "Aidan said for now, we'd live with his family."

"What's his family like?" Kellen asks.

"I don't know. I've never met them. But they can't be too bad, right? You guys like Aidan, and I bet his family is just as nice as he is." I hope.

The boys grow quiet again. Kellen glances up a few seconds later. "Can we take our stuff?"

I slide off the bed to sit on the floor by them and take his hand. "Of course you can. Anything you want. Aidan said they have lots of room."

He didn't actually, but if he's rich enough to pay ten thousand euros without blinking, he has to live in a massive house. He did call it an estate after all.

"How about this? Why don't you two talk it over for the day. Aidan wants to take us out for dinner. We can let him know our decision then." I make sure to say 'we' because their opinion and decision is just as important as mine.

"You know Aisling will want to go," Kellen points out. "She's excited to get more brothers who do her bidding."

That makes me laugh. "She does have a way of getting you two to do exactly what she wants, doesn't she?"

They both smile which eases some of the pressure inside my chest. "I'll leave you to talk."

I head to Aisling's room next. She's sitting at her desk drawing. I stand beside her and stare down over her shoulder. "Oh, that's pretty. I love the

colors you're working with."

She glances up. "Yellow, pink, and purple are my favorite."

"Mine, too."

She goes back to drawing the flower she's working on and I sit on her bed staring at the mural on her walls and ceiling. It had taken me over a month to complete it. And that had been doing a little bit every day. It's a piece I'm most proud of. When I'd set out to start on it, I didn't realize how difficult it would be. Sketching on paper is a far cry from almost life-size on perpendicular surfaces and making sure everything was to scale and didn't get distorted. Then there had been choosing the right paint. The end result had been perfect, though. And we'd be leaving it.

Some other family would be sleeping here if we do leave. I have to make Aidan promise they won't change anything about this room. It has to be kept exactly the way it is. My heart aches at the thought of my hard work and Aisling's adoration being destroyed.

"Socha, why are you crying?" Worry colors her tone.

I sniff back the tears and swipe my face. Aisling stands in front of me, her eyes big and wide and scared. I pull her onto my lap although she's almost too big for this too. God, she'd been so little as a baby. Every time I'd held her, I worried I'd hurt her somehow. What can I even tell her?

"I'm just feeling a little sad that you're getting so grown up. Before I know it, you're going to be going off to uni and I'm going to miss you."

"Then I won't go. I'll stay with you and Aidan forever and ever," she says firmly.

Apparently even she thinks it's a given that Aidan and I will be together.

"Will you be okay with him and me getting married and all of us moving to Dublin?" Does she actually understand what that means?

"Is Dublin very far away?"

I shake my head. "Not too far. A few hours."

"Can we come back here to visit?" she asks.

"Of course. We can make a whole weekend of it if we decide we want to come back for a bit."

She quirks her lips and sits quietly for a rule. "Okay. we can go."

"I think you're going to like Dublin. Plus, like Aidan said, you'll get more brothers and another sister. That's exciting, isn't it?"

"Uh huh." She nods rapidly.

I guess it's all settled then. All there's left to do is tell Aidan.

CHAPTER 11



Aidan

THE FAMILIAR SCENT OF BAKING HITS ME AS SOON AS I OPEN THE DOOR. NORA is always making something or another, whether it's for Da or Nathan and Lucia's boys.

She spoils them every time they come over, which isn't often enough for her or Da. He may only be their great-uncle, but they're treated like grandchildren by both him and Nora. Hell, they've got the boys calling them grand-da and mhamó. Learning they're going to be grandparents to three more kids might be enough to ease them into the idea that I'm getting married.

I stride down the hallway to Da's office. The door's open and I peek in. He sits behind his desk with his head bent over some paperwork. A pint of beer sits nearby and the faint scent of pipe tobacco lingers in the air. Although Cian supervises most things, Da still makes sure he also knows what's going on. I knock and he raises his head.

"Finally decide to grace us with your presence, I see." He arches an eyebrow and leans back in his chair. "You've been gone longer than usual."

Despite the fact I'm thirty, he still manages to make me feel like a teenager waiting on punishment for getting into another fight at school. Not that Da truly punished us unless we rightly deserved it.

"I had to take care of some things."

He waves me in. "Sit, so we can discuss this important thing you have to

tell me after being absent for six days.”

Not once in five years has he ever asked me where I disappear to. I take a seat and mimic his pose. Might as well just throw it all out there.

“I’m getting married.”

Da sits forward and rests his elbows on the desk top, tapping his lips with steepled fingers. “I hadn’t realized you were seeing anyone.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Is she pregnant?”

My head rattles. “What? No.”

“Is she the daughter of another enemy I’m not aware of?” he asks with a bit of irony in his tone.

I bark out a short laugh. “No. Sorcha and I have been friends—and only friends—for five years. She, her three young siblings, and, up until a month ago when he died, her Da live in a small village on the northwest coast. We met in Belfast where she was going to uni.”

“Not that I need to know who all your friends are, but why is it that I’ve never heard of her before today?”

I have to resist the urge to look away like I’m guilty of something. “Because until three days ago, she had no idea who I was. Or rather what my last name is. She didn’t know the family I belong to.”

Da slowly leans back, his gaze penetrating. “I see. Why is that?”

“I lied to her when we met.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

I straighten. “Sometimes it’s nice being just Aidan without everything that comes with being a Donnelly. The circumstances around Sorcha’s and my meeting were difficult for her. It felt easier. Safer if she didn’t know who I was.”

Da’s quiet for several minutes that stretch into what feels like hours. “I assume, if she’s marrying you, she’s now aware of who you are?”

“Yes.”

“If you’ve been lying to this woman for five years, I’ll also assume something prompted you to tell her who you really are.” It’s not a question.

“I haven’t figured out how, yet—although it may not matter at this point since they’re both dead—but her Da knew Dónal Sheehan. Well enough to borrow over ten-thousand euros to help keep Keir’s pub afloat. With Sheehan’s death, the debt was transferred to its new owner who sent two men to collect payment from Sorcha. A debt she knew nothing about.”

Da's face hardens and his lips thin. "Campbell."

I dip my head. "She called me after they left, completely terrified. I confronted him that night. He was a prick like usual. Refused to accept my offer to pay it. So I did the only thing I could think of to protect Sorcha."

"You told him she was your fiancée," he surmises.

"In front of Imogen."

At last, a spark of amusement lights up his eyes. "I'll bet that didn't go well after you left."

"I transferred the money to him the day before yesterday. As long as Sorcha and I follow through with the marriage, the debt will remain wiped clean. Otherwise, he'll take payment out of my flesh." No matter how much I'd wanted to, I hadn't gloated after it was all said and done.

"Have you set a date for this wedding?"

"Not yet, although Campbell forced my hand and said if Sorcha and I were actually engaged, then it must mean she would be moving to Dublin soon. Plus, I wanted to tell you first. I do need to go back to Burtonport and help Sorcha finalize some things with the pub. I told her I would hire people to continue operating it if she wanted. She's having a hard time letting go though. It's been in her family her entire life. She wants it to stay that way for the boys and Aisling after they're grown. In case any of them decide to take it over." I lean forward and rest my forearms on my knees.

"What about living arrangements?" Da asks.

"That's another thing I wanted to talk to you about. For now, I was hoping to get them settled here at the manor. The boys can take two rooms upstairs and Aisling can take Cian's old room so she's close to her sister. I think it'll be nice for them to get to know the family. Plus, having other people here can help take the burden off Sorcha. It's been hard for her since her Da died. She's running the pub and parenting three kids alone."

Da nods slowly. "I think that's a good idea. You'll need to talk to your brothers. Let them know."

"I also need to introduce Sorcha to Lucia and see how to enroll the kids in school. Plus, Aisling is around Enzo's age."

"You said there are two boys as well?"

"Kellen and Carson are twelve."

A smile comes to his face. "It'll be nice to have grandchildren around. Nora will be delighted."

"Thank you, Da." Having his support means a lot. "I'll sleep here tonight,

but I need to head back to Burtonport tomorrow.”

He stands and circles the desk. I rise as well and he palms both sides of my head. “You’re my son and I always want the best for you.”

He kisses my forehead and releases me. “Let’s go speak with Nora. We’ll need to make sure all the rooms are ready. Then you can call your brothers.”

We walk out of his office and into the kitchen where the scent of something sweet grows stronger. Nora is taking biscuits off a sheet and placing them on a wire rack. She glances over her shoulder at our entrance. Delight flashes across her face.

“Aidan, it’s so good to see you.”

Da crosses the room and wraps his arms around her, pressing a kiss against her cheek. “We have some good news to share.”

She sets the cooking sheet down and wipes her hand on a towel she tosses on the counter. “I love good news.”

I need to resign myself to the fact I’ll probably have to tell the story at least three more times. If I’d planned better, I’d have gathered everyone together and told them all at once. Too late. Quickly, I summarize what I told Da, but leaving out everything having to do with Sheehan, Campbell, and the pub. It’s easier that way, although I’ll probably tell Cian and Finn.

Nora rushes over and hugs me. “Oh, Aidan, I’m so happy for you and can’t wait to meet this Sorcha and the children. Will you all be staying here?”

I almost chuckle at the thread of hope in the question. “For the moment. Until they get settled at least. Later we may decide to buy a house in the city since the kids are still in school.”

“It’ll be so nice to have little ones around the house,” she nearly gushes.

“I’m sure they’ll love having a mhamó who makes them biscuits.”

Da comes up behind her, tugs her against his chest, and lays his hands over her waist. “Nora, love, I’m going to call the Fitzpatrick boys to clear out Cian’s old room as well as two of the rooms upstairs. Would you mind supervising and making sure things get stored in the extra rooms?”

She pats his arm. “Of course.”

Ever since Imogen has come into our lives, Da’s been much more affectionate and Nora’s let him. We’ve told her for over a decade that it doesn’t bother us—she’s been more of a mum to us than ours ever was—but she’s held firm in her belief to keep what happens between her and Da behind closed doors. I’m glad she’s eased up. Da’s never been happier. We keep

speculating if they'll ever get married.

“Thank you, Nora.” I glance at Da. “I’m going to my room to call Cian and Finn and give them the news.”

I leave the two of them and make my way down the corridor and into the common area I’ve shared with my brothers since we built this wing onto the house. The boys will love it in here, between the theatre system and all the gaming equipment we have. Finn’s the only one who still uses any of it. I take the hallway that offshoots toward my room and close the door behind me.

This has been my room for most of the last decade. I’ve never brought a woman here. To my knowledge neither has Cian or Finn brought one to theirs. It’s been our sacred space. And come next week, I’ll be sharing it with Sorchá.

CHAPTER 12



SORCHA

I STAND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE EMPTY PUB WITH MY ARMS WRAPPED AROUND my waist and try not to cry. The past week has been a rollercoaster of emotion. Enough to make me sick to my stomach. The nausea has been almost a constant presence. The twins and Aisling have somehow started treating this like some grand adventure. This will be only the second time they've ever left Burtonport.

Footsteps come from behind and then Aidan's warm body is pressed against mine. I lean into him and he holds me without saying anything. He just hugs me tight while I grieve. We remain there for a few minutes before I take a deep breath and turn forcing him to release me.

"The last of the stuff has been loaded in the lorry. They'll make sure it gets to the manor and taken inside. You just tell them where you want it," Aidan says.

This is really happening. It's time I accept it and figure out how to move forward from here. "Thank you for taking care of all this. I'm not sure I would have been able to do it."

"Yes, you would have, because you don't quit. But now you have someone to help so you don't have to do things alone anymore."

Tears threaten again, because this last month trying to keep everything together has been exhausting. I move close again and circle my arms around him, laying my head on his chest. "Thank you."

“Are we leaving soon?” Aisling’s voice pipes up from nearby.

Aidan and I separate and my sister joins us. I kneel down. “In a few minutes. As soon as we grab our bags and get them in Aidan’s car.”

She grabs my hand and tugs me toward the kitchen. “Mine’s ready.”

I can’t help but chuckle at her enthusiasm and glance behind me. Aidan’s smiling as well. The three of us climb the stairs and enter the flat. Sure enough, sitting in the living room is her small, pink Hello Kitty suitcase.

The twins walk in, each carrying their own duffel. I guess I’m the only one left.

“Let me get my bag, and we should be ready to go,” I say forcing excitement into my tone.

I leave the four of them and head to my bedroom. For several seconds, I stand there, staring at the four walls where I’ve lived nearly my whole life. We moved in here long before the twins were born when it had just been Da, Mum, and me. Every day after school, I’d rush upstairs so I could finish my homework and then I’d hurry back downstairs and visit with the fishermen who came in. More than half of them still show up. It hadn’t just been about the pub for me. It had been about the people.

With a deep inhale, I grip the handle of my suitcase, take one final glance around the room, and walk out, closing the door quietly behind me.



THE DRIVE TO DUBLIN HAS BEEN FILLED WITH CHATTER AND MORE THAN ONE argument, but a buzz of excitement comes from the three passengers in the backseat. As we make our way through the city, the chatter increases drowning out the song playing on the radio. I glance back and they’re all pointing at different things.

The scenery changes as we continue out of Dublin and into the countryside. Aidan had said their estate was about twenty minutes outside the city center. The rolling green hills on either side of the road remind me of the area around Burtonport and a wave of homesickness washes over me. A warm hand covers mine and squeezes gently. I glance over at Aidan.

“It’s beautiful out here.” It truly is. Shouldn’t I be happier?

“The back of the estate looks out over a field of hills. Once in a while I’ll sit on the patio and watch the sunset on the horizon. The view is stunning.”

“I look forward to seeing it.”

“Are we there yet?” Aisling calls out for only the twenty-third time.

Aidan and I both laugh and he glances over his shoulder for a brief second. “We should be there in less than five minutes.”

That must satisfy her, because she sits back in her seat and goes back to drawing. I’d made sure to keep out her small lap desk and a few art supplies before we left so she’d be somewhat entertained during the drive. Having a picture to sketch is about the only time she’ll sit still.

As promised, five minutes later, Aidan turns onto a narrow lane guarded by a massive iron gate that opens automatically at his approach. We drive down the lane lined with trees on either side that provide us shade. Dappled bursts of sunlight filter through the branches giving the ground a polka-dot appearance. As we slowly move forward I keep my eyes trained ahead waiting for the first glimpse of our—my—new home.

The road curves softly and then...there it is. I’m awestruck. The kids must be as well, because a chorus of wow and whoa come from them. It’s magnificent with its Georgian architecture and creeping vines that climb and weave in between the narrow spaces separating the wall of windows. The panes are so clean and shiny they reflect the entirety of the front lawn and the archway of trees surrounding it. If I didn’t believe Aidan about who he really is, I would after laying eyes on this house. It screams wealth.

Several cars—expensive ones, including Aidan’s—are parked in the circle drive. He borrowed his brother’s SUV because he thought we would be more comfortable in the larger vehicle. We come to a stop and he shuts it off. Before I can exit, he reaches for my hand and rubs his thumb across my skin.

“Everything is going to be okay. I promise.”

I nod shakily. He mimics it and then we’re both getting out. Aidan opens the back door on his side and the boys jump down. I help Aisling out. Holding her hand, we circle around to meet them and then the five of us walk toward the house. Before we make it to the steps the double doors part and, despite the dark hair threaded with silver, an older version of Aidan appears. His blue eyes glow with warmth, but every inch of him radiates power. It’s in the way he holds himself. This is a man who wouldn’t hesitate to destroy any person who crosses him.

Aidan’s hand goes to my lower back and I draw strength from him. The most feared and powerful man in Dublin is going to be my father-in-law. I can’t be—won’t be—timid. Keeping hold of Aisling’s hand, we walk side-

by-side until we reach Aidan's Da. He smiles down at us and once again, Aidan's resemblance to him is visible.

"Welcome, you must be Sorcha," he greets me with a hug that takes me by surprise. "It's so nice to meet you."

For a second, I'm taken back to before Da died and he'd wrap his thick arms around me, smelling like yeast and hops. I'd felt loved. Mr. Donnelly releases me and his gaze shifts to Aisling and the twins.

"I'm happy to meet you all as well. Forgive me for not being able to tell which of you is Kellen and which is Carson," he says with a wink.

I already warned both of them not to play any tricks on Aidan's Da regarding their identity. As the natural leader of the two, Kellen steps forward with his hand outstretched. "I'm Kellen, sir."

The older man gives him a firm, but gentle handshake and turns to Carson to shake his hand as well. "Which means you must be Carson. A pleasure."

At last Mr. Donnelly turns back to Aisling and for a second time shock keeps me immobile when he lowers himself to one knee. "That means you must be Aisling. I understand you're quite the artist like your sister."

Never one to shy away from strangers, she releases my hand and shoves hers out in front of her like the boys did. "Yes, sir, I love to draw."

Chuckling, Aidan's Da shakes it. "Well, there just so happens to be a new sketchpad and box of pencils with your name on them inside. Perhaps we should go in and see?"

Without loosening her grip on his hand, she turns to me. "Can we, Sorcha?"

"Of course, and be sure to tell Mr. Donnelly thank you."

Aidan's Da rises, his hand still held firmly in Aisling's. "Call me Carrick. All of you. You're family now."

With that pronouncement, he leads us inside. Aidan leans close. "See? Nothing to worry about."

I shoulder bump him, because we've only been here for five minutes. There's plenty of time for things to go wrong. While Aisling leads the conversation in front of us, I slow until the boys come up beside me.

"So? What do you think?" I ask.

"This house is huge," Carson stage-whispers, his gaze darting around.

Yes, it is. It's a bit overwhelming in fact, which is why I keep my attention on them instead of what's around me. I'll have Aidan give me a tour when I'm a bit more settled. I glance at Kellen.

“What about you?”

He actually hesitates before finally speaking. “Do you think he’ll like us?”

I open my mouth, but Aidan beats me to it. “I know for a fact he already likes you.”

“How do you know that?” Kellen asks in an unsure tone.

“Because *I* like you, and my Da knows I have excellent taste in friends. Besides, he doesn’t let everyone call him Carrick. Like he said, you’re family now and to us, that means everything.”

CHAPTER 13



Aidan

A LITTLE BRIBERY NEVER HURT ANYONE. IT'S A SMART STRATEGY. WIN THE kids over and Sorcha will soon follow. Especially once she sees there's nothing to worry about. With Da in the lead and still holding onto Aisling's hand, we head straight for the kitchen. Of course, Nora is more than ready for us.

She turns at our arrival and wipes her hands on her apron. "Welcome."

"Nora, this is Sorcha, Kellen, Carson, and Aisling." I point at each of them as I say their name. "Nora is the best cook and baker in Dublin."

She smirks, because we always give her over-the-top compliments when we want something, but her cheeks still turn pink.

"It's lovely to meet you," Sorcha says.

"You as well. Aidan has told me so much about the four of you." Like Da, she gives Sorcha a hug and then faces the kids with a bright smile. "I hope you like biscuits."

They all nod.

"Wonderful. When you get settled, come back and visit me and I'll make sure you get some."

"Thank you so much," Sorcha tells Nora.

"Why don't I show you to your rooms?" Da says. "Then Aidan can bring your bags in."

He and Aisling leave first. I glance behind us and the boys still trail. It

probably wouldn't have been as quiet and with far less anxiety permeating the air if it was just the five of us, but it's best to get the nerves out of the way first with the introduction to Da. Get all the uncomfortableness behind us. I'd told Sorcha that my family knew why we were engaged. Maybe I shouldn't have. She's been nothing but worried since. Except I'd also promised not to lie to her again.

Like I said, bribery doesn't hurt anything. Which is why Finn is sitting in the common area playing a video game. Ply them all with what they love most. The boys' eyes are trained on the giant screen. Already they're salivating. After a quick introduction, we head for Aisling's new room. On her bed are the drawing supplies Da teased.

She breaks away from him and rushes over to pick up each item. "Sorcha, look."

"I see." She crosses the room to admire everything.

"Why don't I take the boys up to their rooms while you and Aisling explore in here? We'll be right back." She may not realize it, but I can sense her emotions and her overwhelm. There are tells.

Sorcha glances up, relief filling her eyes. "We'll be here."

Da walks with us. As we pass through the common area again, he glances at the twins. "Aidan tells me you two love video games."

"Yes, sir," they answer in unison.

"You'll have to show me which is your favorite one of these days."

Kellen and Carson stare in awe. As though they're not quite sure what to make of him. Did Keir never play with them? The one thing about Da is that he has never been too busy for us and always took an interest in the things we enjoyed growing up. Granted, it helped that all the hobbies we enjoyed included fighting, gaming, and shooting.

We reach the second floor and stop at Kellen's room first. His gaze bounces between Da and me and his brother.

"Wait, we get our own room?" It's as though he can't believe it.

Da chuckles and squeezes his shoulder. "If that's what you'd like. Of course, if you'd rather, we can rearrange things so you can both stay in the same room. I'll leave it up to you. Either way is perfectly fine with us. But while you're here, you are each welcome to your own room."

Kellen and Carson exchange a look and then turn to Da, nodding their head rapidly.

"That's settled, then. And this is Carson's room." He gestures to the

neighboring door and Carson breaks away from his brother to check out where he'll be living. "If neither are to your liking, we have a couple more you can choose from that might suit better."

I'm glad I can give them this. The home they shared with Sorcha was a wonderful place, but there are so many more opportunities for them here.

"Alright, you can enjoy your rooms once we bring your stuff in. We don't want to leave Sorcha or Aisling unattended. Who knows what kind of trouble those two might get into while we're gone," I joke and the boys smile.

Their bodies are less tense and they're far more animated as we head back down to Finn's and my wing. Although, I suppose it's more my wing than Finn's considering Sorcha and Aisling moved into it. Not that my brother spends much time at home anyway. Just enough to catch a few hours of sleep before he goes into the casino. A lot of times, he doesn't even come home, but rather sleeps in the penthouse on the top floor we keep when one of us needs a place to crash.

Da stops us. "I'll leave you to finish your tour. I hope you'll join us for dinner this evening."

"Thanks, Da."

"Thank you...Carrick," Kellen says, with Carson echoing him.

Da pivots and takes the hallway toward his office, while the twins and I walk through the common area where Finn remains. Sorcha and Aisling are still in the young girl's room, where Aisling is pointing out where she's going to put all her stuff. They glance up at our arrival.

"How did you like your room?" Sorcha asks the boys.

"Holy shit, we get our own," Kellen blurts out and then cringes.

I bite back my laugh. Sorcha gives him "the look". "That's wonderful, but next time, how about we leave off the expletive?"

"Sorry."

She waves him off. I step forward. "I don't think Finn would mind if you wanted to join his game. And maybe Aisling can take some of her new art supplies into the kitchen and keep Nora company while Sorcha and I get your things from the vehicle?"

Kellen and Carson are already nodding. Sorcha runs her hand over Aisling's head. "What do you think, little nightmare? I bet if you asked nicely, Nora will give you a biscuit. No more than one, though. I don't want you to ruin your dinner."

"I liked her. She was nice," the little girl declares. "I like Carrick, too."

As expected, she is the easiest to win over. “I’m glad to hear that.”

While I get the twins settled in with Finn, who immediately starts speaking gamer with them, and Aisling all set up at the small table in the kitchen, Sorcha and I head outside.

“Was Da as scary as you thought he’d be?” I tease her when we reach the SUV.

She fakes an exaggerated laugh. “Very funny. Besides, you know it’s not necessarily your Da that makes me nervous and uncertain. It’s this whole marriage thing. And losing the pub. And taking the kids away from their home. It’s all of it.”

I let go of the suitcase handle and face her. “You’re not losing the pub. It will still be there whenever you want to go back to visit. It’s an easy weekend trip. You’re just not having to be the one to run it. And so far, the kids are taking the move in stride. You know they’re resilient.”

Sorcha wraps her arms around her waist. “I know. I just can’t help but feel like I’m ruining both our lives. Maybe I could have figured something else out or another way to pay down Da’s debt. It’s like I just gave up and took the easy way out. That’s not who I am.”

In two steps, I close the distance between us and palm her cheeks. “The easy way out? Are you kidding? You’re going to be marrying into the Donnelly family. Nothing about us is easy. We are all stubborn, loud, opinionated, and possess a fiery temper when provoked. While we haven’t had too much trouble in the last few months—aside from Campbell—we’re not without our enemies. I’m not trying to scare you, because you’ll be well-protected, but there is a small level of risk being one of us. So, while you’re safe, it’s not always easy.”

Sorcha’s eyes track over my face until she finally nods. “I don’t mean to appear ungrateful for your help. Although if we’re comparing stubbornness, then I think I’ll fit right in with your family.”

I snort and pull her in for a hug. Something I’ve done hundreds of times over the last five years. Except, I’m not sure if it’s the fact we’re standing in our driveway or the knowledge that tonight, we’ll be sharing a bed, but this hug feels different. From the crush of Sorcha’s breasts against my chest to the fragrance of her shampoo, there’s so much...more. I cough and release her.

“All right, let’s get these bags inside and get everyone situated. Da invited us to join him and Nora for dinner tonight if you’re up for it.”

“That would be nice. I think we’ll all appreciate a home-cooked meal.

Especially one I don't have to cook." She chuckles.

"If there's one thing that Nora lives for, it is to feed everyone. She's a fantastic cook and an even better baker. Apparently she's attempting to teach Imogen a few recipes." I mock-shudder and sling the boys' bags over my shoulder and grab Sorcha's suitcase. "All I can say is I'm glad Campbell is her guinea pig and not us. From what Nora says, the lessons aren't going well. But my sister is as stubborn as the rest of us and determined to learn how to make one meal before she calls it quits."

"I'd love to meet her." She brings out Aisling's luggage, and I close the door.

"I'll ask her to stop by. Same with Caitlín. I also spoke to Lucia. She said to give her a call if you need help with getting the kids enrolled in school. Her oldest son is around Aisling's age."

"You've thought of everything haven't you?" Sorcha walks beside me toward the house.

"Probably not *everything*. Just whatever I can to make life easier for you. I know between losing your Da and now this, things have been hard. Aren't friends supposed to be there for you when times are tough? To help you get through them?" I pause at the door and glance at her expectantly.

She huffs out a short laugh. "I think you've gone above and beyond a regular friendship."

"What can I say? I'm an overachiever."

"And so humble," Sorcha deadpans.

I wink and open the door for her. It's like I told her. Everything is going to be fine.

CHAPTER 14



SORCHA

ALL DAY I'VE BEEN TRYING NOT TO HAVE A PANIC ATTACK. AIDAN'S BROTHER Finn, his Da—I *have to remember to call him Carrick*—and Nora have been wonderful. They're far more down-to-earth than I expected them to be. Carrick, especially, considering who he is. I appreciate how Finn has befriended the boys.

"I think that's everything." Aidan surveys Carson's room and the boxes that the men he hired finished delivering a short time ago. "Go ahead and start unpacking and putting things wherever you want them."

Kellen's already doing the same in his room. The boys are over the moon that they have their own. It's the first time ever. Although, I suspect tonight, and maybe a few more nights after, they'll both wind up together in one room or the other. At least until they get used to having their own space.

Aidan's hand goes to my lower back as we head down the hallway and then the stairs. He's always been affectionate, but today it's like he's taking every opportunity he can to touch me. Little brushes across my arm here. Soft caresses of my fingers there. Every time he puts his hand on my back the heat that sears through me grows hotter. It's enough to drive me insane. Has he always touched me this much?

"Breathe," he whispers in my ear, his hot breath tickling the shell.

"I'm breathing."

"You're ten seconds from a freak out."

I gasp. "Excuse me, it's at least five minutes away."

Aidan laughs. "Whether it's ten seconds or five minutes, it's too soon. Talk to me. What's freaking you out?"

How do I tell him that I had no idea he planned on us sleeping in the same room? Kellen, Carson, and Aisling were all given their own and yet, each time, my only thought was "where's mine?". Maybe I'm jumping to conclusions.

"I'm not freaking out," I insist. "I'm just thinking."

"About?"

I hesitate. "Our sleeping arrangements. Everyone has gotten their own room except me."

Aidan stops in the middle of the hallway and his gaze meets mine. He studies me for a second. "We're getting married. Where else would you sleep but with me?"

My pulse races at the thought of lying in the same bed as him night after night. Of him leaning over to kiss me. A kiss that quickly flares into more. Already I can picture growing even more attached and then my heart breaking.

"But it's not real." I try one more desperate attempt. The lie is bitter on my tongue.

"It's real to me."

I swear my heart stops beating altogether. "What do you mean?"

He steps closer and threads his fingers between mine. "I'll admit that when I blurted out to Campbell you were my fiancée, it was strictly to fuck with him. But I've gotten used to the idea of us being married. You're going to be my wife. Whether it's tomorrow, next month, or next year."

Aidan scans my face. "We might not be starting out with the ideal marriage, but that doesn't mean it's not real."

Except he's not the one who has to worry about his heart. "Why can't we just stay engaged forever?"

There's a flash of emotion in his eyes. "Would it really be that bad being married to me?"

"Yes." I jerk from Aidan's grip and turn away. Hands clasp behind my neck, I face him again with a heavy sigh. "No. I don't know."

"I see." He takes a step away from me. "I'll move into one of the rooms upstairs, then, so you can still be near Aisling."

"Aidan, no." I reach out, but he dodges me. Dread swirls in my stomach.

“It’s fine. I understand. You don’t have to worry about anything.” He walks away.

With that sick sensation growing, I follow him through the large living area he told me he and his brother share. Finn is gone and Aisling must still be in her room organizing all her drawing supplies. He continues into his bedroom and opens the closet. The one he re-organized just so I’d have room to put my clothes in there as well.

I hate this. He’s never walked away from me in the middle of a conversation before. Already the engagement is ruining things between us. What’s the marriage going to do to it? *Why are you fighting this so hard?* Didn’t I just tell myself that this is happening and I’d need to figure out how to make it work?

Besides, what woman in their right mind would turn Aidan down? He’s funny. God, is he funny. No one makes me laugh like he does. He’s sweet and kind to the kids. There’s no one more reliable and trustworthy than him—minor lying about his identity aside. Him being rich doesn’t hurt. And the man is gorgeous.

But, he’s also stubborn and often inflexible when he puts his mind to something. There might additionally be the small fact that he’s a criminal and is part of a whole family of criminals.

He take a bunch of jeans out—still on the hanger—and lays them on the bed. He adds shirts to the pile.

“Aidan, will you please stop?”

He completely ignores me as he sets a stack of boxer briefs on the bed. Then he turns toward the bathroom and my anger blows. I grab the first thing I can reach and throw it at his back. The soft wad of—oh god—underwear hits him between the shoulder blades and drops to the floor. But he stops and slowly turns around. He tips his head down—his gaze flicking to the black fabric lying there—lifts it, and arches an eyebrow.

“Did you just throw a pair of underwear at me?”

I fist my hips. “Yes, because you were being a dick.”

“Me? I’m pretty sure there is only one dick”—he pauses, darts a quick glance down, and then glares at me—“okay, *two* dicks in this room, and one of them can’t talk.”

There’s a stunned silence that lingers for several beats until I burst out laughing. “Oh my god, you did not just say that?”

Finally, Aidan smiles. The ickiness inside me dissipates. But then I get

serious.

“You’re right. I was being a dick. I’m sorry. And I’m sorry for throwing something at you.” I extend the olive branch and make the first move this time. Closing the distance, I hug him. “Please don’t move out of here.”

At first he remains tense, but then he puts his arms around me and sighs. “You know I have a hard time saying no to you, even when I should.”

“I know. Ignore me, okay? I’m just being weird.” I breathe in the scent of detergent and Aidan’s cologne. “I don’t want to fight with you.”

“I don’t want to fight with you, either. But I also don’t want you to be miserable.”

I lean my head back to stare up at him. “I’m not miserable. Not at all.”

Before my brain can send a warning signal, I come up on tiptoes and press my lips to his. It’s a mad compulsion. One I’m going to regret in a minute. But for this brief second, I ignore the screaming voice yelling that I just made a huge mistake. Aidan’s hold tightens on me and he moves to deepen the kiss, but it’s like a tether yanks him, because in a heartbeat he’s nearly pushing me away from him.

“I’m sorry,” I rush to say. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

He shakes his head. “No, I’m the one who’s sorry. I think I’m giving you mixed signals.”

There’s a visceral thud in my chest. “Mixed signals?”

“I’m making such a huge deal about you not wanting to share a room since we’re getting married, but I also don’t want to ruin our friendship with messy emotions.”

“Messy emotions?” I can barely get the words out. “You just said this marriage is real to you. Which means I need to start thinking of it as real, too, and the last I checked real meant kissing and being intimate. Real means I assume you hadn’t planned on living a celibate life, and I know you well enough to know that you wouldn’t cheat on me.”

Aidan’s cheeks turn a deep red and he won’t meet my eyes. I swallow down my uncertainty.

“You wouldn’t”—I have to take a breath before I can even continue—“you wouldn’t cheat on me. Would you?”

“No,” he says a little too quickly. “I just...I guess I didn’t think that far ahead either. Thought maybe we could get married without worrying about more than that.”

I’m so busy processing his words that it takes a second before I respond.

“By ‘more than that’ I’m going to assume you mean that I won’t do something so completely and utterly stupid as fall in love with you? We get married and have sex, but don’t let those messy emotions get in the way. So it’s real to you as long as I don’t catch feelings. Got it.”

This time, it’s me who walks away. Only Aidan doesn’t follow. Which is a good thing, because I’ll say something I’ll regret. I should go check on Aisling, but I need to be by myself for a little bit. Alone time has been virtually non-existent for me since Da died. Even before then I spent most of every day of the last five years helping him with both the pub and the kids. He’d been so lost after Mum was gone. When was the last time I did something that was solely for me?

I make my way through the house and out the front door. Maybe some fresh air will do me good. I explore the estate, starting with the back. I take a seat at the round table and stare out over the landscape. Aidan had been right about the view. I bet the sunset *is* spectacular. There’s an adorable cottage more than halfway down the slope along a level section. Maybe I could stay there?

A door opens behind me. I brace myself and turn in my seat. Except it’s not Aidan. Instead, Carrick steps out. “Mind if I join you?”

What, am I going to tell him no? “Please do.”

He closes the distance and sits perpendicular to me, but turns toward to the sprawling lawn to stare out at it as well. “Everyone settled?”

“They’re getting there. Thank you for giving the boys their own room. You didn’t need to do that.”

“What’s the sense of having this large of a house if everyone doesn’t get to have their own space?”

I suppose that’s true.

Carrick finally faces me. “My son’s lucky to have you.”

Excuse me?

“He’s different around you. More focused. Centered.”

“What do you mean?” I lean forward and rest my forearms on the table. He has me curious.

“Cian is the oldest. He’s the one who will take over our organization when I’m gone. It’s what he was born to do. He knows what his place is and he’s preparing for it. Finn has always had a knack for business and numbers. It’s why I put him in charge of the casino. He’s the only person I trust with my money. With our family’s money.” He pauses briefly. “Then there’s

Aidan. Despite his creative talent, he somehow manages to coast along, rudderless, without any specific direction. He's brilliant, but he doesn't have the patience for things like managing the books or looking after any of our other businesses or being in charge of it all. There's always been this restless energy surrounding him. Like there's something he's missing out on in life, but can't find it."

It's fascinating how Carrick sees his son, because that's nothing like what he's shown me.

"I can tell I've surprised you," he notes.

"Yes, because I've never seen Aidan anything but calm and focused."

He stands. "I find that interesting."

Before I can respond, he walks toward the house, but he pauses at the door. "It doesn't matter what proof Campbell asked for regarding your engagement. Aidan would have figured out another way to pay off the debt and protect you and your family's pub that didn't force you into marrying him."

He goes inside.

What does he mean by that? Is he saying that I can call off the engagement? Or is he saying there's another reason Aidan is going through with the wedding?

CHAPTER 15



Aidan

THANK GOD THIS DAY IS ALMOST OVER. OF COURSE, THERE'S STILL THE question of Sorcha and the shit show from earlier. I'm forcing the confrontation by not moving to another room and waiting in here for her to show up. She ignored me during dinner and instead focused all her attention on the kids and how they liked their rooms and how they spent their day. Of course, they were all more than happy to dominate the conversation. Kellen and Carson disappeared upstairs right afterward and Sorcha has been in Aisling's room getting her settled.

It was nice to see Da and Nora so happy. He's never come out and said it, but Cian, Finn, and I are all aware of how much he would love for us to give him grandchildren. Imagine me being the first. I doubt any of them expected that to happen.

Other than at dinner, I haven't seen her since our argument. Maybe it's cowardice, but I gave her her space. *Because you know what an ass you were.* Jesus, how could I have been so stupid to think she wouldn't have been hurt by my words? My only excuse is fear.

There's a soft knock on the door. I open it to find her standing there.

"Can I come in?"

I step back to let her pass. The coconut scent of her shampoo follows. I've been smelling it off and on all day. Or maybe that's just wishful thinking. She stops in the middle of the room and pivots to face me.

“We need to talk,” she states point blank.

“I know. Have a seat.” I gesture to the overstuffed chair at the desk.

Sorcha sinks down into it and swipes her hands down her thighs. She’s looking everywhere but at me. “I’ll go first before I lose my nerve.”

I sit on the corner of the bed facing her. “I’m listening.”

“I’m not sorry I kissed you. If this marriage is going to be real, then it’s going to be real,” she states firmly. “But you need to know that there are going to be messy emotions.”

I wince, because I deserve that.

“Maybe you can separate sex from emotions, but I don’t know that I can. Especially with you.” Sorcha finally meets my eyes. “There’s a chance I could fall in love with you. No, there’s a good chance I *will* fall in love with you. You’re my best friend. You’re the first person I want to talk to when something happens, good or bad. I’ve never wanted to screw that up, so, in my head, I’ve reminded myself that you’re unavailable. Forever. That what we have is better than nothing and I refused to give that up.

“I’m also selfish enough to not share you with another woman, so be warned. If we’re doing this, you have to swear on everything you hold dear you won’t cheat on me. Ever,” Sorcha’s voice hardens. “There are no such thing as mixed signals. You’re either in this for real or you’re not.”

Can I live with that? With the possibility that no matter what I do, I’m probably going to break her heart. “I’m not saying this to hurt you, but you need to know that I can’t promise I’ll fall in love with you.”

She swallows and nods. “I understand that. But, I also want you to do something for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t completely rule out the possibility.”

My brow creases. “The possibility for what?”

“Of falling in love with me.”

Her words are a gut punch and instantly have me distancing myself emotionally. Love was never supposed to factor into this. It’s a marriage of convenience. A way for me to protect Sorcha. Nothing more. Loving someone gives them power over you. Makes you weak. Bitter. Hateful. All the things my mother was. And I refuse to become like her.

“Can I have the night to think about it?”

I can tell she’s disappointed, but she tries to hide it. “I’m probably asking for a lot and springing it all on you, so I guess it’s only fair I give you time to

decide.”

“Do you want me to sleep somewhere else tonight?”

Sorcha gnaws at the inside of her bottom lip like she always does when she has to make a hard decision. I’ve always thought it was adorable, but this time it’s more meaningful. I’m holding my breath while she decides. She shakes her head.

“No. I’m sure we can both make it through a night in the same bed unscathed.” I could swear there’s a hint of sarcasm in her tone, but I don’t point it out.

“Do you want to watch a movie until we’re ready to go to sleep?” It’s always been our thing when I’ve crashed at her flat. We watch a scary movie she picks out and then she spends the entirety of it shielding her eyes against my chest.

“I think I’m just going to go to bed, if that’s okay? It’s been a long and exhausting day.”

“Understandable.” I concede. “If you want to use the bathroom first to get ready, I’m going to go take care of a couple things for Da.”

“Thanks.” Sorcha gets up and I stand as well.

Because I can’t help myself, I close the distance between us and tug her into my arms. She stiffens for a second, but then relaxes fully against me. The minutes tick by with neither of us releasing the other, until finally she breaks away and closes herself in the bathroom.

There’s nothing I need to do for Da. It had merely been an excuse to get away and try to make things less awkward between us. Even if we survive this marriage with our friendship intact, I’m not sure it will ever be the same. For some reason, I’m finding it hard to breathe. I walk out of the room and head anywhere but here.

Of course, I wind up outside Da’s office. The door is slightly ajar and the light’s on. “It’s kind of late for you to be working isn’t it? You should be enjoying your evening with Nora.”

He glances up and waves me in. “I’m almost finished here and then we were going to read together before bed.”

“You reading anything good?” I sit in the chair opposite him.

“Dry, boring stuff about the growth of agriculture in Ireland that you would have zero interest in.” He smirks.

“You’re right. I’m falling asleep just thinking about it.”

“So tell me why you’re sitting in here with me instead of with your

fiancée? Not that I don't appreciate the company, but Sorcha's much prettier to look at than I am," Da jokes.

"I think I fucked up."

He leans back. "How so?"

"I thought I was doing the right thing. Protecting Sorcha. Saying she was my fiancée seemed like a simple solution. Then Campbell called my bluff. Now, she's moved in here and we're actually getting married. I didn't plan on it being more than on paper. A front to placate Liam's demand. But nothing about this is simple."

"Loving someone never is."

My heart skips a beat and panic rises in my chest. "Sorcha and I are just friends. I don't love her. Not like that."

Da stares quietly at me, his gaze assessing. Then he closes the folder he'd been reading from, stands, and rounds his desk to stand in front of me. "Of all you boys, you have always been my most stubborn. If you didn't want to do something, you wouldn't do it. No matter how much you're threatened or coaxed. Nothing could ever make you do something you didn't already want to do."

He clasps me on the shoulder and walks out of his office. I sit there for several more minutes replaying his words. No, he's wrong. I've never had any plans to marry. I'm not like Cian who, until Nessa, would have married if for nothing more than to produce a few heirs. Or Finn, who has admitted he wants to find a nice woman to settle down with at some point. But only once he's done fucking his way through every former floor girl who used to work at the casino.

Marriage has never been for me. Love, *especially*, has never been for me. I've seen what love does to a person, and I want nothing to do with it. Yes, I care about Sorcha, and if I could love anyone, it would be her.

I make my way back to my bedroom. She's already in bed, lying on her back and staring up at the ceiling. She glances over at me. At least she's not pretending to be asleep.

"Did you get done whatever you needed to do?"

"I did."

"Good."

We stare at each other for several awkward seconds, neither of us breaking the silence. Finally, I head for the bathroom. I brush my teeth and strip down to my boxer briefs. Maybe I should have grabbed a pair of

lounging pants from my dresser, but it's too late for that. Besides, Sorcha and I are getting married. We're going to have to get used to seeing each other without clothes.

Instantly, images of her naked filter through my head. Not for the first time, either. She's a beautiful woman with the perfect amount of curves. I've imagined Sorcha naked more than once, especially during the early days of our friendship before I decided it wasn't worth fucking up by sleeping with her. Soon though, we'll be married and she'll be in my bed every single night. Available. Gorgeous. And my wife.

I meet my reflection in the mirror. *You're really going to do this, aren't you?* Her request plays in my head again.

"Don't completely rule out the possibility of falling in love with me."

Before I left Da's office, I'd already decided I'm in this for real. I'm just not sure I can do the only thing she asked me to do for her.

CHAPTER 16



SORCHA

I'M NOT SURE I GOT MORE THAN A FEW HOURS OF SPORADIC SLEEP THE ENTIRE night. More than once I found myself plastered to Aidan's side, but quickly moved away each time, praying he stayed asleep. I woke up a short time ago, only to discover he'd already left. I've been lying here alone since. *You're feeling sorry for yourself.* Maybe I am. The stress of the last month hasn't made it any easier.

There's a soft knock on the door.

"Sorcha, can I come in?" Aisling's voice filters through it.

"Of course," I call out.

She opens it tentatively and peeks around before coming in and crawling into the bed with me. She hasn't done this since the week Da died. I tug her close to me and she lays her head on my chest. I stroke my fingers through her hair.

"Did you sleep okay?"

Aisling shakes her head slowly. "I miss Da. Do you think he knows where we are?"

There's a twinge inside my chest. I kiss her the top of her head. "Of course he does. Remember, he's always in our hearts, so wherever we go, he goes with us."

She tips her chin up and meets my eyes. "You promise?"

"Promise."

Apparently satisfied, she rests back on my chest and is quiet for several minutes. “I miss my fairy forest and twinkle lights, too.”

“I know you do. I’m sorry for that.”

“Do you think you can draw me another one in my new room?”

Considering our stay here may only be temporary, I’m not sure it’s a good idea. “Let me talk to Aidan and I’ll see what I can do.”

She doesn’t say anything, but she does sniffle. Tears burn my own eyes. Crying doesn’t do any good, so I force them back.

“Hey.” I tap her shoulder and wait until she tilts her head back to look at me. “Why don’t we get up and go exploring? I found this really neat hedgerow maze yesterday with a cool sculpture in the center. We can take our drawing supplies down there and do some sketching. What do you think?”

“Okay.” There’s a little more enthusiasm in her tone.

She moves away from me just as the door opens and Aidan walks in carrying a tray. He pauses at the sight of Aisling. Will he mind she’s in his room?

“Everything all right?” His gaze bounces between the both of us.

“Can Sorcha paint me another fairy forest?” she blurts out making me groan.

“A fairy forest?” He arches an eyebrow.

I sigh. “In her room back home, I painted the walls and ceiling with trees and flowering bushes with little fairies hidden in the branches and behind blooms. Then at night, I turned on a light that would project glowing stars and other small shapes onto all the surfaces.”

“That sounds pretty,” Aidan says to Aisling. “I don’t see why you can’t have another one in your new room if Sorcha doesn’t mind doing it.”

She jumps off the bed and rushes over to throw her arms around his legs. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. I’m going to go tell Kellen and Carson.”

Without looking back, she runs out of the room. I guess that means we won’t be going exploring together. Aidan chuckles.

“To be so easily satisfied.” He crosses the room with a bemused smile. “Here, I brought you breakfast.”

Surprised, I slowly sit up. The blankets pool around my waist. His gaze flicks in the direction of my chest when he sets the tray over my lap, but darts away. Only that brief heated glance has my nipples aching. I refuse to check if they’re hard. If Aidan can ignore it, so can I.

Finally, I remember my manners. “Thank you. That was sweet.”

“I can be sweet sometimes.” He almost pouts.

A small smile pulls at my lips. “Yes, you can.”

He sits on the edge of the bed with one knee angled toward me and faces in my direction. I squirm a little under the scrutiny.

“Eat.” He gestures with his chin.

“You didn’t bring anything for yourself?”

“I ate earlier.”

Never one to shy away from food, I lift the lid off the plate. There’s a croissant that smells delicious, along with jam, peanut butter, and a bowl filled with fruit. I pick up my fork and stab a chunk of melon. Sweet juicy flavor bursts over my tongue. “Mmm, this is so good.”

I glance at Aidan and his eyes are locked on my mouth. My chewing slows and I swallow with a big gulp. Heat swirls around my belly and the ache in my nipples grows. Almost subconsciously, I flick my tongue out to gather some of the flavor left on my lips. His pupils dilate and his nostrils flare before he lifts his gaze to meet mine. There’s a fluttery sensation inside my chest.

“Okay,” he says in a husky growl.

“Okay, what?” It’s almost a whisper of sound.

“I’m in this for real.”

The fluttering gets faster as does my heartbeat. Isn’t this what I wanted? “Are you sure?”

“Not really.”

The flutters come to an abrupt halt. Ouch. “At least you’re honest.”

Aidan reaches for my hand and threads his fingers through mine, the slight callouses lightly abrading my skin. “I promised I wouldn’t lie to you again.”

He’s right. I want the truth, even if it isn’t always pleasant. “Thank you.”

“Why don’t you eat and when you’re done, we’ll head into town. I’ll show you some of the businesses we own and I’ll take you to the casino. Introduce you to Finn.”

Since we’re really doing this, I should probably meet the rest of Aidan’s family. “Will the kids be okay here?”

“Of course. Nora will keep them entertained. She’ll have them calling her mhamó before the day is over, mark my words.”

Aisling never knew any of her grandparents and Kellen and Carson only knew our maternal grand-da. He died right before she was born. All the rest

of our grandparents were gone by the time I was fifteen. I would love for the three of them to think of Nora and Carrick as their grandparents. Every kid deserves a grand-da and mhamó who spoils them.

“I’ll let you finish eating and when you’re ready come find me. I’ll either be out in the common room or in Da’s office.” Aidan stands and leans across the distance between us to brush his lips across mine. He draws back, his eyes track my face, and then he walks out of the room.

I lift my fingers to my mouth and press them to my lips trying to trap in his touch. God, I’m in so much trouble.



I RUN THE COMB THROUGH MY HAIR ONE LAST TIME AND THEN GO IN SEARCH of Aidan. He’s sitting in the common room with the boys who are already at the video games. I’ll let them enjoy their final days of pseudo-vacation, but by Monday, they’re going to be back in school. I’ll make some phone calls when we return from our trip into Dublin.

Aidan stands and kisses my cheek. “You look good.”

My cheeks heat. When he said he was all in, I guess he wasn’t kidding. “Thank you.”

“You ready then?”

I nod.

“Where are you going?” Kellen asks, barely taking his eyes off the television and the game displayed on it.

“Aidan and I are going to town.” It’s on the tip of my tongue to invite them, but I bite it, for once being a little selfish and wanting time alone with...my fiancé. That sounds so weird.

“Have fun.” He turns his full attention back to the video game.

That was easy enough.

“We’ll be back later,” Aidan tells them and they both wave distractedly.

He and I exchange smiles and leave them to their entertainment. Nora and Aisling are nowhere to be found. My guess is they’re in the kitchen. The weather is mild. Sunlight peeks through the swaying branches of the trees overhead. Aidan and I get buckled in and then we’re on our way.

“I sat out back for a little while yesterday. You’re right about the view. It’s so pretty out here and reminds me of the area surrounding Burtonport.”

“Wait until it rains and then clears out. We usually end up with a rainbow that crosses the entire horizon over the field. If the weather holds tonight, we can watch the sunset,” Aidan says.

When was the last time I had the time to sit around and watch the sun set? At least before Da died. It almost feels wrong to not be busy doing... something. Of course, ever since Aidan planted the idea of opening an art studio in my head, I haven't been able to let it go. Except there's so much that goes into one, not the least of which is a lot of money. Of which I have none. I'd had to drop out of my master's program when my Mum died, so I could always go back and finish that.

Needing a distraction, I pivot in my seat toward Aidan. “Tell me about this casino of yours.”

“We bought it from its previous owner several years ago. Caitlín continuously reminds us that she deserves all the credit for the idea. Her Italian brother-in-law's organization runs a highly successful one in Brooklyn, which is what made her suggest it.”

I hold up my hand. “Wait. Her ‘Italian brother-in-law's organization’? Like your father's organization?”

Aidan grins like a madman. “Emilio Jacob Ricci is head of the Italian syndicate and the most powerful man in all of Brooklyn. I'm pretty sure Nathan told me he even has the mayor of the city in his pocket.”

My eyes widen. Good god, they're all criminals. I rub my hand across my forehead. What have I gotten us into? “Continue. Casino. Crime organizations.”

His crazy smile turns into a smirk at my unintentional alliteration. “There's not much more to tell. It was a derelict building that we bought, gutted, and turned into the most lucrative operation in Dublin. It's obscenely exclusive. Our clientele are extremely wealthy and pay for the privilege of being a member. Finn's in charge of the day-to-day operations.”

I've never been to a casino before. There's never been a reason to go. Plus, all of them require a person to be a member. I'll admit to being curious what it's like. “What's it called?”

“*Anamacha Cailte.*”

I gape. “You called your casino ‘Lost Souls’?”

“All credit for that goes to Cian. He found the irony of it amusing.”

“Your entire family sounds quite interesting.” That's about the kindest word I can use.

Aidan barks out a laugh. “We’re all a bit crazy.”

“I mean, you said it.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to us after a while.”

Oddly, I find that reassuring. They all sound a bit colorful. I admit to being a little excited to meet everyone. Especially Caitlín and Imogen. *I hope they like me.* I somehow never manage to keep girl friends for long. I’m not sure what that says about me.

The streets turn more residential and narrow with traffic going only one way, until Aidan parks at a curb in front of a metal sign labeled “Donnelly family only”. There are perks to being the owners, I suppose. We exit the vehicle and approach a brick multi-story building. A narrow section juts out and large letters stacked on top of each other spell out the name of the casino.

Aidan grabs the door handle, pauses, and glances over at me. He waggles his eyebrows. “You ready for the corruption to begin?”

I snort. “Bring it on.”

CHAPTER 17



Aidan

DIM LIGHTS ILLUMINATE THE INTERIOR OF THE CASINO, BUT IT'S MOSTLY covered in shadows. There's a marked difference between the place during the day when it's completely silent and when the doors open and the buzz of bets being placed fills the air.

Sorcha glances around, those eyes of hers soaking everything in. She turns to me once she's given the place a careful inspection. Her expression is blank and it's obvious she's unimpressed. "This is it? Why did I expect it to be gaudy and ostentatious? It looks like a boring business office with a bunch of empty felt-covered tables."

I roar with laughter. "Be careful, you might hurt Caitlín's feelings if she heard you say that. We loosely designed it based on Emilio's casino, but far less grand. It's also intentionally made to look like a boardroom. It makes the players feel more like they're making lucrative business deals instead of gambling away their hard-earned cash."

We make our way across the gaming floor, weaving between Blackjack tables and Texas Hold 'em tables, toward the elevator. I'm sure security has already spotted us. Unless he's occupied, they've already notified Finn we're here.

"I suspect it looks a bit different with all the lights on and people occupying the seats at the tables," Sorcha concedes.

"I'll bring you back one night and you can judge for yourself. I'll even

teach you how to play if you want.”

Her eyes widen at that. “Really?”

“Who knows, you might even win a hand or two with beginner’s luck.” I press the elevator button.

The bell dings and the door slides open. I sweep my hand out and she steps in first. I’m right behind her and then we’re moving. A few seconds later, we reach the top floor. I place my hand on her lower back and escort her down the hall to where Finn’s office is located. Past experience has taught me to knock. I have no desire for Sorcha to witness my brother’s bare ass pumping if he’s fucking his latest woman inside.

“Come in,” the muffled reply comes through the wood.

I open the door and walk in. Finn sits behind the desk with papers strewn across it. I have no idea how he handles the chaos of it all, but it’s his system and it works for him. He glances up and his gaze homes in on the woman at my side.

“I don’t feel like we got a proper introduction yesterday.” He quickly stands and rounds the desk to give her a hug. “Welcome to the family, Sorcha.”

“Thank you so much.”

When Finn’s embrace lasts a little too long I growl. “All right, hands off.”

Far too slowly, he releases her, but he clasps her hand, kisses her knuckles, and winks before stepping back. “My brother is one lucky man.”

Sorcha’s cheeks turn bright pink and she smiles sweetly. I want to punch Finn in the face. *I know what you’re trying to do.* He only smirks.

“Yes, he is,” she says with a bit of sass.

“Shouldn’t you be getting back to work?” I give him a pointed glare.

“Why would I want to do that when there’s a beautiful woman nearby?” He glances over at Sorcha again. “Has he given you the grand tour of the place?”

She shakes her head. “Not yet. Unless of course you count walking from the front door to the elevator a tour. I’ll admit, it was kind of boring.”

Finn palms his chest and staggers back a few steps. “You wound me. I’ll have you know that this is only the second most boring casino in Dublin. Liam Campbell’s is the first.”

Sorcha giggles and I stare at her dumbstruck. She actually *giggled*. Is she really falling for his schmoozy charm? Is that the kind of guy she likes? Does

she want me to be more like that? *Why are you even worried about this anyway?* It's not as though I want her to fall in love with me. I don't want to hurt her if—when—I can't love her back. Then why do I have the urge to put a bullet in Finn?

A gentle hand rests against my chest and I blink back the image of my bullet-riddled brother. Sorcha stands in front of me, her body nearly pressed against mine. "Are you okay? You have this weird look on your face."

I glance over her head at my brother who cocks his head at me and then my focus is back on who it should be. My *fiancée*. "I'm fine. Just lost in thought for a second."

"They didn't look like they were nice thoughts. For a second I wondered if you were about to murder someone."

Behind her, Finn coughs.

"No murdering." *At least not today.* "We should get going though."

"I'll give you the grand tour the next time you stop by," my brother promises.

Sorcha turns toward him. "That would be lovely, thank you."

If anyone is going to show her around, it's going to be me. Finn is well aware of this, but apparently he's in the mood to fuck with me. I glare at him and promise retribution. He's not even fazed. As though sensing the underlying tension, her gaze bounces between him and me. She steps closer and puts an arm around my waist. "I'm ready to go if you are."

Shooting Finn a triumphant glare, we walk out of his office and to the elevator. It opens and we both step in. No sooner does the door close than a feral possessiveness washes over me. I push Sorcha against the wall and my lips crash down on hers. Her mouth opens on a gasp, and I sweep my tongue inside, tasting her surprise. I cradle the back of her head with one hand to protect it from the hard surface behind her and my other is free to roam. Instead, I keep it resting on the curve of her hip.

My fingers itch to explore every inch of her, but my brain is sending warning signals that this is Sorcha. My body isn't getting the message as I deepen the kiss. Her hands clutch the fabric of my shirt. I can't tell if she's pulling me closer or trying to push me away. The elevator comes to a jerky halt and we both stumble. I break the kiss, but tighten my hold on her to keep her from falling.

The door opens, but it's as though we're both frozen. Our harsh breathing echoes in the small space, bouncing off the metal walls as the door closes

again. Her eyes meet mine and they've darkened with desire, her pupils shot full. I open my mouth, but Sorcha expression shifts fiercely.

"Don't you dare say you're sorry," she growls.

My teeth snap shut. *I wasn't going to, was I?* Probably. Except I'm not sorry. "I have no intention of apologizing."

She blinks. "Oh. Okay, good. Because I'm not sorry either."

"Good."

Another two seconds go by before I manage to hit the button that opens the door. It glides apart and with her spine straight, Sorcha steps out. I follow right on her heels, my cock aching with an unsatisfied need. The taste of her still lingers on my tongue and I can still feel the softness of her body beneath my fingertips. My gaze drops to her ass as she walks in front of me. I'm so fucked.



THE DRIVE HOME IS QUIET. I'D PLANNED ON SHOWING SORCHA A FEW MORE of the businesses we operate, but after that kiss I need some time alone to process it. My reaction had been completely unexpected. This is Sorcha. Of course I'm attracted to her, but that went far beyond attraction. That was jealousy. Possessiveness. I've never wanted to maim or dismember either of my brothers over a woman before. But I'd been seconds away from snapping when Finn flirted with her.

I pull through the iron gate and make my way down the lane to park behind Da's vehicle. Sorcha and I walk through the front door of the manor.

"I'm going to go get some work done. You okay by yourself for a little while?" I do my best to keep my tone level.

She glances at me with an unreadable expression. "I'm sure I can find something with which to entertain myself."

"See you at lunch?"

"Yeah."

I nod and head to the library. As soon as I walk in, I close the doors and go straight to the bar to pour myself a drink. I throw it back in a single swallow then lean into my palms on the edge of the wooden surface. *It was just a kiss.* How many times will I have to tell myself that before I start to believe it?

I push off the bar, pour myself another drink, and head for the back corner of the library where I set up a desk for the times I want a little bit of privacy.

Pulling my keyring from my pocket, I find the one I want and insert it into the keyhole of the top desk drawer. Lying undisturbed inside is a leather-bound journal and several charcoal pencils. I grab one and the notebook and close the drawer. While I sip my whiskey, I focus on the project in front of me. It normally takes me a while to start something new, but not this time. My hand flies across the page, lines forming shapes, shapes forming a subject.

I lose myself in the drawing. My fingers ache, but I keep at it like demons are nipping at my heels. They won't stop until I finish what I started. Shadows get shaded in with varying shades of gray giving the image texture and depth. Giving it—*her*—life. After the last line is drawn, I set down the pencil and lean back to admire the work. Jesus, it's perfect. Not because I drew it, but because it's her. There's arousal in her eyes. Her hair lies in tousled waves around her shoulders. Plump lips shine with moisture. Lips whose flavor I can still taste. Sorcha looks exactly how she did after that kiss.

The one that's not supposed to mean anything.

CHAPTER 18



SORCHA

THE LIVING AREA AIDAN SHARES WITH FINN IS QUIET AND EMPTY. AISLING IS helping Nora with lunch in the kitchen and I'm not sure where the boys have taken themselves off to after they announced they were heading outside. It's been just me since Aidan and I returned from Dublin and he ran off to hide. The kiss in the elevator spooked him. Or maybe not so much the kiss itself, but his reaction to it. I've known him long enough to tell he'd been unnerved. A tiny flicker of hope, maybe, for this to work between us still hums in my veins.

I sink into the chair with a sigh. After multiple phone calls and more than two hours, I finally have the twins and Aisling enrolled in their schools. Come Monday, they'll be back to classes. Which will leave my days entirely free. The prospect is terrifying. I'm not used to idleness. Already my skin is getting itchy.

In the distance, someone knocks on a door. Seconds pass and feminine voices drift into the room. I sit up. Should I go out and greet whoever it is? No, that's a bit presumptuous of me. It could be anyone. Footsteps approach and then an auburn-haired woman maybe a few years younger than me and a glasses-wearing brunette around my age step into the room. I nearly jump up from the chair and smooth my palms down my thighs.

"Damn, Aidan has good taste," the former says as her gaze scans me from head to toe. I flush under her scrutiny. "No wonder he's kept you all to

himself.”

“I’m sorry?”

The brunette rolls her eyes and steps forward with an outstretched hand. “You’ll have to excuse Caitlín. The filter from her brain to her mouth is broke. Hi, I’m Nessa, Cian’s girlfriend. And this, as you might have guessed, is Aidan’s cousin.”

Still processing Caitlín’s comment, I shake Nessa’s hand. “I’m Sorcha.”

“Oh, we know,” she says kindly. “Word has been traveling through the family for a few days. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You as well.”

“Welcome to the family.” Caitlín forgoes the handshake completely and gives me a giant hug. “Once we heard what Aidan had done, we couldn’t wait to meet you. I’m glad he could give two middle fingers to Liam. That twat needs to be brought down a peg or two. I don’t know how Imogen puts up with his ass.”

The brunette—Nessa—winces. “He’s trying.”

Caitlín side-eyes her. “Yeah, trying to be a major prick.”

Yikes. Not wanting the conversation to escalate into an argument, I clear my throat. “Thank you for stopping by. I’ve been wanting to meet you both. Aidan has told me a lot about you.”

“That makes one of us.” Caitlín pouts. “He hasn’t been forthcoming with information about you other than you’re getting married so he could pay off your Da’s debt and that you have three much younger siblings. Which is why we’re here. We wanted to invite you out to lunch so we could get to know you.”

Oh. “That’s very nice of you, thank you.”

“She’s not being entirely altruistic. Caitlín is nosy and likes to be in everyone’s business,” Nessa says with a laugh.

Aidan’s cousin shrugs, completely unapologetic. “Sue me. Anyway, lunch?”

I hesitate. Aidan and I were already gone this morning. Should I really leave again when the boys and Aisling are still settling in? I don’t want them to think that because we’re not in Burtonport anymore, I’m just going to push them off onto someone else.

“I’d love to, thank you. Let me just check on the kids and make sure they’re okay with me leaving. I feel guilty for not being here. Just in case they need me. Other than Aidan, they don’t know anyone else very well yet.”

“I don’t have any of my own, but my sister Brenna has a shit ton of them, and I can tell you that as long as someone feeds them they’re fine,” Caitlín says.

That makes me laugh. “I suppose you’re right, but it will soothe my anxiety just to make sure. Maybe I need it more than they do.”

“Understandable,” Nessa agrees.

The three of us head out of the room in search of Kellen, Carson, and Aisling. On our way to the kitchen, a set of double doors open and Aidan steps out. The library, if I remember correctly. He comes to an abrupt halt and his gaze bounces between us before landing and sticking on me.

The heat in his eyes burns through me. This is the same way he looked at me in the elevator. My core pulses and arousal makes my skin tingle. One of the women clears her throat. I dart a quick glance their way and back to Aidan. “Caitlín and Nessa came by to invite me to lunch. I was just looking for everyone to let them know.”

Is that disappointment in his eyes? “That was nice of them. I won’t keep you then.”

I turn to the women. “Would you mind giving us a minute?”

“Of course.” Nessa tugs Caitlín’s arm and guides her away.

“Damn it, why do we always miss the good stuff?” Aidan’s cousin’s voice trails off.

I think I’m going to like her. Clearing the smile from my lips, I face him again. “I don’t have to go with them today if you had plans for us.”

He shakes his head. “No, you should go. Enjoy some grownup time.”

I lay my hand on his chest. His heart beats firmly beneath my palm. “I enjoy my grownup time with you.”

Aidan covers it with his. “You know what I mean. It’ll be nice for you to get to know each other and have other women to talk to. I know it’s been lonely for you without that.”

It really has. “You’re being sweet again. You know that, right?”

He cradles my jaw and his thumb caresses the ridge of my cheek bone. “Don’t tell anyone. I have a reputation to maintain.”

“I won’t,” I say softly.

“Good.” Aidan leans down and kisses me. It doesn’t last nearly long enough before he rests his forehead against mine. “I’ll let the boys and Aisling know you’ll be back later this afternoon. How’s that?”

The pull to stay here wars with the need to enjoy a little bit of freedom.

“Are you sure? What if they need me for something?”

“We’ll be fine. If it gets desperate, I’ll call you. Go and have fun.”

I rise up and manage to bring my lips to his for another brief kiss. Everything in me wants to linger, but I make myself draw back. “Thank you. We shouldn’t be gone long.”

Aidan squeezes my hand gently and releases me. “Call me if Caitlín gets you guys into any trouble.”

“It’s just lunch.” I chuckle.

“You don’t know my cousin. She’s like a magnet for trouble. Ask her about the time she drew a knife on Nessa’s stepda.”

My mouth falls open. “You’re kidding?”

He’s the one to laugh this time. “Not at all. Granted the bastard deserved it. May he rot in hell.”

“You know, I’m not sure if I should admire her or be completely terrified.”

“Both,” Aidan replies. “All right, go. Enjoy.”

I wave goodbye and go find Caitlín and Nessa who are waiting at the door. His cousin whistles and opens it. “Holy shit woman, he’s got it bad for you.”

“What? No. We’re just friends,” I insist as I follow her and Nessa out to another expensive-looking vehicle. It’s a sleek silver sports car that shines. I’m almost afraid to touch it.

“Friends who happen to be getting married,” Caitlín points out.

I somehow keep forgetting that. “Fine, I’ll admit there’s a certain amount of attraction on both sides. At least I’m pretty sure it’s on both sides.”

“Oh, it’s definitely on both sides. When Aidan stepped out of the library, Nessa and I no longer existed,” Caitlín says while Nessa nods in agreement.

My cheeks heat. His cousin gets behind the wheel and Nessa takes the backseat.

“Your first ride in this thing should definitely be up front,” she says.

Once I’m in, Caitlín takes off. She glances over at me. “I won’t even tell you what I had to negotiate to get the car today. Sometimes I think Roarke loves her more than he loves me.”

“You know that’s not true.” Nessa laughs.

“Fine, maybe it isn’t. I still had some hard negotiations to make to be able to drive her.”

Nessa leans forward and touches my arm. “Don’t ask her what she

negotiated. It'll be something sexual. Caitlín likes to see how much she can shock people."

Aidan's cousin jerks her head sideways and glares before returning her attention to the road. "Thanks for calling me out."

"You're welcome."

Caitlín glances over at me. "Since Nessa ruined all my fun, tell us about yourself."

It's clear the two of them have a close friendship, which is nice, but also intimidating. "There isn't a lot to tell, I'm afraid. My life is pretty boring."

"How did you meet Aidan? He said you've been friends since you were at university," Nessa says.

Old memories surface, and I shudder. I hate talking about the past, but I'm not sure how to avoid answering without being rude. "My ex-boyfriend was pissed and having trouble understanding what the word no meant. Aidan happened to be nearby and reminded him."

A heavy silence falls until Caitlín curses. "Men are such pieces of shit sometimes. I'm sorry that happened to you, but I'm glad my cousin was there to protect you."

It's as though he's been protecting me ever since. "I am too. He made sure I got home safely and checked on me for a couple days after. That was right around the time my mum died as well. Aidan was there when I got the news. We've been friends ever since. He's always been there for me."

"I know our family has a dangerous reputation—one that's well-deserved—but what people don't know about us is how much we love one another." Caitlín glances in the rearview mirror at Nessa. "There are times we fight, of course, but we are all close with each other. There isn't much we wouldn't do for one of us, even if we were pissed at the person. Except Liam. He can fuck off."

Nessa leans forward again. "In case you haven't figured it out, someone holds a grudge forever."

"Yep," Caitlín ends the word on a pop.

I make a mental note not to get on her bad side. We reach the city and make our way down unfamiliar roads. "I've only been to Dublin a few times in my life. It feels bigger with each visit."

"It's not so bad once you learn your way around. Us girls try to get together once a week for drinks, although Lucia can't always come. Not sure if Aidan's mentioned her or not, but that's my sister-in-law," Caitlín says.

“Enzo is in a lot of activities so her calendar is full some times.”

“He’s the oldest, right? Aidan said he was around Aisling’s age.”

“Seven going on thirty?” Caitlín jokes.

I laugh. “Something like that.”

“The kid’s an artistic genius. You should see some of his drawings. He has more talent in a single finger than I do in my entire body.”

Caitlín has my attention. “Really? I’d love to see some of his work. I’m an artist and Aisling is a budding one herself.”

“You should definitely reach out to her and introduce Enzo and your sister,” Nessa suggests. “Especially if they’re the same age. They might even be in the same class together. It might make things easier for her if she already had a friend.”

“That’s actually a great idea. I’ll do that, thank you.”

So far this outing is going far better than I expected. I’m not sure I’ve ever felt so welcome. Maybe marrying into Aidan’s family won’t be so bad after all.

CHAPTER 19



Aidan

SO MUCH FOR SPENDING THE REST OF THE DAY WITH SORCHA. I'M NOT SURE why I'm bitching. I'm glad Caitlín and Nessa are taking her under their wing. Imogen is still balancing getting to know her new family while also being in a relationship with their rival, so we don't see her as often as Da and Nora like. They hope the visits will grow more frequent with time. Still, I need to make it a point to introduce the two women soon.

Sorcha's never said it out loud, but slowly losing her friends from uni really hurt her. She'd been so isolated in Burtonport. The village was full of people over forty or under fifteen. It'll be good for her to have new friends.

I stride through the house in search of the kids. Aisling is in the kitchen standing on a stool next to Nora who's showing her how to make whatever it is they're making.

"Hey, little nightmare. Having fun?" I come up beside her and peek over her shoulder.

"Uh huh. Auntie Nora is showing me how to make the potatoes for shepherd's pie."

I raise my eyebrow at the older woman. *Auntie Nora*, I mouth and she just smiles. Not mhamó yet, but it's close. "That sounds delicious. I can't wait to try it."

Her gaze flits my way. "Where's Sorcha?"

"She went to lunch with my cousin Caitlín and my brother's girlfriend,

Nessa, but she'll be back before you know it." I lean against the counter a short distance away. Far enough to stay out from underfoot.

"I wanted to show her what I was making." Aisling pouts.

"You'll have plenty of time to show her another day. Do you know where your brothers are?" I try to distract her.

She lifts a shoulder. "Outside somewhere."

"I'll find them and let them know it's almost lunch time." I head toward the dining room and the door to the back patio.

It's an overcast day, but the temperature is mild. The expansive lawn that stretches out to the rolling fields is empty aside from the guest house that sits on a level area about halfway down. I walk around to the side of the manor where the hedgerow maze sits. When we were kids, my brothers, Caitlín, and I would chase each other through it. On the other side of the house, we used to set up targets while we taught her how to shoot.

"Kellen. Carson," I call out their names while I walk.

Rustling sounds come from the hedgerow. I pause at the entrance and wait. Several minutes and more than one curse later, they appear. I'll leave it up to Sorcha to give them the look for their language.

"It's about time for lunch," I tell them and wave them toward the house.

"This place is so cool," Kellen announces.

"I'm glad you're enjoying it. I'll have to show you the secret passages inside the house that lead out here." I pause. "Although, if you're going to use them to sneak out, make sure you stay out of trouble when you do it. No leaving the property. Stay within the gated walls or it won't be Sorcha you have to worry about."

Both boys swallow and nod sharply and continue walking with me.

"Speaking of Sorcha, it's just the three of us and Aisling for lunch." I open the door into the dining room for them and gesture for them to proceed.

"Why isn't Sorcha eating with us?" Kellen asks.

"She went out to lunch with a couple friends. They'll be back this afternoon."

Kellen nods. "Oh good. She needs more friends. It can't be all that fun for her to just hang out with us all the time, even though we know she loves us."

For a twelve-year-old, he has the maturity of someone much older. I nudge him with my elbow. "You're a good kid, you know that, right? You are too, Carson. Sorcha's lucky to have you both."

They flush but stand a little prouder.

“Why don’t you have a seat in here. The food should be coming shortly.”

While they sit next to each other at the table that’s already set, I go into the kitchen. Nora glances up. “There you are. Cian just arrived. He and your Da asked that you come to his office.”

“Thanks. The boys are at the table. Holler at them when you need some help.” I turn and head to Da’s inner sanctum.

I stop in the doorway. “Nora said you wanted to see me.”

My brother’s already taken a chair. Da jerks his chin. “Close the door.”

I do as he says and sit next to Cian. “What’s going on?”

“Word on the street is that Ayman Naji is back in business,” my brother announces.

“The Moroccan?”

“One and the same. With Campbell blocking all the imports from our suppliers, Nathan says that Naji has been making deals with the Germans. He’s increasing his weapon stores and there’s talk of retaliation for our attack a few months ago,” Da adds.

“An attack that was provoked when that piece of shite McElroy tried to kill Roarke. An action that wasn’t even sanctioned by Naji,” I argue.

“He’s still threatening revenge since we took out so many of his men. Naji didn’t escape completely unscathed. From my understanding, he took a bullet that required more than a month of recuperation,” Cian says. “Now that he’s back to his full health, he’s ready to declare war.”

Fuck. “I suppose Campbell is letting his shipments through.”

Da’s fists clench on his desk. “From the sounds of it. Liam has said he has no quarrel with the Moroccans so he has no reason to deny cargo deliveries for them.”

“That bastard. Does Campbell really think Naji isn’t going to try and use those same weapons against him if it comes down to it? He can’t be that naive?” I scoff.

“I don’t think it’s naivety. Liam thinks he’s untouchable. He’s cocky. One of these days, his superiority complex is going to be his downfall. I have no intention of letting Imogen fall with him,” Da growls. “Eventually the Moroccans are going to want more than they have and Campbell will be the one standing in their way.”

“What’s the plan then?” I ask. “Do we have any other way of smuggling weapons into the city?”

Cian shakes his head. “Not Dublin. Our only option is to somehow get

them into Belfast. Which isn't so much a problem, although Nathan is running into a couple snags with finding some contacts up there. The challenge is transporting them from Belfast to here. There are too many opportunities for something to go wrong. We don't have enough people in our pockets at the moment."

I run my hand down my face. "Son of a bitch. Completely disregarding the weapons shipments for the moment, what are we going to do about Naji?"

"I'm calling a meeting with the clan leaders tomorrow," Da says. "We'll strategize then and see how we want to proceed. In the meantime, you boys need to keep your eyes open when you're in town and make sure you're armed."

"Always. Fuck," I curse and move to stand up. "Caitlín and Nessa took Sorcha to the city for lunch."

Da lifts a hand and I settle back down. "Roarke is keeping an eye on them. They'll be fine. He'll call if there's any trouble."

Not that I don't trust our enforcer, but I won't relax until Sorcha walks through the front door.

"Speaking of..." Cian draws out. "I take it this new engagement is the 'it's complicated' thing you were telling me about? And you said it didn't involve a woman."

Leave it to him to bring that up. I give him the finger.

Da clears his throat and stands. "I'll leave you boys to your discussion. Don't argue too long. Nora won't appreciate having her meal grow cold."

He leaves his office and I punch Cian in the arm. He groans. "The fuck? That hurt."

"Don't be a pussy. That's not even near where Sheehan's guy's bullet hit you."

"You're a dick. I can't believe you didn't tell me you were getting married," Cian whines.

"I hadn't planned on getting married until that bastard Liam called my bluff."

"And you've been friends with this woman for five years and not once did she know you were a Donnelly? You ashamed of us?"

I glare at him. "No, I'm not ashamed. Sometimes, it's just easier if people don't know who I am. It lets me go places that I might not otherwise be welcome."

“Since when has being unwelcome stopped you—any of us—from going where ever the fuck you want?” Cian gapes. “Money and power opens pretty much any door.”

“Normally, I’d agree. But, at the time, being Sorcha’s friend was more important than being a Donnelly.”

My brother stares at me for several seconds and then he narrows his eyes. “You’re in love with her.”

I shake my head. “What? No I’m not. She’s my best friend. Nothing more.”

Cian stands over me. “Go ahead and keep lying to yourself if it makes you feel better.”

Before I can respond, he walks out of the office. I slump back in the seat. He’s wrong. I am *not* in love with Sorcha.

CHAPTER 20



SORCHA

I CAN'T REMEMBER WHEN I HAD SUCH A GOOD TIME. THANKFULLY, CAITLÍN has been happy to lead the conversation. She also has a way about her that makes a person feel comfortable. It's not that I'm an introvert or shy. I just tend to let others do all the talking unless I feel like there's something I want to add to it or if it's a topic I have a lot of knowledge about.

"Are you excited or nervous about the wedding?" I ask Caitlín. "Aidan told me you were getting married in a few months in Brooklyn."

"Both, but I'm even more excited over the fact that my mother loves nothing more than to plan weddings. She's organized nearly all of her childrens'. I think Nathan and Lucia's was the only one she didn't do everything for, and that's only because they got married here in Dublin." She takes the last bite of her dessert.

I'm a bit envious and even more sad. My mother and I had been close. Same with Da. Neither one of them will be here to see me get married. Nessa lays her hand on my arm. "Hey, are you okay?"

I nod and smile a little sadly. "Just thinking about my own parents and how they won't be at my wedding."

"I'm sorry. I feel the same way about my mum not being there if Cian and I ever get married. She died when I was so young, but I still miss her," Nessa says softly.

"I know I'm not a replacement for anyone's mum," Caitlín adds gently.

“But I’m happy to help with any wedding planning you want me to help with. Either of you. I don’t mind. I’m just letting my own mother do it, because I know how much she loves it.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate it. Aidan and I haven’t even set a date yet. Or even started talking about it.” We only *just decided* it’s even real.

“If I’ve learned anything in my life, it’s that men aren’t going to make a point to sit down and think about things like that unless you make them. It’s not necessarily that they don’t care,” Caitlín pauses. “No, wait, never mind, they don’t.”

I’m taking a drink and nearly spew it everywhere. Instead I cough and grab my napkin. Nessa laughs and pats my back.

“I’ve learned to be cautious about when I drink when she’s talking for this very reason,” she says.

Unapologetic, Caitlín shrugs. “Even I don’t know what’s going to come out of my mouth half the time.”

I manage to get my coughing under control. “I guess I’ll have to be the one to bring it up.”

Aidan’s cousin chuckles. “Don’t make it sound so terrible. Communication is important. How else are you going to know what the other is thinking or feeling if you don’t talk about it? It’s all part of being in a relationship.”

Nessa stares at her like she doesn’t recognize her. Caitlín chuckles. “What? I manage to give out decent advice every once in a while.”

My gaze bounces between them and Nessa turns to me. “I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but...what she said. Talk to Aidan. You two have been friends for this long, it’s not as though you don’t know how.”

I sigh. “You’re right. Everything feels different now, but we’re still both the same people. Talking is something we’ve never had trouble doing. We’ll figure out this new relationship between us eventually.”

We finish our dessert and drinks and the server brings the bill. I get out my pocketbook, but Caitlín waves me off. “It’s on me.”

“Thank you.”

Once she’s paid and we leave the table, a tall, scarred man with silver-flecked hair rises from another table and falls in line behind us. I glance over my shoulder at the distance between him and us and lean close to Nessa. Before I can say anything, Caitlín pivots so she’s walking backward and blows a kiss at the man. “Thanks for lunch, babe.”

She swivels forward and the man shakes his head, but there's a grin on his face. *Ohhh*. That must be her fiancé. My curiosity is raised. Does he always linger nearby when she goes out or is there another reason he's sticking close?

"Who's up for some shopping?" Caitlín asks.

"I should probably get back to the house." The guilt returns about leaving the kids, even though it shouldn't.

"Maybe next time, then."

We reach the vehicle and then we're back on the road.

"Thank you again for inviting me to lunch. I had a really nice time." It's been great getting to know Aidan's family.

"Of course." Nessa glances at me in the backseat. "I, for one, know how intimidating it can be as a newcomer. I've only been around a couple months myself so I know how nice it is to be welcomed. It's great to have friends. Especially ones who understand what it's like being attached to a Donnelly."

"Excuse me," Caitlín gasps. "I'm a Donnelly."

"Exactly my point."

The two of them bicker good-naturedly while I sit back and enjoy the scenery. It's been a pleasant afternoon. Finally, we drive through the gate guarding the entrance to the estate and down the lane to stop in front of the manor. Nessa lets me out and I wave over my shoulder with a goodbye before entering the house. I head straight for Aidan's wing. He's sitting in one of the chairs with a glass in his hand. He glances up at my arrival.

"You're back. Did you have a nice lunch?" he asks.

I set my purse on a table and sit on the couch closest to him, curling my legs beneath me. "I did. I really liked the both of them."

"Good. I'm glad."

"Were the kids okay?"

"Of course. Aisling helped Nora make lunch and the boys traipsed around outside. They're back out there, although they said they'd be back soon, and Aisling is in the dining room drawing you a picture of her day for when you get home."

"I can't wait to see it." I smile. "What are you doing in here all alone, anyway? I figured you'd have some work to do."

"Just sitting and thinking."

"About what?"

"Things." Aidan takes a sip from his glass.

I study him closer. There's a distance in his eyes. Something...off. "That sounds ominous." I try to joke.

Finally one side of his mouth curls up displaying the dimple that hides in the auburn scruff covering the lower half of his face. "It's not, I promise."

"You know whatever it is, you can talk to me. We're still friends, remember." I reach across the short distance separating us and lay my hand on his. Aidan flips it over and threads his fingers through mine.

"It's just family business stuff that will work itself out eventually."

I've always loved the casual way he touches me. Except after the kiss this morning, I'm far more aware of the texture of his skin than ever before. The way the callouses slightly abrade my flesh. The heat that builds where we're connected and how it travels up my arm. I'm much more aware of the attraction that's been present from the moment we met, but that I've kept tempered for five years because I didn't want to ruin what we had.

Except, after all this time, we have more. Or could. A certain boldness comes over me. I release his hand, unfurl my legs, and stand up. When I settle back down, it's across Aidan's lap. His eyes widen. I try not to blush, but from the heat radiating off my upper chest and cheeks, I'm pretty sure I haven't succeeded.

"You looked like you needed a hug." I shrug with as much nonchalance as I can muster.

Both sides of his lips curl this time and he rests his arm over my thighs. "If this is the kind of hug I get, then I could get used to them."

"I also figured if you can't get away, we can talk."

Aidan arches an eyebrow. "I'm not complaining in any way, but you don't have to become a delectable lap decoration just to talk to me."

My cheeks become even hotter. "What if it's about the wedding?"

His head draws back slightly. "Are you breaking up with me already and you're trying to let me down easy?"

"What? No. I thought that, well, since it's real and all, we should consider setting a date."

Beneath my butt and hips, Aidan's body actually relaxes. *How had I not noticed how tense he'd become?*

"When were you thinking?" he asks.

I wiggle a little, trying to get more comfortable and he goes rigid. All tension that had left him returns and a bulge hardens beneath me. *Don't look down. Don't look down.* I keep my eyes on his. Both of our breathing has

sped up. I clear my throat and swallow. “I’m not sure. Caitlín said she’s getting married in three months so we should wait until after that. She might think it’s rude to do it any sooner.”

“There’s always a late autumn or early winter option,” Aidan suggest, his voice gruffer than usual.

“Hmmm. I *have* always loved autumn. We could do it near the end of September or beginning of October. Wait until after Aisling’s birthday.”

“Or…” his tone rises a bit at the end like it’s a question. “We don’t have to wait that long. There’s always just eloping. That way there’s no long, drawn-out fuss. Caitlín won’t mind, I’m sure.”

My own words come back to haunt me. “I mean, we’re both nothing if not pragmatic.”

“Hey.” Aidan gently taps my thigh. “If you’d rather wait until autumn and go all out with the big church wedding and reception, we can. The wife of one of the clan leaders owns a shop that makes cakes. Caitlín loves shopping so I bet she’d go dress shopping with you.”

Even when I was younger I hadn’t pictured—or wanted—a fancy wedding. There was too much fuss involved. Why then am I questioning his suggestion? “No, that sounds like so much trouble. You’re right. Why are we waiting? We should just do it and get it over with.”

“You don’t have to sound too excited,” he grumbles.

I nudge his chest with my shoulder. “You know what I mean.”

Aidan smirks. “But it’s fun giving you a hard time.”

I stick my tongue out and his gaze drops to my lips. He stares a second longer before leaning in and brushing a kiss across them. I bring my arm up and loop it over his shoulder while my fingers clasp the back of his neck. His tongue flicks out and coaxes my mouth to part. I open for him and he deepens the kiss. It’s not the claiming from the casino, but there’s a hint of possession in it.

I’m consumed with need as the kiss goes on. This is Aidan. Soon to be my husband. Something I never would have imagined or even hoped. I caution my heart. Don’t read more into this than attraction. It’s purely lust. At least we have this between us. Our marriage could be starting out with less than that. His woodsy scent fills my head. It’s a comforting smell.

The hardness beneath me grows and with a soft moan, I shift trying to ease the ache that’s building. A warning blares inside my head. Reminding me where we are and that any one of the kids could walk in any second. I

stop moving, and Aidan groans against my mouth. The voice of caution speaks louder, and as much as I want to keep going, I slowly break the connection.

“We should probably resume this somewhere more private later,” I murmur against his lips.

He rests his forehead on mine. “As much as it pains me—in more ways than one—you’re probably right.”

Aidan doesn’t draw away. Instead we continue breathing in each other’s air until the sound of voices reach us and grow louder. With a sigh, I move to stand, but he tightens his grip on my hip.

“Stay.”

CHAPTER 21



Aidan

IT'S NOT ONLY BECAUSE MY COCK IS ROCK HARD THAT I DON'T WANT SORCHA to move. I love touching her. Having her close. She surprised the hell out of me when she sat on my lap. I'm not sure I ever want her to leave. Which terrifies me.

Kellen and Carson walk in. Their gazes land on us—widen—and they come to a standstill. They've seen us sitting next to each other on the couch hundreds of times, but never like this. Sorcha stiffens, but remains where she is. Kellen is the first to recover.

“You're back.”

“I am. How's your day been? Aidan said you've been outside exploring the property.” Her words nearly run together.

The twins move forward. Kellen sits on the couch while Carson takes the floor chair where Finn often sits when he's playing a video game.

“There's a cool hedgerow maze that we got lost in,” Carson says with some excitement.

“Yeah, and there's this secret room built into one of the trees out in the woods. Well, it'd be secret if there was a door. But it's really well-hidden. We also found a tree-swing,” Kellen adds. “Nora has this huge garden, too, where she grows a bunch of different vegetables.”

“Sounds like there are some neat things around here,” Sorcha says with an indulgent smile.

Running footsteps approach and Aisling bursts into the room. “You’re back,” she squeals and runs over.

With a quick glance, Sorcha carefully rises off my lap and Aisling collides with her, wrapping her arms around her sister’s legs, a piece of paper clutched in her palm.

“Aidan said you got to spend time with Nora today. Did you have fun?”

Aisling untangles herself and shoves the paper at Sorcha, who takes it gently. “I drew this for you.”

“Wow, look at this. You did such a great job,” she praises her. “Is that you with Nora in the kitchen?”

Her younger sister nods. “Uh huh. I helped make shepherds pie for lunch. It was delicious, too. Even better than Glen’s. But don’t tell him I said that.”

Sorcha chuckles. “I promise I won’t tell him.”

“Okay good. I’m going to my room,” Aisling says before she walks away and down the hallway leading to it.

“I guess someone didn’t miss me too much.”

I stand up and hug her from behind. “She missed you. But she also trusts that you were going to be back so she didn’t need to worry about you being gone.”

Sorcha turns in my arms and loops her arms around my neck, the paper crinkling in her hand. “I suppose you’re right. I’m so used to always being available in the pub if she needed me.”

“It’s good for all of you to have a little freedom from each other. It helps her”—I glance over her shoulder—“and the boys develop a bit of independence.”

“You always somehow manage to put things into perspective.”

“It’s my superpower.”

“Oh, I think you have a much greater superpower than that,” Sorcha says low enough that there’s no way either Kellen or Carson can hear and glances downward before meeting my eyes again. Then she winks.

“You’re trying to torture me, aren’t you?” I say just as quietly.

“What are you two whispering about over there?” Carson calls out.

We jump away from each other, both of us clearing our throats, while Sorcha swipes her free hand across the top of her thighs and her other clutches the drawing tighter. She turns to face her brother. “Boring grownup stuff. Nothing that would interest you.”

He doesn’t look like he believes her, but just shrugs and picks up the

game controller that had been discarded next to where he's sitting. Kellen's gaze darts between his sister and me and then he gets up from the couch to turn on the television and the gaming system. Seconds later, they're both ignoring us and their attention is on the game.

Sorcha darts a glance my way and her eyes dance with amusement. I thread my fingers through hers and tug her out of the room. "C'mon, let's go for a walk."

"I need to drop this off in my—our—room first." She flashes me the piece of paper. "I'll be right back."

She hurries down the hall and returns a minute later. Taking her hand again, we leave the boys and stroll through the house with no real destination in mind. It's like I'm trying to make up for the far too infrequent times we were able to see each other over the years by keeping her close.

"Have you given any thought to going back to art school or opening that art gallery?" I squeeze Sorcha's fingers.

"Yes and no. I've thought about it, but I'm not sure where to even start. Besides, opening a gallery isn't as simple as you seem to think," she says with not a small amount of sarcasm.

"What does it take?" Whatever it is, I'll make sure she gets it.

Sorcha darts a glance in my direction and widens her eyes, not in surprise, but as though I should already know the answer. "First of all it takes a location. Then I have to reach out to the artists of the type of art I want to showcase and see if they'd be interested in a collaboration. None of whom I actually know where to find. But most importantly, it takes the single thing I don't have."

"And that is?" I raise an eyebrow risking her annoyance with my ignorance.

"Money. A lot of damn money."

I stop her outside the library and wait until she looks at me. "It's a good thing then that I *do* have it."

Sorcha lets go of me and crosses her arms with a glare. "Didn't we have this discussion before. I'm not taking your money, Aidan."

I close the fraction of distance between us until I tower over her. She tips her head back, but the fierce expression doesn't lessen.

"That was before you knew who I was and didn't think I had any," I point out. "We're getting married. My money is your money. And we have *a lot* of it. If you want to open a gallery, then open it. We—you—can afford it."

That stubborn tilt in Sorcha's jaw only sharpens. "It doesn't feel right."

I throw up my hands and spin away with a growl before I pivot and crowd her against the wall. Her eyes widen. My chest bumps up against hers and her head is caged in between my forearms. I lean in until my forehead rests against hers. Her lashes flutter before closing. "This is an argument you're not going to win against me. If you really don't want to try and open your own gallery or go back to art school, then that's one thing. But if you're only refusing because of the cost, then you need to get over it. You don't have to do everything yourself anymore. Opportunities you and the kids have never had before are open to you. All you have to do is take them."

Sorcha's takes in a shuddering breath. "You know, it's really not fair of you to use my weakness against me. And I'm an idiot for admitting I have one."

I caress her cheek with my fingertip. Her skin is soft and smooth. I rub the end of my nose against hers and she trembles. "What weakness is that?" I murmur and run my lips over the side of her face and along her jaw.

She tilts her head slightly and I kiss my way down her neck.

"That," she whispers, her voice breathy and sexy as fuck.

"You mean this?" I suck lightly on her skin, nip it with my teeth, and soothe the sting with my tongue.

Sorcha murmurs something unintelligible and moans. A sound that goes straight to my cock. I grind against her and slip my leg between hers. The voice inside my head reminds me where we are, but an overriding need is much louder. She shudders and one of us must have some sense, because she's whispering in my ear.

"We have to stop." Except her actions are saying something entirely different as she rubs her sweet, hot core against my thigh. "Aidan."

Finally, her words penetrate the haze of lust. We're dry fucking in the middle of the hallway where anyone could walk by. Sorcha would be mortified if she's seen. With every ounce of control I have, I pull myself away. Her face is flushed and the skin along her neck is even redder, either from my facial hair or my mouth. Beneath her shirt, pebbled nipples tempt me. I adjust the throbbing hardness behind my zipper.

How the hell am I going to lie in the same bed with her tonight and not fuck her?

I brush the hair off Sorcha's face and she stares up at me. Slowly, her lips turn up. "You're an evil, evil man tormenting me like that. But you win."

“You’ll do whatever it is you want with the money we have, then?”

She nods. “Yes. I’m still not sure what direction I want to go, but you convinced me to at least try.”

“I’m happy to *convince* you to my side of any other future debates we have as well.” I drop my voice suggestively and Sorcha snorts.

“I bet you will.”

CHAPTER 22



SORCHA

I FINISH BRUSHING MY TEETH, DRY OFF MY MOUTH, AND WALK INTO THE bedroom, turning the bathroom light off on my way out. Aidan is meeting with his Da so I'm alone for the moment. I read Aisling a bedtime story and checked on the boys earlier. It's still hard to believe we're in Dublin and living in this place. It doesn't feel real.

Once I'm under the blankets, I prop myself up against the headboard with some pillows and get out Aidan's laptop again. All the open tabs mock me. There's a lot more to operating an art gallery than the few things I mentioned to him apparently. Considering the terrible job I'd been doing running the pub, I'm not sure I'm cut out to be a businesswoman.

There's a single knock on the door before Aidan steps in.

"Still researching?" he asks as he takes his wallet out and tosses it on the desk.

"It's a bit overwhelming to say the least." And frustrating. "Out of curiosity, I searched for storefronts to let. I know you said not to worry about the money, and I'm trying not to, really, but some of the rent these people are charging is outrageous. Nauseating, in fact."

He reaches up and tugs the neck of his shirt, dragging it over his head—mussing his hair—and exposing every glorious inch of his tattooed chest. The jerk is distracting me whether intentionally or not. Judging by his expression, it's not. *Just ignore it.* Better said than done. I force my eyes back to the

computer. “Like this one here. Yes, it’s in the center of the city on what I’ve discovered is a well-traveled street by tourists, but rent is four digits a month. And not four small digits, either.”

Aidan comes over and sits on the bed, his knee angled toward me, and his gaze focuses on the information on the screen. The woodsy scent of his cologne hits me and heat radiates off his body. His finger rolls across the touchpad as he scrolls through the listings. “Jaysus. You should just buy a building. That way you’d own it outright and wouldn’t need to worry about monthly rent. One of the families in the organization runs a construction company. They did all the renovations on the casino for us and charged us a fair cost.”

I glance at him. “You don’t think buying an entire building is excessive?”

Aidan’s eyes meet mine. “Not at all. Think about it. You’ll be the owner. If the space is bigger than you need or want, put up some walls and create a couple extra storefronts. Then *you* become the person who lets it out to people. Plus, any commission you make from the sales is pure profit, aside from the day-to-day operating expenses you have to pay out, which can’t be that much. Utilities, cleaners, a couple employees. I also know that, with your talent for picking out brilliant work, you won’t lack for buyers.”

Barely a second passes and I lean over to kiss him. “Thank you for always knowing the right things to say that make me feel better.”

The two dimples on either side of his mouth appear. “You’re welcome. I’m being serious about owning your own building, too. I can make a call tomorrow if you want.”

“Let me think on it.” I don’t want to make any rash decisions. Especially when there are so many other things I need to learn. Which gives me an idea. “Do you think your brother would be willing to teach me about managing books and running a business? I had no idea what I was doing with the pub. We survived the past month on pure luck. Although, considering you had to pay off Da’s debt, any luck we might have had would have run out soon.”

“I can’t speak for Finn, but I’ll ask him.” Aidan palms the back of my neck. “Although, I’m not sure how well I’ll be able to deal with you in such close proximity as him if he says yes. I’d hate to have to kill my brother because he flirted too much with you.”

I breathe out a laugh. “He’s harmless. His charms have no affect on me.”

He growls. “You think he’s charming?”

I poke him in the center of his chest. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure I do. Maybe you should show me exactly what it is you meant,” his tone drops suggestively.

My pulse spikes and heat settles in my belly. An ache grows from my core and spreads through my body. Without looking away from me, Aidan manages to close the lid on the laptop and toss it toward the end of the bed. A dull thud follows.

“You probably broke it,” I whisper.

“I’ll buy another one.” That’s the last thing he says before his lips claim mine.

Every kiss brings new sensation with it. Each one swirling around inside me, spreading, until I’m consumed with nothing but need. Desire. Want. Aidan kisses me like it’s the last time he’ll be able to. It’s too much and yet, not enough. The heavy weight of his hand caresses my spine sending shivers dancing down it before he settles it along my shoulder blade and carefully guides me to lying on my back.

He breaks the kiss and his eyes meet mine. He palms the side of my face, his fingers threading through my hair, and rubs his thumb gently along my cheekbone. His touch brings with it more heat and fire that sizzles through my veins.

“You’re beautiful. I’m not sure if I’ve ever told you that,” his voice is a gruff whisper that vibrates through me.

I flick my tongue out and further dampen already damp lips. It hadn’t been intentionally seductive, by Aidan’s gaze drops to them. I reach up and glide my fingertips along the contours of his forehead, nose, and jaw, the hair covering it soft. I dip one into the divot on the left side of his mouth. I meet his eyes again. “I think you’re beautiful, too.”

He smiles and the crater deepens. “Now you’re just trying to make me blush.”

I snort. “It takes more than a simple compliment to make a man like you blush.”

“What kind of man do you think I am?” He quirks an eyebrow.

My muscles in my cheeks go slack as I grow serious. “A kind and generous one. A man who makes me laugh. One who’s smart. Who makes me feel safe. Protected. The kind of man I’m glad I get to spend the rest of my life with. My best friend.”

With every word I speak, Aidan's eyes darken, and his gaze sears into me with a burning intensity it's a surprise I don't combust. I mean it all, though. My only hope is that one day we'll find the kind of love my parents have. The kind I've witnessed between Carrick and Nora. A love I never thought I'd have, but discover I desperately want. With Aidan. I'm more than halfway there already and have been for a long time.

His lips crash down on mine and his tongue sweeps in like he's dying to taste me. I meet every thrust with my own and sink into the pleasure that crashes over me in waves. Aidan's body covers mine. My nipples grow harder, and the dull throbbing in my center grows as he settles in the cradle of my thighs. His cock hits right at my clit, and I roll my hips trying to increase the contact where I need it.

He answers by rocking his pelvis against me and swallowing my breathy moan. My fingers clutch at his hair, holding him tightly to me. I don't ever want this kiss to end. His palm covers my breast and gently kneads my flesh. I arch my back and press more fully into his touch, needing more. There's blissful pleasure as his fingers pluck the hardened tip of my nipple through my thin shirt that travels throughout me.

It's as though every nerve in my body is firing. Everything tingles and a low hum dances across every inch of my skin. I've never experienced anything like it before. Aidan's cock hits a spot that makes my toes curl. We both have far too many clothes on. As if sensing my thoughts, he reaches for the hem of my t-shirt and with some maneuvering on my part, he drags it up and over my head. My bra is gone next and I collapse into the mattress.

Aidan rises up on a single elbow and stares down at me. With a fingertip, he traces a line down my sternum and then circles my pebbled nipple. No one has studied me this closely before, and for a second I feel self-conscious enough to want to cover myself. My boobs still sit where they always have, but they're a little small in comparison to the rest of me. Except the desire in Aidan's darkened eyes tells me how much he likes what he sees.

"I've imagined you spread out beneath me more than once over the last five years." His words confirm the thought.

Pleasure flutters in my belly. "Why haven't you ever said anything?"

"Because, like you, I valued our friendship too much to fuck it up by sleeping with you. I didn't want to change anything between us. Or make it weird."

I run my fingers up his bicep, marveling at all the tattoos, and nibble my

lip in uncertainty. “Is this going to change it now? More than it already has, I mean?”

Aidan takes my hand and brushes a kiss over my knuckles. “Almost nothing stays the same, but I promise you, no matter what else occurs, you will always be the best thing to ever happen to me.”

That doesn’t really answer my question.

“Hey,” he says and I lift my eyes to meet his. “Are you okay?”

I force a smile to my lips. “Of course. How could I not be with a beautiful, half-naked man in bed with me who, I’m pretty sure, had been about to give me a mind-blowing orgasm?”

Aidan barks out a laugh. “Mind-blowing, huh?”

“Most definitely.” I give a succinct nod.

“Nothing like a little pressure to help a man perform.”

I pat his cheek. “I’m sure it’s nothing you can’t handle.”

His gaze turns predatory, and any arousal that had dampened during our talk sparks back to life. The faint throbbing ache in my lower pelvis starts up. Aidan bends until his mouth grazes mine and hovers there.

“Challenge accepted,” he growls low in his chest.

CHAPTER 23



Aidan

PUSHING AWAY ANY REGARD FOR CONSEQUENCES, I CLAIM SORCHA'S LIPS AND slip my tongue in between them. Hers tangles with mine, following my lead, and I lap up the mint flavor of her toothpaste. Her kisses are as sweet and sensual as she is. I skim my fingers along her side, running over the ridges of her ribs until I palm the curve of her hip and tug her leg up. She wraps it around me and rolls her pelvis to grind against me. Damp heat soaks through the fabric of her shorts. I let her continue working herself up until I sense she's right on the edge and then draw away.

Sorcha lets out a whimper. "I was so close."

"When you come, I plan on being inside you. But before that, I'm going to have you begging," I promise.

"Is that a challenge? Maybe you'll be the one begging."

I palm her cunt, no doubt dripping with wetness, and she moans. "I beg for no one."

"Challenge accepted," she echoes my words from moments ago.

I rise onto my knees to tower over her. Eyes gone dark with arousal meet mine and I slip my fingers beneath her waistband and slowly lower the fabric that covers what I'm dying to taste. The musky scent of her arousal perfumes the air as I expose her bare cunt to my view. It glistens with wetness and my mouth waters. I toss Sorcha's shorts and underwear over the edge of the bed.

Making room between her legs, I reach down and with my thumbs,

spread her wide open. I glide them along her slick flesh until I reach her clit. Her breathing speeds up and a shudder runs over her. A faint moan spills from her lips. I meet her gaze again and rub circles over the sensitive pearl. I study Sorcha's every response. How much pressure, what speed, and in which direction makes her whimper and press herself into my touch.

"Such a pretty sight. Your clit is swollen and begging for me, isn't it?" I repeat the motion that made her cry out and she repeats the sound.

"Yes." She nods shakily. "Please."

I continue playing her body with my thumb and then slide two fingers inside her. She's wet enough there's no resistance. Her cunt clamps down on them. In and out I thrust.

"Please what?" I push ever farther inside her and graze the front inner wall with my fingertips finding the soft spongy spot.

Wetness gushes out of her and Sorcha cries out. "Oh god, please. Fuck me. Please."

Sweat-dampened hair clings to her forehead and her pink nipples have darkened in color to match the flush spreading across her chest. I bend and take one in my mouth, flicking it with my tongue before trapping it against the roof of my mouth and sucking hard. Her entire body goes rigid and she's almost ready to fly. Quickly I remove my fingers from her and come up on my knees to stare down at her.

Sorcha's entire body shakes, and she whimpers. Taking pity on her, I rip my jeans off, free my cock, and then I'm plunging deep inside her. The second my pelvis brushes against the already over-sensitized flesh of her clit, her climax hits. She fists her fingers and clenches the sheet between them. A scream rips from her throat and I cover her mouth with mine to swallow it down. I pound into her harder and harder.

"You feel so fucking good," I growl against Sorcha's lips.

Her legs clamp around my waist and she digs her heels into my ass. It spurs me on. Another orgasm washes over her. Shudders wrack her body. I don't stop. My thrusts only get faster. Deeper. I reach between us and finger her clit, forcing a third orgasm from her.

"It's too much," she whispers, her voice gravelly and rough. "Aidan, please."

Her pleading triggers my own release, and I erupt inside her with a hoarse yell. When I've finally emptied my cock, giving her everything I have, I collapse half on top of her. Sweat covers both our bodies. Our chests heave

with effort to pull in air. I nuzzle my face in the crook of her neck and place soft kisses along her shoulder. A tremor wracks her body and her cunt spasms around me.

I force myself to withdraw from her and roll off the bed for the bathroom. Holding a warm, wet cloth, I come back and clean her. After tossing it in with the rest of our dirty clothes I make my way back to the bed and crawl in next to her. She cuddles into my side and rests her hand on my chest.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” I can’t help but ask.

A satisfied sound comes from her. “Only in a really good way.”

I chuckle and kiss the crown of her head. “Did I meet your challenge to your satisfaction? Was that orgasm mind-blowing enough for you?”

“I think my mind exploded with those orgasms. But maybe later we’ll have to try again. Just to make sure you can’t do better. For research purposes and all. Besides, you still have to meet my challenge. Next time”—she palms my semi-hard cock and it twitches in her grasp—“you’ll be the one begging.”

She might actually be right.

Before long, Sorcha is softly snoring, and I stare up at the darkened ceiling. I lied to her. Then again, that’s what I’m good at. Because after this, nothing is going to be the same between us. She’s not the kind of person who can separate her emotions from sex. It’s already evident. I have nobody to blame but myself. I’m the one who told her this marriage was real between us.

God, she’d been perfect though. Every response had made my cock harder than it’s ever been. Nothing had prepared me for how good it felt to be deep inside her. Sorcha fit me like a glove. One time and I’m already addicted to her. I want her again and again. She snuggles closer, as though seeking my warmth. I draw the blanket up higher and tuck it beneath her chin. She releases a contented sigh.

I close my eyes, hoping for sleep, but my mind won’t quiet. Carefully, I slide out from beneath her and throw my jeans and shirt back on. Glancing over my shoulder to make sure she’s still asleep, I walk out into the common room for a drink. I stop short. A lamp is on and the dim light shows Finn’s already seated in one of the chairs with a drink in his hand.

“What are you doing home?” I ask quietly as I make my way to the bar.

“The last time I checked, I lived here.”

I glance over my shoulder and fill my glass with whiskey. “You know

what I mean. Why aren't you at the casino?"

"Needed a break for a night. Brenn is perfectly capable of taking care of things while I'm not there."

With drink in hand, I take a seat in my usual chair. "I never said he wasn't."

We sit in silence for several minutes, each of us sipping our drink.

"I still can't believe you're getting married," Finn breaks it. "You always said you never would. Not after Mother."

If not for Campbell calling my bluff, I wouldn't be. "Sorcha's my best friend. I'm doing what I have to to keep her safe."

He makes a sound I can't decipher and takes another drink. "You seemed a little jealous when you brought her to the casino."

I should have known he'd bring that up. "I wasn't jealous. Merely protective. I know how you are with women."

Finn's eyes narrow. "Not with women who are taken. I've seen what cheating does to a relationship. Do you really think I'd do something like that?"

A pinch of guilt plucks at my chest. "You're right. I'm sorry."

The quiet settles between us for another minute.

"Do you ever hate Da for what he did?" he finally asks.

I turn my head sharply in his direction. "Hate him for what? His affair with Nora?"

"For forcing Mother to marry him knowing she was in love with someone else," Finn says. "If he would have married Nora instead then maybe Mother wouldn't have hated him—hated *us*—so much."

"You forget that it was Grand-da who forced the wedding. He's the one who deserves all our hate. Beside, if Da had married Nora, none of us would have existed *for* Mother to hate. The only person who would even be here is Imogen." I take another sip of whiskey.

No one mourned when Grand-da died a decade ago. He'd been a ruthless prick who actually puts Liam Campbell to shame. At least Campbell loves Imogen enough not to kill any of us unprovoked. Unlike Grand-da who'd had our Uncle Brian murdered.

It's been twenty-three years and I've never told a soul that I was there and witnessed the whole thing. I'll take the secret to my grave. Not to protect the old bastard, but because it would break something in Da if he knew.

Finn tosses back the rest of his drink and stands. "Not that you asked, but

you're not fooling anyone other than yourself. We've all seen how you look at Sorcha when you don't think anyone's watching. I know how you feel about Mother and loving someone. But don't let her keep you from what could be the best thing to ever happen to you. She made her own choices and so can you."

Without another word, he walks to the bar and places his empty glass in the sink then turns and heads down the hallway that leads to his room. I finish off my own drink and refill it before grabbing the glass and the bottle from the cabinet and bringing them both back to the chair. Finn's wrong. Whatever he thinks he sees isn't there. Or maybe I am really lying to myself. I've always been a great liar, after all.

CHAPTER 24



SORCHA

I HAD SEX WITH AIDAN.

Panic flutters in my chest.

Oh my god. I had *sex* with Aidan.

And not just any sex but the best I've ever had in my entire life. Taking a deep breath, I roll over. Only to find his side of the bed is empty. I reach over. The pillow beneath my hand is cold. I'm not sure if I'm relieved or disappointed. Maybe a little of both. But mostly relieved because it gives me time alone.

Except being alone only makes my mind spin with too many thoughts all at once. It's overwhelming. I need to focus on something else. Jumping from the bed, I make my way to the bathroom for a shower. There's a twinge of pain between my thighs. Aidan isn't a small man and it's been a while. There aren't a lot of options in Burtonport. And even if there were, I wouldn't have slept with any of them. The village is too small and I never had the desire to be the subject of local gossip. Of course, leaving to marry Aidan no doubt has everyone talking.

I tie my hair up to keep it from getting too wet and step under the spray of warm water letting it beat down on my back soothing some of the aches. Once I've washed up, I throw on a pair of leggings and a comfy shirt. My stomach rumbles, begging for food. Do I dare wander into the kitchen and hope I don't pass Aidan? Based on the dim light filtering into the room, it's

still early. In fact, I'm not sure the sun's fully risen yet. My stomach growls again making the decision for me. I'll have to risk it. I'm starving.

The hallway is empty as I make my way through the common room and out of the wing toward the kitchen. My luck holds, because all is quiet. Even it's empty. I don't want to be presumptuous and help myself to anything. *You're marrying Aidan, and for the moment, this is your house, too. No one will care.* Right. With that, I get a few things from the fridge and search for a frying pan.

"Found you." I grab two from the cabinet and raise them up like they're some prize.

I've got potatoes cooking in one pan and eggs in the other when Nora walks in.

"Good morning," I greet her. "I hope you don't mind that I took over the kitchen this morning. I woke up starving and figured I'd help out."

"Thank you, Sorcha. Don't get me wrong, I love cooking, but it's kind of nice to have someone else prepare a meal for a change." She helps herself to something to drink.

"Well, I'm happy to help any time. I've been cooking for the boys and Aisling since my Mum died five years ago, so I understand how good it feels when someone else takes over once in a while." I stir the potatoes and eggs so neither burn.

"Is there something I can do?" Nora asks.

I wave my hand. "You just make yourself comfortable or go take care of anything you have to do."

She hesitates. "Are you sure?"

I twist at the waist to glance back at her and smile. "Positive."

"Thank you." She finishes off her juice, puts the glass in the dishwasher, and disappears. I hum while I continue cooking. Nearly everything is finished by the time the kids stroll in. I glance over at them.

"Good morning. Will one of you set the table, please?"

Aisling comes to stand at my side and I bend to kiss the crown of her head. "Did you sleep better last night?"

She nods. "A little. I still miss my fairy forest though. When will you draw it again?"

"I'll have Aidan take me into town later today and I'll look at what paint I can find. Then, maybe you and I can get started on sketching it out tomorrow, what do you think?" My days are free to be filled with whatever I want to do.

A fact I'm still not used to.

"Yippee," Aisling exclaims and dances around.

Laughing, I transfer all the food into serving bowls. "All right boys, breakfast is ready. Take this into the dining room for me, will you?"

Kellen and Carson each grab a bowl and I take the two remaining ones then we head to the next room. The three of them take their seats.

"Shoot, I didn't get any drinks." I turn back to the kitchen and collide with a hard body with an "oof".

Familiar hands steady me as the woodsy smell that's quickly becoming a favorite wafts around me. Right behind it is the strong scent of whiskey. I glance up at Aidan and my lips turn down. Bloodshot eyes scan my face. His hair is ruffled like he's run his fingers through it a thousand times. He's also wearing the same clothes he had on yesterday only they're far more wrinkled.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine. Just didn't get much sleep," he says.

"Why not?" I worry my fingers together. Especially since our epic marathon fucking session last night should have exhausted him. It had me.

"Just thinking about things." With those cryptic words Aidan walks toward the kitchen. Of course, I follow. Not only because it had been my original destination any way.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I ask hesitantly.

He gets a glass from the cabinet and fills it with water from the filtering pitcher in the fridge. I stand there while he drinks the entirety of it, my stomach swirling with nerves and that heavy, uncomfortable sensation burning inside. He refills the glass and leans against the counter. Knots of anxiety tighten. Finally his eyes meet mine. "Not yet."

I swallow. "Okay. You know I'll be here when you're ready."

Aidan smiles, but as someone who knows him almost better than anyone else, it's clearly fake. He unfolds his frame and closes the distance between us until he's close enough to touch. There's a clink of glass hitting the countertop and then he palms my cheeks between both hands and presses the same comforting kiss on my forehead that I've always loved. It feels different this time. Like it's the last one he'll ever give me. Tears sting my eyes for some reason.

He draws back and stares down at me. "You're my best friend, you know that."

I lay my hands over his wrists and try to hold back the panic attack building. “You’re mine, too. Always.”

“I’m going to be gone for the day. Will you be okay here alone?”

“Of course,” I say softly. “Besides, I won’t be alone. There are plenty of people here to keep me company.”

Aidan releases me and with only a brief glance he walks away. I stand there another minute, slowly breathing in and out, until I take in a long, shuddering breath and go back to what I’d come in here to do in the first place. Moving on automatic pilot, I fill four glasses with juice and, after all the practice carrying drinks at the pub, I manage to pick them all up and take them into the dining room in a single trip. Kellen, Carson, and Aisling are chattering with each other in between bites.

My appetite has vanished, but I force myself to eat a little if for nothing more than sustenance. One by one the kids finish eating.

“Take your plates to the kitchen and rinse them off before putting them in the dishwasher please.”

The three of them comply and then I’m left alone. I wallow in self-pity for a short time and then stand. Whatever is going on with Aidan, I need to trust him. Maybe I’m jumping to conclusions and worrying about something that isn’t even there. Straightening my shoulders, I clean the rest of the kitchen and then grab Aidan’s laptop from the spot on the floor in our bedroom where it had fallen last night. It doesn’t appear to have suffered any damage. I take it with me out onto the back patio and click on the first open tab.

I’m going to open that art gallery, and it’s going to be incredible. Which means I need to get to work.

CHAPTER 25



Aidan

I HADN'T SLEPT AT ALL LAST NIGHT. AT LEAST NOT UNTIL I PASSED OUT after finishing off the rest of the whiskey left in the bottle I'd pulled from the cabinet. The couple hours I did manage to get weren't near enough and only added to the headache I had from the hangover.

Once I've taken a quick shower and changed my clothes, I walk out the front door and get in my car. Seconds later, I'm on the road toward Dublin. I wind my way through the city streets and across the Liffy until I reach my destination. After finding a place to park I walk down the footpath that leads into the place I haven't visited since right after Sorcha and I met and her mother died.

The atmosphere inside the cemetery is solemn as other pedestrians make their way to their loved one's gravesite. A few stand around an open grave comforting each other. I only give them a passing glance as I continue on my way. Less than ten minutes later I stand in front of where a large marble statue bearing our family's crest towers over the neighboring markers.

I take in the newest ones in the ground at my feet. All of them have been added within the last twenty to thirty years. There's Uncle Brian, an infant daughter of Uncle Conor's, Mhamó, Grand-da, and finally, my mother. Kathleen Róisín Donnelly. The only other inscription besides her birth and death dates is "Beloved Daughter". That's it. Nothing to indicate she'd been a wife or mother or friend.

Did she even have any friends? I'd barely been ten when she died. I hadn't paid attention to that kind of thing. She cried a lot, though.

Was there ever a time when she wasn't crying? Only when she screamed how much she hated us. Hated Da. Hated her life. I'd once walked into her room to ask a question. She'd been sitting on her bed quietly sobbing. In her hands was a picture frame. She stroked it with her fingertips and whispered, "I love you and miss you so much."

The floor must have creaked under my foot, because her head snapped up. Pure hatred spewed from her eyes. She jumped from the bed—yelling at me to get out—and slapped me across the face. I turned and ran out of the room, her screams and curses following me until they only echoed inside my head.

Until that day, I'd hated her as much as she hated us. After, I pitied her for how weak and pathetic she was. How weak love had made her. I swore I would never love anyone if that's what it did to a person.

Except Da's not weak and aside from his children, there isn't anyone he loves more than Nora. Carrick Donnelly rules an entire organization. He's the most powerful man in Dublin.

Maybe I'm the weak one. The one who lets fear rule me.

I stare down at my mother's gravestone. Will mine, one day, read nothing more than "Beloved Son"?

Turning, I walk back to my car. Once I get behind the wheel, I make a couple phone calls.



I DRIVE THROUGH THE IRON GATE OF THE ESTATE AND DOWN THE LANE toward the manor. The late afternoon sun hides behind the shade of the trees. A few rays of light filter through casting long shadows across the sprawling landscape. I reach the house and park. For a few minutes, I sit there, staring at the front door. The second I cross the threshold, there's no turning back.

Taking a deep breath, I exit, stride forward, and step into the entryway. The faint sound of the boys' voices drift in from the left. I follow it to the common area where the two of them are engaged in a battle on the television screen. They yell out commands to each other and their fingers press wildly on the buttons and knobs of their controllers. Neither of them even glance

over at me, too engrossed in their game.

I make my way down the hallway into my bedroom only to find it empty. I'm not sure why I expected otherwise? *Did you really think Sorcha would be sitting here just waiting for you to come back?* I shake my head at the idiocy and go back the way I came. Next, I check Aisling's room. It's just as empty.

The library is quiet as usual. Finally, I walk through the dining room and movement outside catches my eye. I stand at the door and my gaze lands on Sorcha and Aisling. They're sitting at the table, their heads bent close, with paper strewn in front of them. The young girl points at the sheet in front of her older sister and Sorcha's hand moves, the pencil gripped between her fingers moving with it.

I step outside. Sorcha notices me first. Her head jerks up and our eyes meet. Pure happiness radiates from them, but flashes of fear and worry accompany it. I hate that my leaving this morning caused that. She nudges Aisling who whips around. Her smile lights up her face and she rushes over and grabs my hand, nearly dragging me back to the table.

"Aidan, come look what we're drawing. It's a new fairy forest," she squeals in excitement.

I let her pull me over so I can study the art Sorcha's creating. Good Christ, she's talented. It's no wonder Aisling desperately wants her forest back in her room. I study the image in front of me and I can almost imagine I'm there, standing within the trees, smelling the air filled with the scent of flowers and dirt and nature. I can picture the fairies flitting from limb to limb, their iridescent wings sparkling in the black of night.

My eyes meet Sorcha's. "It's stunning. Although that is almost too pale of a word to use."

A flush rises in her cheeks. "Thank you."

I glance at Aisling and back to Sorcha. "Can we talk?"

She swallows. "Of course. Here, take these to your room, please"—she rises and gathers up all the paper in a neat stack and hands it to her sister—"and we'll work on them again later, okay?"

"Bye, Aidan," Aisling says before disappearing into the house.

Sorcha's turns her gaze back to me. Her body is rigid as if she's waiting for a blow.

"Will you take a drive with me into the city?"

She blinks, clearly surprised at the request and nods. "Let me send a quick text to the boys letting them know."

Once she's done that, she passes me on her way to the door. I take her hand and thread my fingers through hers. She startles, but doesn't pull away. Instead, one side of her mouth curls up just slightly in a small half-smile. I'll take it. We get to the car and I'm forced to release her, but the minute we're both seated and driving back into Dublin, her hand is within mine.

I can sense her wanting to ask about this morning, but she doesn't. The only sound is the song coming through the speakers. We ride in silence. Every so often, I squeeze her hand gently. Finally, we come to a stop on a quiet, but frequented-by-locals street in front of a small, two-story building bookended on one side by a bookstore and a popular bakery on the other.

Sorcha sends me a questioning glance when I turn the car off. I just grin and exit the car. Seconds later, her door closes and she rounds the front to stand next to me.

"What is this place?" she finally breaks the silence.

"You'll see." I can't help tease her.

I reach into my pocket, insert the key in the door, and open it. Then I glance over my shoulder. "You coming?"

Sorcha strides forward and follows me inside. I walk over to one wall and flip on the light. The concrete floor is bare and a little dusty. The tall ceiling is fitted with black rafters and exposed black ductwork. White tubed light covers dangle at random intervals, each one bright and shining with brand new bulbs. The cavernous space echoes with Sorcha's footsteps as she gawks from one side of the room to another, slowly pivoting in a circle and taking everything in.

Her chin tips down and she meets my gaze. "This place is lovely. But I'm not sure what we're doing here."

I close the distance between us and reach for her hand, using my thumb to open her palm where I drop the key in it. Sorcha's head jerks up and confusion is written across her face.

"It's yours. If you want it," I tell her.

"Mine?"

"For your gallery."

Her eyes widen and then fill with tears. "Oh, Aidan."

"I'm sorry for leaving and being weird this morning. Especially after last night." I cradle her jaw. "It was nothing to do with you. It was me and my need to let go of the past."

Sorcha lays her hand over mine. "I was worried you regretted it."

“Not at all. I just needed to take care of a few things.”

“Did you get them taken care of?” she asks.

I take her hand and kiss her knuckles. “I’m working on it. But while I get my shit together, what do you think? Should we buy the place as a wedding gift to ourselves?”

Sorcha laughs. “To ourselves, huh?”

“Why not? If you can’t buy gifts for yourself, who can you buy them for?” I smirk. “Besides isn’t there something in the wedding vows about what’s mine is yours and what’s yours is mine?”

“I don’t think that’s in the actual vows.” She rolls her eyes and walks through the open space taking it all in.

“There’s an upstairs that can be used for storage if we need it. Or we can extend the small space in the back that’s already there.” I gesture in that direction. “You could even make the upstairs into a special events area where you showcase a single artist’s work or throw a fancy party.”

Sorcha faces me. “You’ve thought a lot about this, haven’t you?”

I close the distance between us and take both her hands in mine. “I know I’ve asked a lot of you, what with the whole marriage and moving to Dublin, thing. I want you to be happy.”

She places her hand on my chest and rises up on tiptoe to kiss me. “I *am* happy. As long as I still have you in my life, I’ll be happy.”

Her words settle deep in my chest, warming it. I claim her lips with mine, curling my hand around her hip, and tugging her to me. There’s no rushing. It’s a sweet, perfect kiss. I draw back and press my forehead to Sorcha’s. “You make me happy, too.”

I reach into my pocket and pull out the small, square velvet box. Sorcha sucks in a breath.

“Do you remember what you asked me to do?” I take out the platinum band with its large round diamond in the center surrounded by emerald accents.

She clears her throat before she can speak. “I asked you not to rule out the possibility of falling in love with me.” Still it comes out in a hushed voice.

Taking her trembling hand in mine, I slide the ring down her third finger. “I think it’s very possible I already am. Sorcha O’Connell, will you marry me? Not because of any debt or blackmail. But because you’re the person I want to spend my life with.”

It’s not the pretty words every woman wants to hear, but I’m doing my

best to open myself up to possibilities. To her. To love. I hold my breath waiting for her to choose me. To choose us.

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 26



SORCHA

ONCE AIDAN PROPOSED, WE DECIDED NOT TO WAIT. I MEAN, WHEN IT'S THE right person, what's the point? Five days after he gave me the best wedding present ever, we're getting married. It's a perfect day for it, too. The gods must be looking down on us and smiling, because the sun is shining brightly in the sky and there's not a single cloud. A rarity in Dublin this time of year.

Caitlín, Nessa, and Lucia had rallied together and with whirlwind speed had a small but adorable venue booked. I would have been happy to have it in the backyard at the manor, but since Liam has refused to step foot on Donnelly property again, it wasn't an option. Nessa told me he'd only done it the one time for Imogen's sake.

The three women had also helped me pick out a dress, flowers, and took care of getting the food for the reception. They even hired a photographer to take some pictures. Although it's only family present, there are still nearly twenty people. That's also counting Aidan and me.

"Aidan is going to want to rip this dress off you the minute you head down the aisle," Caitlín says with an appreciative whistle.

"Let's hope he at least waits until he has her alone." Nessa giggles.

Despite Caitlín still pinning back my hair, I turn in my seat to face the two of them. "Thank you both for being here and standing up with me. I don't really have any girlfriends left and both of you have been so warm and welcoming."

“That’s what family is for. Besides, my sister and best friend are halfway across the world. It’s nice having sisters here,” Caitlín says. “Even if technically we’re cousins-in-law.”

“I grew up an only child with a shitty Da. Imogen and I are slowly becoming friends, but it’s been a challenge. I’m sure because Cian and Liam hate each other. It can’t be easy for her to be caught in the middle.” Nessa sighs. Does she not realize she’s caught there, too?

The wedding ceremony is going to be interesting with everyone, including Liam, in attendance. Aidan had personally invited Imogen and him, although the latter with great reluctance. But he said he knew that if Liam wasn’t allowed to come, then his sister wouldn’t attend either. I’d been introduced to her when the two of them arrived. They couldn’t have been more different. Liam wore a dark, pin-striped suit that showed off his massive build, and his rough and craggy face spoke of someone who’d live a rough life. Imogen, on the other hand, resembled the lead singer of a goth band with her black and white skull dress and the purple and teal streaks throughout her black hair.

“I’m glad they could come. Aidan wouldn’t want his sister to miss his wedding. I’m sure everyone can behave themselves for a couple hours,” I say.

Nessa and Caitlín exchange disbelieving glances. There’s a knock on the door and Aisling skips into the room.

“I brought the flowers.” She holds up the basket filled with rose petals nearly spilling some of them in her excitement.

“Look at how pretty you are,” I gush.

The white dress with its flared tulle skirt and wide Kelly green ribbon around the waist that ties into a giant bow at the back had been adorable when she’d tried it on. With her hair combed and styled in loose curls, she’s the perfect flower girl.

“I’m ready to throw them.” Aisling nearly vibrates with giddiness.

“I know you are, but it’s not time yet.” I face the mirror and meet Caitlín’s eyes with a smile and she goes back to putting the finishing touches on my hair.

Nessa calls my sister over and the two of them talk and giggle. Butterflies have been swarming around in my stomach all day. Today I become Aidan’s wife. Something I never dreamed possible. The past five days have been surreal. We’ve both been so busy during the day that we barely saw each

other. But the nights? The nights have been incredible.

The first time we'd had sex, it had been fucking. Since he proposed, and although he didn't actually say he loved me, he's made love to me like he does. And while him admitting that he *thinks* he's falling in love with me might not be enough for another woman, it is for me. I've always judged a person on their actions more than their words, and everything Aidan has done over the last few weeks—god, the last five years—tells me he loves me. I can be patient.

“All done,” Caitlín announces.

I stare at myself in the mirror. She's pinned the sides back in loose twists and left the rest to cascade down in long waves. My makeup is light and natural with a pale pink lip gloss that shines, but doesn't look wet. Taking a deep breath, I stand and turn to face the three of them. “How do I look?”

“Absolutely stunning,” Caitlín breathes out in awe while Nessa and Aisling nod their heads with eyes wide and mouths gaped.

There's a narrow full-length mirror attached to the back of the door and I walk over to it to study myself. My dress is a simple, but beautiful A-line with a sharp V-neckline that shows the perfect amount of cleavage. The asymmetrical skirt is a triple-layered satin that's shorter in the front before lengthening and billowing out around the back. I turn around and twist at the waist to glance over my shoulder. The straps are almost a halter, except they form an X centered right between my shoulder blades exposing my lower back in the triangle-shaped opening. There aren't any other embellishments. The minute I laid eyes on it, my gut told me it was the one.

For the second time, there's a knock on the door. Caitlín goes to answer it. On the other side is Carrick.

“The priest is here and everyone's in their places whenever you ladies are ready,” he tells her after a brief kiss on the cheek.

She turns back to me with a huge smile. “You ready to put that ball and chain on my cousin?”

I snort and burst out laughing. “I'm ready.”

With Aisling skipping between them, Caitlín and Nessa head to the small suite where the ceremony will take place. Carrick turns toward me with a soft smile that changes his face entirely. He isn't the head of the Irish mafia today. He's the father whose son is getting married and the father-figure who is walking me down the aisle.

He takes both my hands. “You look beautiful. I'm so happy for you and

Aidan and I'm proud to call you daughter."

Tears well at his kind words. But they're also a reminder that neither Mum nor Da are here to see me get married. Da had always liked Aidan.

"Thank you, Carrick. Not just for welcoming me as part of your family, but for raising such an amazing son."

"I wish you both a lifetime of happiness." He loops my hand around his elbow and leads me to where everyone—where Aidan—awaits.

The sound of music reaches me through the closed doors of the room and we stop in front of them. Two ushers who work for the venue stand on either side of it. Carrick lays his hand over mine and squeezes it gently. I swallow at the sudden rush of emotion. We stand there for several minutes until finally the song changes and that's our cue. The two men each grab a handle and pull apart the double doors.

Heads turn and then we're slowly moving forward. Both our families are seated in chairs that are placed on two sides of the room forming an aisle in between both sections. At the head of it stands Caitlín, Nessa, and Aisling on the left. To the right are Kellen and Carson who both nearly cried when Aidan asked them to stand up with him. And directly in the center, just in front of the priest, is Aidan. Our gazes lock and neither of us can look away as his Da and I draw closer.

Even from this distance, love shines from his eyes. I feel it deep inside me. No one has ever looked at me like this. I suspect it's the same way I'm looking at him. My heart is full to bursting. It takes far too long, although it's only a minute, but finally, Carrick and I stop next to Aidan. The priest speaks but it's nothing but a buzzing in my ears. All I can focus on is the man in front of me.

There's a soft tug on my arm as Carrick releases my hold on him. He ghosts a kiss across my cheek and then Aidan's strong, calloused hands are wrapped around mine and he brings both sets of knuckles up to his mouth for a soft and gentle kiss.

The priest speaks again, and somehow, I manage to give all the appropriate responses at the right time. Then he faces Aidan.

"Do you have the ring?"

Aidan lets go of my hands and turns to Kellen behind him, who passes him the plain platinum band. Then he's facing me again and taking my left hand.

"You may place the ring on Sorcha's finger and speak your vows now,"

the priest instructs.

I blink. We were supposed to have our own vows? Mild panic rises, but then it's soothed away by Aidan's voice.

"Sorcha Noreen O'Connell. You've been my best friend. My confidante. My lover. Now, you'll be my wife. The woman I plan on spending the rest of my life honoring, cherishing"—he pauses, a bright light shining from his eyes, and slowly releases a breath as he slides the band in place—"and loving to the best of my ability. Thank you for never giving up on me. I'll do everything in my power to make sure that every day you know how much I care for you. How much I love you. I'm sorry it took so long for me to realize."

I take in a shuddering breath and barely hold back my sob. Tears streak down my cheeks.

"Sorcha would you like to make a vow?" the priest asks, as though he knew ahead of time that I hadn't prepared one.

Except it doesn't matter, because as soon as Caitlín gives me the ring, I speak from my heart. "Aidan Brian Donnelly. Five years ago you saved me. Not just from a bad situation, but from grief. You've been there for me through everything, never wavering in your friendship and support. From that first moment I've loved you and only dreamed that one day you might love me, too. Thank you for making all my dreams come true."

The priest says a final prayer and then, "I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss your bride."

Aidan doesn't waste a single second before he palms my cheeks and his lips are on mine. Cheers and clapping echo around us, but the only thing I care about is my husband. Oh my god. Aidan is my husband. Joyous laughter spills from me. He draws away and our eyes meet.

"Wife," he says in a gruff tone.

"Husband."

Aidan threads his fingers through mine and turns us to face our family. Everyone is on their feet whistling and celebrating. The music plays and we step down off the slightly raised dais to walk toward our future. The music is drowned out by a massive boom. The floor shakes.

Confusion is on several faces, but the men's expressions turn fierce and they all share intense glances. Heads swivel like we're all searching for the source of the noise, when there's another explosion and everything around us turns into chaos as the walls collapse with a deafening boom.

CHAPTER 27



Aidan

GUNFIRE RINGS OUT AS DEBRIS FALLS FROM THE CEILING.

“Everybody down,” a gruff voice yells out that sounds like Da’s.

Sorcha’s hand is ripped from mine and she falls to the ground. I scream her name and cover her body as I cough on the dust, and smoke fills my lungs. Children are screaming as more *popping* sounds reverberate around us.

I can still make out shadowy figures. My attention turns to my wife lying still beneath me. I can only pray someone doesn’t shoot me in the back.

“Sorcha, baby, look at me.” I carefully run my hands over her, searching for a wound.

Blood stains her dress. My hands shake as I shove all the fabric up and out of the way, my heart beating like a drum, and fear like I’ve never experienced before swells inside me. I can’t breathe from it. There’s a bullet wound along her upper thigh, although it only appears to have grazed her. She groans and shifts. I search her again and find a large bump on the back of her head.

Roars of pain join the whimpers and cries around us and bodies fall. Fuck. I reach for the ankle holster under my pants and pull out my weapon. Finally the smoke begins to clear giving me a better view of my surroundings. Concrete walls lay crumbled around the perimeter.

The gunfire slows until only a deathly silence fills the air.

“Throw down your weapons or I will kill her,” a heavily Arabic accented

man breaks it.

I search the room. The women are huddled on the floor protecting the weeping children. Dead bodies—enemies—lie in crumpled heaps. My brothers, Da, Roarke, and Nathan are all standing with their weapons pointed toward where the doors leading into the suite used to be. Several armed Moroccans—none of them Ayman Naji—flank the man in the center, whose arm is wrapped around Imogen’s neck and who’s holding a gun to her head. Fear lines her face and her eyes are locked on Liam who faces them with his own gun raised. His other arm hangs loosely at his side and blood drips off his fingertips and falls to the floor in a puddle at his feet. I don’t have a clean shot and I don’t want to move and set off any itchy trigger fingers.

“I said throw down your weapons,” the man holding Imogen roars again.

“Not a chance. If you hurt her, you’re a dead man. You’re all dead,” Liam says in a harsh tone.

“My men are closing in as we speak,” Da warns, pain etched on his face. “You have nowhere to go.”

I study him and spot the blood soaking through his shirt. How bad is it?

The Moroccans exchange glances, as though they’re trying to decide whether or not to believe Da. They converse in Arabic until the man holding Imogen slowly backs up, his hold on her not loosening an inch as he brings her with him. The men behind him follow suit, their weapons still trained on all of us.

My family moves as a single unit forward, no one taking their eyes off our retreating enemies. At my feet, Sorcha groans again.

“Aidan,” she whimpers.

There’s no decision to make. I let Da and the rest take care of things and I drop to my knees next to my wife.

“I’m here, baby. I’m here,” I reassure Sorcha, caressing her face and brushing her hair back, taking care to avoid the lump on her head.

Her eyelashes flutter and slowly open. Her pupils are dilated and she blinks rapidly as though she’s having trouble focusing. Finally, she’s able to lock onto me.

“Wha—what happened?” She tries to sit up and whimpers in pain.

“Careful. A bullet grazed you.”

Her head snaps up and she clutches the side of it. “God, my head is killing me. This is worse than any hangover I’ve ever had.”

I carefully lay my hand on top of hers. “You probably have a

concussion.”

Several shots are fired outside somewhere followed by sharp commands in both English and Arabic. Sorcha jumps. As if remembering where we are, she cries out. “The kids.”

Quickly, I scan the room again and find them. Kellen and Carson—whose faces are deathly white—have their arms wrapped around each other. Within their embrace is Aisling, her face equally as pale. Caitlín and Nora guard all three of them with their bodies, both of them staring where their men disappeared.

“They’re okay. Caitlín and Nora have them.”

On the other side of the room, Nessa and Lucia are protecting her three children. Rubble outside shifts and footsteps approach. Faint sirens blare in the distance. I jump to my feet, gun arm outstretched, ready to defend my wife and our family. Da steps over the pile of rubble—his gaze searching and landing on Nora—slowly followed by Finn, then Nathan and Cian who both head straight for their families, and Roarke who crosses over to Caitlín.

Kellen, Carson, and Aisling run over to us, and I quickly shove the weapon into my waistband at the small of my back under my jacket. A sobbing Aisling throws herself against Sorcha, who hisses in pain, but cradles the little girl in her arms, rocking her with soothing words. The boys cling to me and I bend to pull them tighter against me.

A noise brings my head up. Liam enters with Imogen tucked closely against his side. Rage radiates from him and while she’s not crying, there’s an eerie stillness to her despite being upright and walking. They come to a stop in the middle of the room.

“Is everyone okay?” Da asks with Nora still in his arms.

Murmurs of assent ripple through the air. I glance down at the boys, who finally release me, but stay close enough to touch.

“Are you two okay?”

They nod their heads shakily, their ashen faces slowly gaining color. I crouch down again and stroke Aisling’s hair. “Hey little nightmare. You’re not hurt anywhere are you?”

She buries her face in Sorcha’s neck and shakes her head. I can tell my wife is in pain, but she won’t say anything. Outside, the sirens grow louder.

“Aisling,” I say softly, trying to soothe her fear. “Sorcha’s leg is hurt. There’s going to be some people arriving soon that are going to help, but they’ll need to look at her so they can make her feel better. Can I hold you

while they do that? I promise it's going to be okay."

Slowly, she loosens her hold on her sister. Her eyes are swollen and her face is flushed as she stares up at me. I smile gently and carefully brush her curls back and tuck her hair behind her ear. The sirens blare loudly directly outside and pounding footsteps approach. Da, Roarke, and my brothers form a protective barrier in front of everyone just to be safe, but when the paramedics and Gardaí step across the rubble, they lose some of their rigidity.

"Come on, let's give them some room to take care of Sorcha, okay?"

Aisling raises her arms and I pick her up. She wraps all her limbs around me and lays her head on my shoulder. Kellen and Carson stay glued to my side as I take a few steps back and let the men I gesture over do what they need to do. I keep close watch on her though, needing to reassure myself Sorcha's going to be okay. It may be a while before I let her leave my sight.

Da reaches my side. He fusses over the boys, checking to make sure they're not hurt and then glances up at me. Grief shows heavily on his face as his eyes lands on Aisling. Then they meet mine.

"How's Sorcha?" His gaze drifts over to her.

"Her leg was grazed and it's bleeding some, but I'm not sure if it'll need stitches or not. Also some of the falling debris knocked her unconscious. I'm sure she has a concussion, but she'll be okay." I glance at his shoulder. "How bad is it?"

He waves me off. "I'll live. Finn and Cian are unscathed, but Liam took a bullet to the arm."

"And Imogen?"

Da's gaze lands on his daughter whose eyes are no longer dull. She doesn't appear to be in shock anymore. Instead she's fussing over Liam while the paramedics treat him. He may need to go to the hospital, unless he has a private physician that does home visits.

"She's a Donnelly," he says as if that explains everything. And it does. We're all stronger than anyone thinks. Stubborn too.

"What about the Moroccans?"

He darts a glance between the boys and Aisling's back before he turns back to me. "Several of them got away."

I nod. Even if they hadn't, Da wouldn't let this attack on his family go unpunished. If the Moroccans want a war, then they've got one. I glance at Liam again. After this, where does he stand?

The paramedics have bandaged the flesh wound on Sorcha's thigh and

after a brief discussion that I can't make out, she waves them off. Da claps me on the shoulder.

“Go take care of your wife.”

He walks toward Nora, but is waylaid by the Gardaí. I take Aisling over to Sorcha. The boys are right on my heels. We reach her and she gingerly stands, wincing slightly. She fusses over them, cradling their faces and running her hands over their bodies like they were injured instead of her. They let her, probably knowing she needs it. The three of them probably do, too. Just as much as she does.

“What did they say?” Whatever their instructions, I'll make sure she follows them.

“They cleaned my leg and bandaged it. They said that if I have any headaches or blurred vision to schedule a visit with my GP.”

With Aisling still clinging to me, I wrap an arm around Sorcha's waist and pull her against my side. She's a bit slow to move, limping the step closer to me. “I'm going to take you all home. Da will deal with things here.”

She nods quietly. I reach for her hand and we carefully weave our way through the mess until we reach outside. The road is blocked by the ambulances, the fire brigade, and more Gardaí. My car is parked a few spaces down and luckily escaped any damage. Everyone climbs inside.

On the drive home, no one speaks. The quiet is louder than any voices. Sorcha is turned away from me and stares out the window. I glance in the rearview mirror and Aisling sits between her brothers with her head resting on Kellen's arm. Carson holds her hand. I've never felt pure unadulterated fear like I did today. If I hadn't been sure I loved Sorcha before, I am after this. I'd be lost if anything ever happened to her.

Needing to reassure myself she's here with me and safe, I reach over for her hand and thread my fingers through hers. Anytime I do this, she always glances over at me with a smile. But she keeps her head turned so only her profile is visible. I rub my thumb up and down hers in a soothing gesture. I'm sure everything's been a shock to her. Once she has time to rest she'll feel better.

I ignore the voice whispering that I'm lying to myself.

CHAPTER 28



SORCHA

I CAN SENSE AIDAN'S ATTENTION ON ME. MY HEAD POUNDS AND THE WOUND on my leg burns. Fear still flows through my veins. So much so that I am barely managing to keep it together. The pressure bearing down on my chest makes it hard to breathe. All I want to do is grab Kellen, Carson, and Aisling and run as far away from Dublin as I can.

That means running away from Aidan.

An hour ago, I would have scolded myself for such thoughts. Except they won't stop.

The kids are all quiet and I take a few glances back at them, making sure they're okay. Jesus, how much therapy are they going to need after this? How much am *I* going to need? I breathe through the panic that is starting to take hold, centering myself. *You're okay. It's okay.*

It takes far too long before we finally drive past the gate and park in front of the manor. Being careful, I get out and open the back door for Kellen and Aisling. Carson gets out on Aidan's side. The kids are a mess. The boys' suits are covered in dust as is Aisling's beautiful dress. I glance down at myself and nearly sob. A crimson misshapen stain covers a section of the skirt. *That's never coming clean.* Hysterical laughter threatens to bubble up, but I choke it down because right behind it is a meltdown waiting to be set free.

Aidan reaches for my hand, but I brush past him with Aisling. I just can't. If he touches me, I might shatter. He catches up with us and opens the door.

For the second time, I stride past him and head straight upstairs to the boys' rooms.

"Where are you going?" Aidan's voice stops me, and I pause on the second step, forcing myself to glance back at him. There's confusion and worry written across his face, but I harden my heart against it.

"We were all just in the middle of a building exploding around us and a gun battle," my voice rises in pitch and I take a deep breath to calm down. "I'm taking my brothers to their rooms to make sure they're okay and that they're taken care of. They also need to get cleaned up. As does Aisling. Unlike you, we aren't used to being almost killed."

Aidan flinches, but I'm not a single bit guilty. I turn and climb the rest of the steps still holding Aisling's hand. Footsteps follow behind me after only a brief hesitation. All four of us enter Kellen's room and I close the door behind us, effectively shutting Aidan out. Kellen and Carson sit on the edge of the bed with their hands in their laps and I carefully sit in the chair, pulling Aisling on my lap, taking care to avoid my leg wound. She leans against me and rests her head on my shoulder.

I'd love nothing more than to crawl into bed and drag the blankets over my head, but for better or for worse, I'm their parent and their needs come before mine.

"Are you all okay?" I ask for probably the hundredth time.

The twins nod. Aisling does as well.

Kellen fidgets. "Are *you* okay?"

Not even close. "I will be."

"Who were those guys?" Kellen asks. Carson sits still and quiet at his side.

"I don't know."

There's a long pause and then Kellen speaks up again. "Are you mad at Aidan?"

My immediate reaction is to lie, but we've all been lied to enough. "Yes."

"Why?" Carson finally asks.

"Because he put you three in danger. What if any of you had been hurt today? I'd be devastated if I lost one of you." The tears I hadn't managed to shed yet spill down my cheeks. "You're my baby brothers and my baby sister. I love you all so much."

Kellen and Carson rise from the bed and come over to wrap their arms

around Aisling and me. The four of us sit together for several minutes holding each other. Finally, the boys let loose of me. I nudge Aisling and she scoots off me and I slowly stand, gritting my teeth at the pain.

“If you’re both all right for now, why don’t you get cleaned up. Take a shower and put on some clean clothes. Then how about later you come down to the common room and the four of us will watch a movie if you’re feeling up to it.”

They both say “Okay.”

I kiss them both on the tops of their heads, and then run my hand over Aisling’s hair. “Come on, little nightmare. Let’s go downstairs and get cleaned up as well.”

Before I walk out the door, I turn to them. “If you need anything, just holler.”

They nod and then Aisling and I walk out of their room. Aidan waits out in the hallway. I move right past him, but he claps my arm to stop me. I go rigid, but he doesn’t loosen his light grip.

“Will you please talk to me?”

I shake my head. “I can’t right now.”

Whatever he sees on my face has him letting me go. Aisling and I move forward and down the stairs, not stopping until we get to her room. Should I be worried that she hasn’t spoken since we left the venue? I don’t want to push her to talk if she’s not feeling up to it.

“Lets get you out of this dress and all cleaned up.” Maybe if I keep busy I won’t have a breakdown. If only my headache would go away.

Aisling lets me tug it over her head. Her hair is dusty as is the rest of her body that hadn’t been covered. I turn on the water and adjust the temperature. When I’m satisfied, I guide her forward with a hand between her shoulder blades.

“In you go.”

Together we get her cleaned up including two washes of her hair and then I help her put on her pajamas. I comb out her hair and braid it to help it from tangling when she sleeps. Then I turn her to face me and kneel down in front of her. I brush the wisps of baby hair across her forehead.

“I know today was really scary, and if you want to talk about it, I’m here to listen.”

There’s a long enough pause that I worry Aisling won’t speak to me. But finally she answers. “Why did those bad men try to hurt us?” Her question is

spoken in barely above a whisper.

She adores Aidan, and while I may be furious and disappointment in him at the moment, I don't want her to be. She won't understand. Maybe when she gets older. "Some bad people don't need a reason. They just hurt people because they can, and no one knows why."

Aisling's eyes shimmer with tears. "Will the bad men try and hurt us again?"

She asks the one question to which the answer is my greatest fear.

"I'll keep you safe, I promise." Even as I say the words, they resonate through me. I swear I'll keep her, Kellen, and Carson safe even if that means leaving here. No matter how much I love Aidan, the children have to come first. He should understand that.

"Hey, why don't you lay down for a little bit while I get cleaned up too. Then, I'll crawl into bed with you and we'll go back to working on our fairy forest sketch. What do you say?" I give her an encouraging smile, hoping it eases some of her fears.

"Okay," Aisling says quietly.

I take her hand and we walk out of the bathroom and I help her climb into her bed. Once she's settled I kiss her forehead. "Will you be okay while I run to my room to get my own pajamas?"

She nods.

"I'll be right back." I hurry out of the room and pray I don't run into Aidan. I'm not sure I can even look at him yet.

Thankfully both the common area and our bedroom are empty. I grab a clean pair of underwear, a pair of shorts, and shirt and hurry back to Aisling's room. She's still sitting upright in bed, but she jumps when I step into the room. I head for the bathroom and take the quickest shower I've probably ever taken. After I'm done, I hurriedly get dressed so I can get back into the bedroom.

Before I reach the bed, I snag the stack of drawings we've been working on off the desk, along with the charcoal pencils, and her lapdesk, and I settle in beside her.

"What do you think? Do we need more fairies this time?" I glance down at her.

Aisling lays her head against my shoulder. "I like fairies."

"More fairies it is then."

I pick up the pencil and one of the drawings and get to work.

CHAPTER 29



Aidan

IT'S BEEN HOURS SINCE OUR WEDDING. I'VE CHECKED ON THE BOYS SEVERAL times. Neither have left Kellen's room and they'd been subdued with each visit. I brought them something to eat earlier since we missed the reception. Same with Sorcha and Aisling, although I left it on a tray outside Aisling's room, knocked on the door, and walked away. As much as it's killing me, I'm giving Sorcha a little space. The expression on her face when she refused to talk to me will haunt me. I'm losing her. I feel it in my soul.

Da, Cian, and Finn should be here any minute They spent this entire time dealing with the Gardaí and news reporters. It's been on television half the day. The door to Da's office opens and he strides in with my brothers trailing behind. They haven't even had a chance to get cleaned up. Right behind them is Nathan and Roarke. It doesn't surprise me that we're having a meeting. What does surprise me is the fact Liam—whose arm is in a sling—brings up the rear. What the fuck is he doing here?

"Everyone take a seat." Behind his desk, Da gestures at the various chairs laid out around the room.

I remain in mine near the bookshelf, while Cian takes his usual near Da's desk, Finn and Roarke sit near the sliding glass door like always, and Nathan sits on the sofa. Campbell remains stiff and standing near the door. From the expression on his face he'd rather be anywhere but here. Da glares at him, but Liam only glares back almost daring Da to say something.

Giving up arguing, Da sits in his own chair and glances at me. “Before we get started, how are the kids? Sorcha?”

I’m not keen on airing my personal business in front of Campbell, but it’s clear he’s not going anywhere. “The boys have been pretty quiet, but they seem to be handling everything as well as can be expected. I haven’t seen Sorcha or Aisling since we returned home. My wife is avoiding me. She’s freaked out. Pissed. Terrified. Everything you’d expect from someone who nearly died or whose children could have.”

Da grimaces and sympathy lines his face. “I’m sorry. Today’s attack took us all by surprise, even though it shouldn’t have. I take the blame for it. I knew Naji has been threatening revenge against us. We’ve been watching him, but apparently not close enough.”

“You’re not entirely to blame.” I turn from him and pierce Liam with a hate-filled glare. “You’re the one who’s allowed the Moroccans to smuggle weapons in through the port. If you weren’t such a cunt, and cut off our own weapon supply, or at least not allowed *our enemies* to import them, then maybe this wouldn’t have happened. Even your *Da* didn’t deal with the Moroccans.”

Campbell’s face reddens and his fist clenches at his side. If he had a gun in his hand, he’d shoot me without hesitation. Calling Dónal Sheehan his *Da* triggers Liam’s rage more than anything else. No one in the room contradicts my claim though. Everyone here, Liam included, knows I’m right.

“Regardless of whose fault it is or isn’t, Ayman Naji has increased his weapon’s stores over the last few months and after today, we know that he will continue seeking his revenge,” Cian says. “His men confirmed it before they got away. This has been a declaration of war and we need all the soldiers we can get. Which is why Liam is here.”

I stare at my brother. He can’t be serious. I glance around the room. No one’s surprised by this announcement. My gaze shifts to Da. “You’re fucking kidding, right? For the last two months, this bastard has done everything he can to undermine our organization. Before that, he was bent on destroying it. Now we’re suddenly supposed to trust him. Maybe he’s working with Naji. I wouldn’t put it past him. He can cast all the blame on them for killing us all so Imogen won’t discover what a piece of shite he is.”

“I’ll kill you myself,” Liam charges me with a roar.

I jump to my feet and surge forward to meet him head-on. Roarke and Cian burst from their seats to hold both of us back. I jab my finger in

Campbell's direction over Cian's shoulder, not breaking eye contact with him.

"If you would have just let me pay off Sorcha's loan, she wouldn't have been hurt today. You're to fucking blame for this." Spittle flies from my mouth.

"I did you a favor," Liam growls and then, one-handed, pushes Roarke away. "Get off me."

"A favor?" I lunge again, but Cian's body weight restrains me. "My wife could have died because of you. Imogen, too. Or maybe you don't care about that."

He goes rigid and for a second I'm sure he's about to rush me for a second time. Instead, he remains where he is, his death glare searing into me as he straightens his suit jacket as best he can. He grimaces. "Fuck you."

The raging storm inside me calms by a fraction and I stop trying to barrel past Cian. He slowly loosens his hold on me.

"Look at me," he demands.

I glare at Campbell another second and then move my gaze to my brother. He grabs both sides of my head and gets in my face. "He owes us a life debt." How?

Cian must see the question in my eyes. "I'm the one who shot the man holding Imogen. He was going to kill her."

A sick sense of glee rises up inside me. My lips twitch. God, it must be killing Campbell to know that he owes Cian—our family—a life debt. Serves the bastard right. It doesn't mean I'll ever forgive him for putting Sorcha and the kids in danger in the first place. But at least Liam's getting what's been coming to him. Cian's grip on my head tightens and he gently shakes it bringing me back to him. I nod and he slowly releases me.

He steps away and we both return to our seats. Roarke's already seated. I don't stop glaring at Liam though. *Prick.*

Da clears his throat. "Now that we've all settled down, we need to get back to business. Liam will be buying up the other two small shipping companies that operate at the docks so we have complete control over every shipment that comes in or goes out. Nathan will be reaching out to our German suppliers and all imports will resume. For the time being, we also plan on taking a financial cut and purchasing our cargo at a slightly higher price than they're selling to the Moroccans."

His gaze travels over us emphasizing his point. "Nathan is also going to

reach out to both Emilio and Jack and arrange a...meeting with their contacts in the States to discuss an acquisitions deal with any of them. If the Moroccans want a war, then we will give them one.”

“In the meantime,” Finn adds, “we’re going to borrow Imogen’s hacking skills to get all the information we can on Ayman Naji. Bank records. Real estate holdings. We’ll find all the Moroccan’s hideouts and take them out one by one, drilling away at their defenses until they have none left.”

Da rises. “Everyone get some rest. We’ll meet at the casino tomorrow night at midnight.”

He’s barely finished speaking when Liam whips around and marches out of the office. Moments later the front door slams shut.

“Prick,” I spit.

Everybody filters out of the room. I’m almost to the door when Da’s voice stops me. “You. Stay.”

Slowly I pivot.

“Have a seat.” He gestures to the chair Cian just vacated.

With a sigh, I settle back in. I’m not in the mood for a goddamn lecture. I just want to find my wife and fix this thing between us. Da sits down as well and leans his forearms on the desk top.

“I know I said this already, but I’m sorry I wasn’t vigilant enough in watching Naji and his people. The blame for that lies solely on my shoulders. It’s been a lot of years since we’ve been at war with our enemies. Not since before I was your age. I’ve forgotten what it’s like to always be watching my back. How we can never let our guards down. Not even for a second.” Fatigue mars Da’s face. He appears to have aged overnight.

“As much as it pains me to admit, it was always going to happen, whether it was Naji or Campbell. At least we have Imogen to thank. By the way, is she okay? My main concern has been Sorcha and the kids.”

He nods solemnly. “She’s shaken up, of course. But I think she’s more worried about Liam than herself. As much as I wish it weren’t so, he loves her. If they’d hurt her in any way, Campbell would have razed the entire city to the ground and tried to single-handedly destroy the Moroccans.”

Psychopath. *Wouldn’t you do the same if it were Sorcha?* Perhaps I shouldn’t judge him too harshly when it comes to protecting my sister.

“Being a part of our family—our organization—is dangerous. But we’ve grown up surrounded by this. We understand how it all works as well as the consequences. I taught you boys from birth. Sorcha has only been part of

your real life for less than a month. It's no wonder she's scared and angry." Da sits back and his posture softens. "Go find your wife. I'm sure she needs you."

"Thanks, Da. For everything." I exit his office and head for our wing. She may need me, but I need her more.

CHAPTER 30



SORCHA

THERE'S A FAINT KNOCK ON THE DOOR. WORRIED IT MIGHT BE EITHER Kellen or Carson needing me, I quickly climb out of the bed, careful not to disturb Aisling. I crack it open only to find Aidan. My heart skips a beat and then races like it always does when I'm in his presence. But then I recall the way it raced in fear earlier.

"Hi," he greets me in a whisper.

"Hi."

"Will you talk to me now?" There's a hint of hope in the question.

"I don't want to leave Aisling, in case she wakes up scared." While true, it's also an excuse.

"Please?"

It's that single word that weakens me. I can probably count on one hand the number of times Aidan has ever said please. I glance over my shoulder. Aisling is sound asleep. We're just a hallway over. If she cries out, I'll come rushing. God, I'm weak. I sigh and open the door wide enough to slide through and then pull it almost closed, but keep it cracked enough that I won't miss any sounds that she might need me.

Side-by-side, Aidan and I walk back to our room. I'm glad he doesn't try and touch me. I'm not sure what I'll do if he does. He gestures for me to enter first. I move past him, trying not to breathe in his fresh woodsy scent, and stand in the center of the room with my arms wrapped protectively around

my waist.

He closes the door, but doesn't shut it all the way, and pivots to face me. "How's your head and your leg feeling?"

"They both fucking hurt." Although my head isn't pounding like it had been earlier, but I keep the fact to myself. I have a twinge of guilt for twisting the knife a little deeper, especially when Aidan's face fills with worry.

"I'm sorry. So fucking sorry," he rasps out in another harsh whisper, taking a step forward like he's going to reach for me but stops himself. "I'm sorry for everything. For lying to you all these years. For forcing you into this marriage. For not fully warning you about what this life entails. But most of all, I'm sorry I put not only you, but our children, in danger."

My heart nearly stops beating altogether. The one and only time Aidan has ever said he's sorry was when he confessed his identity. He's said please more times than he's ever apologized. But I can't let go of the fact he called Kellen, Carson, and Aisling our kids. It doesn't matter that I'm their sister. I'm the only mom they have and I love them like they're mine.

"I'm sorry, too."

As much as I want to blame Aidan, I also have to blame myself. It isn't as though him being a member of the mafia had been a secret when we got married. Didn't I watch a news clip of him being arrested for possessing weapons and attempting to break into Liam's house? I'd been not naive, but willfully ignorant. My judgment has been clouded by my feelings for him.

He reaches for me, but I take a step back. His hand drops to his side and pain flashes in his eyes.

"I love you, Aidan. I do. But I need more time to process all of this. I don't know if I can be who you want me to be."

"I don't want you to be anyone else," he says. "I fell in love with this Sorcha, not some imagined version of you."

My arms tighten around my waist. "The Sorcha you think you love wants to take my children and run far, far away. She doesn't want them to have anything to do with gun fights and wars."

Aidan moves before I can guess his intent and pulls me in his arms. "Then we'll go together. The five of us. Start over somewhere as Mr. and Mrs. Broderick. Da will understand."

Tears spill from my eyes as I clutch him tightly and bury my face in his chest. The fact he's willing to leave all this should make me feel better. But it doesn't. I push away from him and at first he doesn't release me, but I push

harder until he does. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking,” he points out.

“This is your family. Here is where you belong. With them. You wouldn’t be happy living somewhere else. In the end, you’d resent me for taking you away from them.”

Aidan straightens and a fierce light enters his eyes. “*You* are my family. You, Kellen, Carson, and Aisling. I belong wherever it is that you are. You’re my *wife*, Sorcha. I made a vow to you. One I meant with every breath in my body.”

God, this is killing me. I want nothing more than to ignore what my brain says and only listen to my heart. But I can’t do that. “I’m not saying we’re done. I’m just saying I need time to think before I make any decisions about the future. The future of my kids. Please give it to me.”

Several seconds pass before resignation settles in his eyes and his shoulders drop in defeat. He takes a small step forehead, presses a kiss to my forehead, and moves back, releasing his hands from mine. “I’ll go sleep in another room tonight.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

Aidan walks out without a goodbye and closes the door behind him. My chest burns and I collapse onto the bed burying my hands in my face. Sobs pour from my throat. I grab a pillow to try and stifle them. This is my wedding night. I’m supposed to be spending it making love with my husband again and again all night long. Instead, I sob for what could be hours. The headache that had only slightly eased is back in full force. It’s like someone is taking a jackhammer to my brain. My leg throbs and between the two of them, the pain’s enough to make me want to vomit.

Once I’ve cried all the tears I’m going to, at least for the moment, I wash my face in the bathroom and climb under the blankets. God, they smell like Aidan. I pull his pillow to me and breathe in his scent. My eyes close and far sooner than I expected, I drift off.



MY EYES FLY OPEN AND I JACKKNIFE UP TO SITTING AS MY HEART POUNDS. I glance around and it takes a minute for my harsh breathing to calm. I palm my chest to try and slow it. What woke me? Memories of gunfire and

faceless demons haunted my sleep. Aisling screamed more than once in the middle of the night. Each time, Aidan was right there, having rushed in from where he slept. Although, other than the time he reached her first, I'm the one she clung to for comfort.

The pounding is back at the base of my skull and my eyes are gritty like sandpaper. I blink a few times to clear my vision. It's still and quiet. Judging by the light filtering through the shutters, it's later than I normally wake up. I throw back the blankets and climb out of the bed for the bathroom. I wash the sleep off my face and get dressed. The bandage over my wound is clean, so at least it's stopped bleeding. It's still a bit achy, but nothing like yesterday.

My rumbling stomach reminds me it's been since early evening when I last ate. I stop at Aisling's room first, but she's not there. I'm not too concerned, yet. Instead of stopping in the kitchen first, I make my way upstairs to check on Kellen and Carson. They're both sleeping in Kellen's bed. Still no Aisling. That panicked sensation bubbles up in my stomach and I hurry down the stairs toward the kitchen. As I pass through the dining room, I glance outside and stop.

Seated at the table is Aidan's cousin-in-law Lucia. Her gaze is focused out on the sprawling manor landscape. Running around and chasing each other are Aisling and Lucia's eldest son, Enzo. The pair met yesterday, but hit it off talking about art and drawing. On their heels is her middle son, Eoin. I step outside and Lucia turns her head toward me. She waves and smiles. I cross the patio until I reach her.

"Good morning." She tips her head, gesturing toward where the kids are running around. "I thought I'd bring Enzo with me today to maybe provide a much needed distraction. Of course, where Enzo goes, Eoin has to go as well. He idolizes his older brother and follows him everywhere."

"That's kind of you. It will probably do Aisling some good to have something to keep her mind off yesterday." It's a sweet gesture, but also a bit confusing. She's Aidan's relative, and yes, her son is the same age as Aisling, but we all barely know each other.

"Did Aidan tell you I used to live in London working at the British Museum?" Lucia asks, her gaze still trained on the kids.

"No, he didn't. Just that you work for the National Museum here in Dublin."

"I was in London for six years. Hiding."
Hiding?

She finally faces me. “Years ago when I was in my early twenties, I’d been engaged to a young man that was part of our family’s...organization. Aidan probably mentioned that my distant cousin Emilio is married to his cousin Brenna.”

I shake my head. “No, he didn’t mention that. About you and Emilio being related, I mean. He did tell me that Brenna was married to the most powerful man in Brooklyn.”

Lucia chuckles. “It’s always funny to hear that, because it sounds great, right? Power. Money. Influence. Who wouldn’t want to be a part of that, right?”

She’s laughing, but I sense a hint of sarcasm behind it. “It does sound tempting.”

“It does. And it tempted Michele. He was one of Emilio’s soldiers and wanting to work his way up the ranks. We had our lives all planned out. Until he went on a raid and was killed.” Lucia pauses and swallows. “I’d been devastated. And furious. I hated everything the mafia represented and wanted nothing to do with it. So, I left.”

“To London.”

She nods. “To London. I didn’t tell a single soul where I was. I came back a few times over the years. Before I left though I attended a family wedding. One in particular. Where I met this far-too-young-for-me eighteen-year old Irishman who swept me off my feet. We danced and flirted and then I ran away back to London. Three years later, we met again. This time a bit more than flirting happened, but I didn’t discover the consequences of that *more than flirting* until a few months later.”

Lucia’s gaze shifts back to the kids. In my head, I do the math. Nathan appears to be around thirty and she around forty. I’m guessing then that Enzo was the result of their more than flirting. Why is she telling me all this? She turns to me again with a sad smile.

“I was terrified. I’d been running from the mafia and all the danger it represented for years. Then, there I was. Pregnant. The father of my child was in the same kind of organization I’d run away from years earlier. I kept Enzo’s parentage secret for three years. I didn’t even tell my niece, who’s my best friend. I thought it was safer that way. There was no way I was going to allow my son to grow up in danger. I’d already lost one person I’d loved to the violence that comes with being a part of a family like ours. I refused to let my son be killed one day.”

God, how naive I've been. Not once have I ever considered what it might mean for the boys—or Aisling even—to grow up in Aidan's family's organization. Yet one more thing he and I need to discuss.

"Why are you telling me this?" Another thought occurs to me and anger wells up. "Did Aidan put you up to this?"

Lucia shakes her head and reaches across to clutch my hand. "Not at all, I swear. I'm here on my own because I know you probably weren't aware of the potential dangers that come with being married to someone like Aidan. And I can only guess at how scared you might be. How you might not want anything to do with the organization. How you might want to run from it. I understand exactly how you feel, because I felt it too. You weren't born to this life. Nor were the children. I know how terrifying it can be thinking of what could happen, especially after yesterday."

I sense there's more to her visit. "I hear a but in there."

She squeezes my hand gently. "Not really. I'm the last person to try and wax poetic about how just because things turned out great for me, they will for you, too. Because, while, yes, my life is great, there is always going to be that little voice in the back of my head that whispers about the dangers my sons face. I just wanted you to know you're not alone with your fears."

My eyes burn. "Thank you. That means so much."

"You're welcome. And if you ever need someone to talk to, give me a call, anytime."

We sit out here a while longer while the children play. I'm so glad Aisling is having fun. I'm also really glad Lucia came by. She gave me a lot to mull over.

CHAPTER 31



Aidan

SITTING OUTSIDE, I BREATHE IN THE FRESH AIR THAT STILL HOLDS A HINT OF the rain that's been hanging around for nearly every one of the past fourteen days. Everyone is still asleep as the sun crests the horizon. Sunrises are always my favorite time of day. I'm not one for omens, despite being Irish, but I can't help but nurse a small thread of hope that maybe this is a sign of positive things to come.

It's been two weeks since Sorcha and I got married.

And it's been fourteen days of sleeping apart. Fourteen days of stilted conversations. We've kept the children out of school and brought in a home school teacher so they wouldn't fall behind. They've also been talking to a pediatric therapist that specializes in trauma. It's been a slow process, but the light is finally returning to Aisling's eyes. The boys rebounded a lot faster. Despite the distance between Sorcha and I, Kellen, Carson, and I have grown closer.

Behind me, there's the click of the dining room door opening. I glance over my shoulder and my pulse races as Sorcha, wrapped in a blanket and wearing a pair of slippers, steps out. Even sleepy-eyed with her hair a tangled mess around her shoulders, she's still the most beautiful woman ever. She heads straight for me, her pace slow, until she takes a seat in the chair next to me. I can't take my eyes off her. This is the first time we've been alone together since our wedding.

“I’m glad it finally stopped raining,” she says quietly, her gaze turned toward the expansive landscape.

“Me too.”

We sit in silence for several minutes. I have so many things to say, but where do I start? I’ll do anything to save my marriage, but I’m not the only one whose decision it is. Every day, I wake up waiting for her to tell me she and the kids are leaving. Fear has been my constant companion.

“I talked to Lucia a couple weeks ago,” Sorcha finally breaks the quiet.

“Nathan told me she’d stopped by.” I’d been surprised by the news considering the two had only met once before the wedding, although I’m glad if the women became friends. “Did you have a nice visit?”

“It was informative.”

I glance over at her. *What does that mean?* Finally, Sorcha shifts in the chair so she’s facing me. Her leg has healed well and her signs of concussion have diminished, although she still suffers from occasional headaches. The doctor said they may never go away or, if they do, it could take years.

“I love you, Aidan.”

Fuck. My heart plummets, because my brain hears a but behind it. “I love you, too. More than anything.”

Sorcha nods and smiles, although it’s a bit sad. “I know you do.”

“But?” I have to gently prod, because if she’s going to break my heart, she might as well get it over with.

“But I’ve also never been more scared in my entire life as I was during that attack. I’d been worried for the kids. For you. It was the worst feeling I’ve ever had. I don’t ever want to feel that way again. Ever,” she says with a ferocious intensity.

If only I could promise she won’t. I ache to reach out for her, but I’m not sure if she’ll welcome my touch and I can only afford to be gutted once today. “I wish I could turn back time and make that day disappear like it never even happened.”

“I don’t,” she says, shocking me. “Up until the insanity hit, it was the happiest day of my life. I got to marry my best friend.”

“Then I wish I could just make what happened after disappear.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice?” she chuckles. “It would certainly make people’s lives easier if we could just erase all the bad things that happen.”

“But we can’t.”

She shake her head sadly. “No, we can’t. I just wasn’t prepared for what

it meant to be married to you. Not only for me, but for the kids. Will the boys be expected to become a part of your family's organization? What if they don't want to? Do they even have a choice?"

"God, no," I rush to reassure her. "No one would force them to do anything. My grand-da was the ruthless bastard. No one would dare refuse to be initiated into our organization. We were all too afraid of him. But Da isn't like that. He loves his family and only wants them to be happy wherever their path leads."

She nods and some more tension leaves her body.

I take a deep breath. "What do you want me to do to make you happy, Sorcha?"

At last, she reaches across and clutches at my hand. "I want you to keep loving me."

"Always. I'll never stop."

"Five years ago you saved me from Duncan. Then you saved me again when my mum died. Then my Da. And yet again when Liam's men showed up to collect Da's debt. You saved me by marrying me. Everything you've done has been to protect me in some way. From the moment we first met." She breathes in. "I put you up on this pedestal like you were some sort of god to be worshipped. My fierce protector. You had a high standard to maintain. And, I think, when I was hurt and our children could have been hurt, my unrealistic expectations of you made that god-like image I had shatter."

I had no idea she'd seen me like that. "I'm sorry I didn't protect you at our wedding." I'll apologize every day for the rest of our lives if that's what it takes.

"Here's the thing I've thought about over the last two weeks. It's not up to you to protect me for the rest of my life. And it's not fair of me to expect it of you. There's danger everywhere. I could take the kids away from here, back to Burtonport, and we could get into an accident on the way," she says. "We could go back to the pub and any one of us could tumble down the stairs. Anything could happen at any time."

"You know that I will always do everything in my power to keep you safe," I swear to her.

"I know you will. I also know that I can't live my life in fear that *something* could happen. That's no way to live." Sorcha sighs. "And while the thought of being in danger from your enemies is terrifying, I'd rather be happy with you than miserable without you. The children would be miserable

without you.”

I come to my feet and pull Sorcha with me, dragging her into my arms to hold her close. I’ve missed the feel of her. The smell of her. “These last two weeks have been killing me. I haven’t wanted to put any type of pressure on you or try to influence you one way or another about staying. But know that if you had left, I would have come with you. I would follow you to the ends of the earth and beyond. That’s how much I love you.”

“I love you, too. I’ve been miserable as well, but Kellen, Carson, and Aisling had to come before any of my selfish needs.” Sorcha lays her head on my chest and squeezes me tightly.

“They’re our kids. Of course they’re going to come first. I wouldn’t expect otherwise.” I stroke her hair back and kiss the top of her head. “You’re an amazing mother.”

She laughs, but there’s a hint of self-deprecation. “I have no idea what I’m doing. It’s harder than anything I’ve ever done before.”

I lean back and cradle her face between my palms. “Does any new mother know what they’re doing? And when it gets hard, you have me. They’re my children now, too. We’re a team, you and me.”

“I love you,” Sorcha whispers.

“I love you more.”

Our lips meet and it’s as though everything has been set right in the world. My wife is here with me and always will be. Our children are safe and I’ll make sure they stay that way. The door opens again and I break the kiss to glance back. Kellen, Carson, and Aisling all spill out, still dressed in their pajamas. I pivot and hold my arm out. The three of them race over and collide with Sorcha and me into a giant group hug.

“Did she tell you we’re staying?” Kellen asks when we finally let go of each other.

“She did.” A wide grin splits my face. “You all made me so happy.”

I drop my smile and crouch down so I’m more level with them. My gaze moves from Kellen to Carson to Aisling. “I’ll do everything I can to protect you. I love the three of you very much.”

“We love you, too,” Carson says.

The three of them step into my open arms. Our life isn’t going to always be easy, but then again, nothing worth having ever is. As long as the five of us are together, then we can get through anything.

EPILOGUE



STRONG ARMS ENCIRCLE ME, and Aidan presses a soft kiss along the curve of my neck.

“Are you excited for tonight?” he murmurs against my skin that prickles with arousal.

I pivot in his embrace and loop my hands around his neck, threading my fingers together. “I think I’m more nervous than excited. My stomach is in knots.”

“It’s going to be amazing. And perfect. Just like my wife.” Aidan kisses the tip of my nose and then moves to my lips.

I fall into his kisses every time, forgetting everything around me. It’s been like that from the beginning. As much as I want to forget what’s happening in a few short hours, I have too many things to take care of to get ready for our opening night.

“Okay, stop trying to distract me,” I laugh against his mouth and draw away. “I’ve still got things to do.”

“Like what?” He doesn’t let me go. “The exhibit is ready and your selections are impeccable. They’re going to be sold for a lot of fucking money. The caterers are upstairs now preparing all the hors d’oeuvres. The bar’s being set up and stocked and the waitstaff have arrived. Imogen’s made sure that your payment system is functioning and your staff is here ready to take people’s money. There’s nothing else you need to do. You’re ready. This place is ready. It’s going to be absolutely perfect.”

I take in a shuddering breath and sag against him. “I know. You’re right. I just keep thinking something is going to go terribly wrong.”

Aidan’s hands tighten their grip on my hips and he pulls me into the

cradle of his thighs. “Nothing will go wrong. And even if it does, nothing so disastrous is going to happen that it’ll turn into an utter failure. I’ll be here to keep an eye on things and to offer any back up. I do have an expert eye for expensive art.”

I snort. “I don’t think those specific skills will need to be put to use tonight.”

He winks. “You never know. One of these pieces on display tonight might turn into the next Mona Lisa or The Kiss. It could be worth a fortune.”

I just shake my head. “I’m not going to encourage your illegal predilections.”

“You love my *predilections*,” he draws the word out in a suggestive tone.

Rising up on my toes, I press a kiss to his lips. “I love your erections.”

Aidan groans. “You’re killing me woman. Weren’t you the one who just said no distractions? How am I supposed to make it through the night without thinking about you and my erection and how you can take care of it for me?”

I pat his chest. “Poor thing, I’m sure you’ll think of something. Now, I need to go check on the caterers.”

He lets me go and as I walk past him, I drag my hand across the front of the significant bulge in his pants.

“You’re going to pay for that later, wife,” Aidan warns making me laugh and waggle my fingers at him in farewell.

I stride through the gallery, my gaze pausing on each pillar or section of wall that displays its piece of focus. Soft lighting illuminates each one, showcasing all the lines, colors, and textures that make up the scene. The evocative images are powerful and resonate with emotions locked deep inside me. Pride swells. Aidan has been making every single one of my dreams come true. If not for him buying this building, I might still be trying to decide what I wanted for my future.

It’s only a short climb up the stairs to the second level. We renovated the whole space and had a small kitchen built up here for events like tonight’s. I walk through the swinging doors and glance around. Everything appears to be in order.

The owner of the catering company approaches. “Can I help you, Mrs. Donnelly?”

I wave her off. “No, I just popped in to see if you needed anything.”

“Thank you, but we’ve got everything.”

“All right, then. It all smells delicious.”

She beams. “Thank you.”

Since it’s clear she has things under control and I’m only here to settle my nerves, I move on.

Aidan was right. We’re ready. *I’m* ready.



“THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR COMING. WE’LL GET THIS BOXED UP AND SHIPPED to you this week.” I shake the hand of one of the last remaining patrons. One who just paid over twenty-eight thousand euros on a piece of artwork. On *my* piece of artwork that I hadn’t put up for display. Aidan had.

I escort them to the door and once they’re gone, I lock it, turn, and collapse against it. My husband comes around the corner and stalks forward with a predatory gleam in his eyes. I rise up and meet him partway. He grips my hips and I lay my palms on his chest.

“You were sneaky adding my piece to the exhibit,” I kiss his chin. “I can’t believe you did that. Most of all, I can’t believe I missed it. I’ve memorized every single painting hanging from these walls. Yet somehow, I missed that one.”

“I knew you’d never add any of your own work, so I did it for you. It deserved to be displayed front and center.”

“Thank you.”

Aidan’s lips slowly curl in that suggestive way of his. “I believe I should get my reward now.”

I chuckle. “Oh, you do, do you? And what kind of reward might that be?”

He walks me backward until my back meets the wall and he flips the lights off until only the faint glow from the upstairs filters down the stairwell. “The kind of reward that ends up with you and me in bed with my cock buried deep inside you.”

“That sounds scandalous,” I say breathlessly. “Oh, it is. Extremely scandalous.” Aidan leans into me and nibbles the skin along my jawline, drawing his tongue across the slightly stinging flesh and soothing it.

I tip my head to give him better access and moan as pleasure skates over my body and the ache in my core grows, spreading throughout me.

“Whoever’s idea it was to build a small room upstairs deserves a medal,” he whispers against my heated flesh, knowing full well it was his.

“I don’t have a medal, but I’m sure I can come up with something to make up for it.”

“Hmmm. I like the way you think.” Taking my hand, Aidan leads me across the gallery floor and up the stairs until we reach the small bedroom just off the kitchen.

Ever so slowly, he takes the pins from my hair and tosses them on the small vanity and then runs his fingers through it, gently teasing out the tangles. I sigh in pleasure. His hands go to my shoulders and he turns me to give him my back.

Far too slowly, he releases the buttons that run from the top of the dress all the way down to the swell of my butt. It’s tortuous waiting, as inch by small inch he exposes me. Aidan kisses his way down my spine sending shivers racing over me. Goosebumps prickle at my arms.

He pushes the fabric off my shoulders, kissing along the slope of one, until the dress falls and pools at my feet. I’m left clad in only my bra, panties, and high heels. I’ve never felt sexier, especially when he groans, dragging me back against his chest, and swipes my hair off my neck to press kisses along the length of it.

“You get more beautiful every day,” Aidan whispers into my ear.

He slides his hands around to my front, tickling my ribs in the process. I suck in a breath as he palms a breast while he glides his other hand down my belly and dips under the waistband of my panties.

“You’re so wet and perfect.” His fingers meet my swollen clit and my knees nearly give out.

Playing my body perfectly, he brings me almost to climax before drawing his hand away.

“You enjoy torturing me, don’t you?” I pout.

Aidan, the bastard, chuckles. “Normally, yes, but I’ve been thinking about this sweet cunt of yours for too long tonight to torment either of us for long.”

“Good.” I step out of my heels and reach behind me to unclasp my bra.

Turning, I face my husband and drop my gaze to the bulge in his pants. I walk backwards until my legs touch the bed. Slowly, I push my panties down over my hips until they drop to the floor. I sit on the edge of the bed, and with a playful smile, crook my finger, beckoning Aidan to me.

He strides forward, removing his own clothes on his way. I scoot back in the bed, making room for him. He quickly shoves his pants down to his

ankles and then with a growl, he pounces. My giggles quickly turn to moans as his lips crash down on mine. Over the past year, he's explored every inch of my body and found all the places on it that drive me wild. Some even I hadn't discovered before.

Never selfish with his pleasure, Aidan takes care of me first. He caresses the one spot between my ribs that should be ticklish, but, instead, has wetness spilling from me and a chill dancing down my spine. Then he moves to the spot along my hip all while deepening the kiss. My fingers clench, gripping his hair and tugging it. Something *I* discovered makes him even harder.

Passion flares higher between us as he rocks his pelvis against mine, rubbing across my already swollen clit and making my body tremble and burn.

"I think it's time for both our rewards, don't you?" I murmur against Aidan's lips.

"You first." He lines up his cock and thrusts deep inside.

I'm already so close, I almost orgasm. Sensing I'm on the edge, he reaches between us and fingers my clit as he rocks his hips and pounds into me. The fuse has been lit and like dynamite, I detonate. The explosive release hits me so hard it takes my breath away. I clutch at Aidan's shoulders, needing a lifeline to keep me from splintering apart.

Another release hits and then warmth spreads through me as he groans out his own release. He collapses on top of me, our bodies sweat-dampened. I love the weight of him and open my legs wider for him to settle deeper. My fingers trace the muscles of his upper back, dancing along the ridges and into the furrows.

"I enjoyed my reward very much." I roll my hips and clench down on his cock to show him how much.

He groans against the crook of my neck and lifts his head. "You're an evil woman Sorcha Donnelly. I've barely caught my breath and already I'm aching to fuck you again."

"What's stopping you?" I lift up and nip his bottom lip.

Despite coming, Aidan's still hard inside me. I guess he really has been thinking about this all night.

"I do deserve another reward, don't I?" he asks as he thrusts shallowly.

"We both do."

"I better give my wife what she asks for, huh?"

I nod and then my eyes snap shut and my breath catches. "Oh yes."

For the rest of the night Aidan and I celebrate the gallery's success and our life together. Never would I have imagined our friendship would turn into our greatest love. We have our children, but most importantly, we have each other.

Thank you for reading **AIDAN**. I hope you enjoyed it. I'd greatly appreciate a review on the platform of your choice. Reviews are so important!

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Love Notes: A Dark Romance
SEALs in Love
Say Yes
Black Light: Possession
The Bratva's Enforcer (co-written with Rachel Everly)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LK Shaw is the bestselling author of sexy, sinful suspense. She resides in South Carolina. She is a dog mom and self proclaimed chocolate lover, world traveler, and perpetual procrastinator. An avid reader since childhood, she became hooked on historical romance novels in high school. She now reads, and loves, all romance sub-genres. Her books feature sexy, protective heroes and the strong women they love.

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